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Sidney Chambers and the Dangers of Temptation

Written by James Runcie

Published by Bloomsbury Publishing

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Sidney Chambers
and
The Dangers of Temptation

Bloomsbury Publishing
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published in Great Britain 2016

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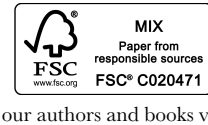
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4088-7022-8
ePub: 978-1-4088-7024-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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The Dangers of Temptation

Although it was Valentine's Day, and also his birthday, Sidney Chambers was not in a happy frame of mind. This was due to persistent toothache, his imminent renunciation of alcohol for Lent and the fact that the recent television series *All Gas and Gaiters* had made fun at the expense of his beloved Church of England, concentrating, quite specifically, on a hapless and drunken archdeacon. This had resulted in much unnecessary teasing from his wife about the similarities between fact and fiction. Could the writers have had anyone specific in mind when they had created such a clueless character? What did Sidney think?

'Not much,' had been his reply and, as a result of his grumpiness, Hildegard had asked her husband to spend the morning of his birthday cheering up in his study. In order to do so, he put one of his favourite records on the turntable, Sidney Bechet's '*Si tu vois ma mère*', only to discover that, in the words of the great Christian poet George Herbert, 'music helps not the toothache'.

His family was coming to lunch: his mother and father (who still treated him as a child even though he was forty-six years old), his brother Matt, his sister Jennifer and her husband

Johnny Johnson. Further guests included Inspector Geordie Keating and his wife Cathy, Amanda and Henry Richmond, and Sidney's former curate Leonard Graham. Together with Hildegard, and their four-year-old daughter Anna, this made them a very crowded thirteen at table.

Geordie was amused. 'You'll have to be Jesus, Sidney.'

'Then I wonder who the Judas is.'

Hildegard put down the chicken casserole. 'Now then, *mein Lieber*. You promised to be in a better mood.'

'I am always cheerful . . .'

'I'm not so sure about that,' Geordie interrupted.

'Only, it's this bloody toothache.'

Anna poked him in the arm. 'Don't swear, Daddy. It's rude.'

'I'm sorry, everyone. The truth is, I haven't been myself lately.'

'Perhaps you haven't got enough to do?' Amanda asked.

Sidney was just about to answer that a clergyman's life was actually far busier and more serious than anyone *ever* gave him credit for when the doorbell rang. He stood up and left the room. 'What fresh hell is this?' he muttered as he walked out into the long central hall that ran down the length of the ground floor. He opened the door to find a startlingly attractive middle-aged woman dressed in a mink coat.

This was Barbara Wilkinson, a divorcee from Grantchester whom Hildegard had always disliked. 'I hope I'm not interrupting anything?' she said. 'You do remember I was coming . . .'

'Not to lunch,' Sidney blustered. He had completely forgotten about her and compounded the offence by being unintentionally bad-mannered.

'You said midday. I'm afraid I'm a little late.'

'No, that's quite all right. It's only that we are about to eat. Would you like to join us?'

'I wouldn't want to intrude.'

'It would be no trouble.'

'I can tell by the way you are looking at me that's not true, Mr Archdeacon.'

There was an awkward pause. Sidney knew that he should try and get rid of the woman but couldn't do so without being even ruder than he had been already.

'It won't take long,' she continued. 'Ten minutes at most.'

Hildegard and Amanda emerged from the dining room to fetch a few more things from the kitchen. A series of awkward salutations then had to be made before Sidney was able to steer his visitor down the hall and into the study. He asked his eyebrow-raising wife to keep the casserole warm and promised he would return shortly.

Barbara Wilkinson took off her coat to reveal a long-sleeved blue and white polka-dot dress, cinched at the waist. Had she deliberately dressed up for this encounter, Sidney wondered, or was this her usual style? It was flash for Ely, let alone Grantchester.

'As you may recall,' she began, 'I am very troubled about Danny.'

Mrs Wilkinson's eighteen-year-old son had joined a commune that had recently been established on a farm outside Grantchester. It was run by Fraser Pascoe, an awareness guru, and was called the 'Family of Love'.

'Danny has joined of his own free will?' Sidney asked.

'He has.'

'And have you found out anything more? Is the community religious at all?' Sidney continued, wondering how on earth he was supposed to help.

'Apparently there was a mystical sect with the same name that flourished round here in the sixteenth century. This is some kind of secular revival. These people say that they have now moved "beyond religion". I think they chant, shout out and have visions.'

'Sounds as if they go in for mystical experiences. William Blake sang naked in the garden with his wife.'

'That's different. He was a poet. My son is supposed to be going into the City. This is not the kind of thing I had in mind at all. And it's not *like him*. He was always such a sensible child. But he's not been the same since his father left home.'

'I see.'

'As you may remember, I have been on my own for the last two years. Mike thought it would be safe to divorce once our son reached sixteen, but Danny's always been young for his age. I'm so worried. I can't sleep. I think he's been brainwashed.' Mrs Wilkinson took Sidney's hand. 'There's no one else I can turn to. You have to get him out of that dreadful place.'

'Have you spoken to my successor, the vicar of Grantchester? It is his parish. I wouldn't like to tread on his toes.'

'He told me that the joy Danny was experiencing in finding himself was something I should celebrate. Honestly. I could kill the man. It has to be you, Mr Archdeacon. Will you go and see my son?' She met his eyes, squeezed his hand and let it lie there rather too long.

Sidney promised to do what he could, stood up and saw his guest to the front door just as Anna had been commandeered

to rescue him. 'Please call in whenever you like,' Barbara Wilkinson concluded. 'Lunch, dinner, anything, Mr Archdeacon, I am all yours.'

As he closed the door, Sidney could still sense his hand in hers. Scent hung in the air.

He returned to his birthday lunch and was immediately teased. Hildegard remarked that she didn't understand why some women felt the need to dress so provocatively when visiting a clergyman. Her husband tried to justify the interruption by explaining how he knew Barbara. She was, he said, a vulnerable parishioner whose husband had run off with a dental assistant, leaving her alone with a teenage son.

'She looks more than capable of looking after herself,' Amanda replied. 'Her perfume was so strong I thought your indoor hyacinths had come out early.'

'It's Fidji.'

'You know the name?'

'I asked her.'

'Why on earth would you do that?'

'Curiosity, I suppose.'

'Then it's just as well you're not a cat. You'd have been dead by now.'

Geordie cut in before anyone else could respond. 'If she's what you call your "pastoral duties" then I can understand why they take a while.'

Sidney did not want to darken the mood by telling everyone that he really felt he should go and see Danny Wilkinson because he knew that some cults warned of the impending apocalypse so fervently that they encouraged their members to get the whole thing started by killing each other.

'Anna said grace for you,' Hildegard reported. 'It was going to be a surprise. She learned it specially. *Sag's nochmal, Kleine . . .*'

A reluctant Anna, disappointed by the earlier absence of her father, repeated her prayer:

'*Komm, Herr Jesu, sei unser Gast*
Und segne, was Du uns bescheret hast. Amen.'

The company applauded. Sidney was touched and guilty at the same time. How had he missed the moment? Repeating it later was not the same, he knew, but he kissed and thanked his daughter and said that her words were the best present anyone could have given him.

After lunch they retired to the drawing room for coffee and gifts. Sidney's father Alec handed over the traditional copy of Wisden, his mother had knitted him an Aran jumper and Amanda produced twelve monogrammed handkerchiefs.

'SRC – *Sidney Robert Chambers* – or *Senior Roman Catholic* if you're thinking of going over to Rome.'

'I think that's unlikely.'

'I had the same done for Henry. Details matter, Sidney, people notice these things: shoes, handkerchiefs and cufflinks. It's important to have standards.'

'I will do my best. Even though we must all fall short.'

'That's enough false modesty,' said his father.

'Then it seems I can't win.'

'That's the clergyman's lot, Sidney.'

'I thought this was supposed to be my birthday?'

He was keen to get a walk in before tea but Mrs Wilkinson's visit, and her son's predicament, provoked a long discussion of

the historic idealistic farm communities inspired by Tolstoy in Kharkov, Kursk and Voronezh, after which Leonard Graham left to see his old friend Simon Hackford in Cambridge. Inspector Keating then said that both he and Cathy should be heading home and would be happy to give Leonard a lift, while Amanda and Henry said they had to return to London for a social engagement that evening. Johnny Johnson also needed to get back to his jazz club.

The remaining Chambers family decided on a brisk tour past Cherry Hill motte and bailey and along the River Ouse. It was a damp afternoon and there were few signs of spring. Last year's leaves clung to the hedgerows, while thick sprays of traveller's joy unfolded over the brambles and dead bracken. Out in the stubble-fields a group of chaffinches picked at the grain left by the gleaners. Clumps of snowdrops were scattered under a hawthorn tree but, as Iris Chambers lamented, there was no hint of either primrose or crocus. Spring was going to be late again.

Jennifer Chambers took her brother aside and asked if he really minded being teased about other women.

'I'm used to it now.'

'It doesn't make you want to change your ways?'

'I have a clean conscience, Jen.'

'You don't think you lead women on?'

'Not at all.'

'I don't know why they find clergymen attractive.'

'I'm not sure they do.'

'It must be the air of distracted unavailability.'

'I don't cultivate such behaviour, if that's what you are suggesting.'

‘But you don’t mind the attention when it comes? I’m sure Hildegard does.’

‘I think she prefers to ignore it. She knows I love her more than anyone else.’

‘I hope you tell her. Sometimes you need to keep proving these things. It’s quite easy to lose faith; not only in religion but also in marriage.’

‘Are you worried about something, Jen?’

‘Not really, only it’s sometimes hard to know what men really think.’

‘Johnny?’

Jennifer swept back a strand of hair that hadn’t needed to be tidied and avoided eye contact. ‘There’s this woman at the club. He says there’s nothing in it, but he’s been coming home later and later. I know it’s the jazz world and I’m used to it, but he’s been distracted and irritable. He snaps at me more often.’

‘Is it money worries?’

‘It’s all kinds of anxiety. I overheard him saying that Blossom was a holiday from his everyday life.’

‘Blossom? As in Blossom Dearie?’

‘I don’t know, Sidney. It’s always Blossom this and Blossom that. She’s a jazz singer. Quite a handful, apparently.’

‘They often are.’

‘I only hope she hasn’t turned his head.’

‘I think he’s strong enough to resist.’

‘You were quite keen on a jazzer yourself, I recall.’

‘Gloria Dee?’ Sidney replied. ‘That was a long while ago; and, don’t forget, I wasn’t married at the time.’

‘Then I don’t know how you resisted the temptation. Will you have a word with Johnny when you’re next in the club?’

Why did people take such risks with their happiness? Sidney wondered. He could not imagine anyone wanting someone more lovely than his sister. She could have doubled for Diana Rigg in *The Avengers*. That was a far better programme than the bloody travesty of *All Gas and Gaiters*.

After the cake and candles and the final farewells at the station, Hildegard suggested a light supper and an early night. As she applied cold cream to her face in bed, she asked about Barbara Wilkinson, Sidney's toothache and then remembered that she had wanted to question her husband about Jen. His sister hadn't been herself. Was anything wrong?

Sidney thought about all the pressures and anxieties of the day. Did he have to tell his wife everything? His birthday had not gone as well as he had hoped. He sighed and put out the light.

'It's been a long day.' He said.

Later that week, and still feeling listless, Sidney sat at his desk with gloomy determination, hoping that work might give him a greater sense of purpose and direction. From the window he watched a bullfinch in the garden, strutting around with a sliver of bark in his beak, waiting to be relieved of his duties and clearly cross that he might have to make his own nest. His strut became ever more furious but pointless, like a vain clergyman in mid-procession up the cathedral nave, convinced that he should have been made a bishop.

Sidney put his hand to his cheek where his tooth throbbed. He thought he caught a ghost of Barbara Wilkinson's scent in the air, and found himself remembering the warmth of his hand in hers.

Because it was Lent, he was working on a study of conscience and guilt, trying to negotiate his way through the vexed question of human fallibility and the necessary distinction between the sins we can live with and those we can't. He had read that it might be helpful for a priest, or any other believer, for that matter, to imagine that Jesus was walking alongside you at all times, as if in conversation, on the road to Emmaus perhaps, as guide and conscience.

Sidney was not at all sure he wanted Jesus to be walking alongside him at all times; certainly not when he was with Barbara Wilkinson or having a man-to-man chat with Johnny Johnson in the jazz club. There were times when discretion was needed, moments when surely even Jesus might have to absent himself until things quietened down a bit.

He put down his pen and left to pursue a less meditative type of faith in the form of a visit to the farm where Danny Wilkinson had sequestered himself.

The centre of the commune was a dilapidated farmhouse with a cottage garden, garage, woodshed and barn. An old Land Rover was parked outside and a couple of mongrel dogs ran freely across the front yard. The doors to the barn were almost off their hinges and the outside tap had formed a frozen puddle on the ground below. A cat toyed with a dead yellowhammer. Sidney was on his guard before he had even knocked at the door.

He was greeted by a pale floppy-haired boy dressed in an oversized loose white shirt over jeans. He asked Sidney to sign a book of greeting and wait in the meditation space for their leader. Fraser Pascoe would join Sidney once he had finished his morning trance.

There was nowhere to sit down properly. A series of beanbags and yoga mats surrounded a teak coffee table that displayed an array of self-improving books: Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, together with Thoreau's *Walden* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

The walls had been painted orange and there was a faint aroma of joss sticks. Sidney noticed a reproduction of William Blake's painting of the twenty-four elders worshipping God in the Book of Revelation, a 'Desiderata' poster and a framed wisdom accreditation certificate from an organisation in India.

Pascoe was a man with a strong handshake and a firm jawline, chiselled cheekbones and dreamy blue eyes that could perhaps have been stolen for the purposes of becoming a cult leader. It was rare for Sidney to dislike someone within minutes of meeting, but Pascoe's perfumed cleanliness (Tabac aftershave, minty breath, Italian hair oil) was surely too good to be true.

'Western society is based on converting wants into needs,' he explained. 'Here, within the Family of Love, we try to do the opposite, reducing our desires to simple daily necessity.'

'An admirable idea.'

'It was, I think, the aim of the early Christians before they were corrupted by the Church.'

'That's true. To some extent.'

'That is a very Anglican answer. "To some extent".'

'And one that you might expect from an Anglican priest.'

Pascoe elaborated on the principles of the farm. It was a celibate, self-sufficient, vegetarian community, living entirely off

the land, without personal possessions or money. Their aim was to cleanse themselves of capitalist delusion and reach transcendent truth through meditation. 'The less you think, the freer you are. We open ourselves to divine dictation; a trance before the revelation of all things.'

'And the revelation will come?'

'Before the rapture. When all things will be known.'

'And when might that be?' Sidney tried not to sound sceptical.

'That is a secret known only to our adherents, but if you have read the work both of Nostradamus and Hendrik Niclaes and are aware of Mayan astrology then you can make a start. You are, of course, welcome to join us.'

'And tell me,' Sidney answered, giving the invitation a duck, 'how do you achieve the trance-like state necessary for revelation?'

'Silence, meditation; just like your prayers. The aim is to live beyond the body in pure light.'

'And how do you find that brightness?'

'We share a loving cup. We discover ourselves through love.'

'And is that expressed physically?'

'That is a question that befits a journalist rather than a clergyman. As I have already explained, Mr Archdeacon, we are a celibate group, uncorrupted by human bondage. I hear you would like to talk to Danny?'

'If that is allowed.'

'We are a free community. People come and go as they please.'

'And you are self-sufficient, I think you said?'

'Everything people need can be found in the community: food, shelter, safety, companionship and, I hope, wisdom.'

'Danny's mother is worried about him.'

'Barbara Wilkinson is naturally anxious,' Pascoe continued. 'A man less charitable than myself might even describe her as neurotic.'

'Do you know her?'

'I have had conversations and, in the past, I offered her a way of rest. But she is too attached to the cares of the world. Her son needs space and distance. That is why he is safely with us.'

'And how did he come to be here?'

'I am sure he can tell you himself. I believe he is in the kitchen. We are having an onion soup with our home-made bread. As I say, you would be welcome to join us.'

Given his insistent toothache, Sidney thought that simple food might be a comfort but he did not want to prolong his stay. 'That is kind but I think a conversation will be enough . . .'

'To allay a mother's fears. There is nothing frightening about our family, Mr Archdeacon. We live very simply, as you will see. But sometimes people are threatened by simplicity, just as they were by Jesus.'

The kitchen still had an old gas range and the peeling paint was partly disguised by hippy posters preaching love and self-improvement: '*Your mind is a garden, your thoughts are the seeds; you can grow flowers or you can grow weeds*.' One wall had been covered by a recent fresco of a rainbow over the Himalayas; another depicted a field of daisies with peace signs and psychedelic self-portraits at their centre. Danny Wilkinson was slicing onions, dressed in a simple olive-green crew-neck jumper with jeans and plimsolls. He was of medium height, with a goatee beard and hair that fell to his shoulders in a style that most parents would have described as 'girls'-length'.

Sidney apologised for the intrusion. 'I know you are old enough to make up your own mind about the way you live your life.'

'I certainly wouldn't follow my mother, man.'

'She has had a challenging time, I gather.'

'After Dad left? I knew it was bad before anything happened: the rows, the drinking. My parents were swingers. What do you expect? I think they still are. It's too much.'

Sidney was momentarily flummoxed by a generational role-reversal in which a trainee hippy appeared to be more moral than his parents. 'How did you come to be here?' he asked.

'Life was doing my head in. A friend saw I needed sorting out.'

'And who was that?'

'Tom Raven. You met him when you arrived.'

'With the large white shirt?'

'That's him. He's the only one who still cares about what he wears.'

Sidney did not bother arguing that an untucked shirt worn over jeans hardly required much effort and continued with his questions. 'How long do you intend to stay, Danny?'

'I don't believe in time any more.'

Pascoe explained. 'We encourage all our young people to live in the moment. Now is the only reality. The past has gone; the future will come. Father Time has no place here.'

'I sometimes think it's advisable to learn lessons from the past and make preparations for the future,' said Sidney.

Danny repeated what was surely a mantra. 'Our only reality is now. Love is our truth. Desire is illusion. Simplicity is our only need.'

Sidney had had enough of being lectured. 'Then I can tell your mother that you are content?'

'You can tell her that I am discovering a happiness that she'll never know.'

'I may not put it quite like that. But I will say, if I may, that she has nothing to worry about.'

'You can tell her what you like, man. I never want to see her again.'

The train back to Ely was delayed by frozen points. The hold-up only increased Sidney's sense of unease. Even though Christmas was long gone, it felt as if he was still stuck in the bleakest of midwinters. He wiped a smear across a steamed-up window to reveal a dull view of the scuffed and bruised earth, wind-damaged fences and empty telegraph wires. The landscape looked abandoned, with only a couple of blanketed horses in the paddocks, a solitary crow and a dead fox that had trapped itself under a railing.

He decided to call in on his friend Felix Carpenter, the Dean of Ely, before evensong. 'I don't know why I am so irritable,' he confessed. 'I think it must be a mixture of cold, toothache and impatience. The visit to the Family of Love has hardly helped. I find those people so difficult. I know it's not very Christian of me.'

'Perhaps it is their certainty,' the dean replied. 'I am not sure faith comes so easily as they seem to believe.'

'There's a smugness to them. I don't like it and then I become even more annoyed that they seem to have got to me. Do you think I could be jealous?'

'No, I think you find it simplistic, Sidney. Our faith is born out of the pain and suffering of the Cross. It's about a little

more than sharing a bowl of lentils and doing the odd bit of yoga.'

Cordelia Carpenter came into her husband's study with tea and digestive biscuits. She asked after Sidney's toothache and recommended the Maltings dental practice and a Mr Wilkinson in particular. Sidney imagined that this must be Barbara's former husband and immediately recognised that he could kill two birds with one stone.

It was impossible, Cordelia Carpenter vouchsafed, to concentrate on anything properly while suffering from such pain.

'Trollope's novels are full of teeth,' her husband remembered. 'I think he never travelled without a toothbrush and seldom described a woman or a girl without referring to their mouth. Of course in those days there was, I think, greater dental variety. People had teeth in gold, tin, ivory, wood and bone. It made them nervous of smiling. Nothing to do with Victorian propriety; they just didn't want to show their gnashers.'

'Didn't they also take them from corpses and reuse them?' his wife said as she removed the teapot to make a fresh supply.

'I think so. Had you been alive then, Sidney, you might have had a teeth-related mystery to solve.'

'I am more than happy to live now,' their friend replied, eager to return to the subject in hand as soon as Cordelia had left them alone. 'The Family of Love are taught that there is no such thing as past or future. They live only in the present.'

'And so they are unlikely to appeal to historians or futurologists.'

'Their leader is certainly aware of the future. I think there is some preparation for the end of the world; the final rapture.'

'Has he been kind enough to set a date on it? Pope Innocent III predicted it would end 666 years after the rise of Islam; Martin Luther thought it would be no later than 1600. Recently I have been told it might be 1968, 1975, or even 1984, but I have my doubts. We don't all live by the same calendar.'

'I think you have to be one of his adherents to be illuminated . . .'

'Or indoctrinated. How dangerous do you think they are, Sidney?'

'I'm not sure. It feels rather creepy, that's all.'

'What about their leader? Is he all he's cracked up to be?'

'Definitely not. I am sure he is a charlatan.'

'Has he taken money from the people who stay there?'

'Probably.'

'That's what you need to find out. If you can't get them on their philosophy, you have to hit them with their economics. If there's fraud you can bring in Keating.'

'I can't see him sharing a loving cup.'

'Indeed. But I'd like to see them offer. You will look after yourself, won't you, Sidney? I don't want you taking on too much.'

'I'm not sure I'm taking on anything.'

'At least go to the dentist, as my beloved Cordelia suggests. I always find it easiest, if you want an untroubled life, to do what your wife says. That's the kind of simplicity that's easy to follow and you don't need to go to the trouble of joining a cult.'

Sidney smiled and finished his tea, loving the dean and his wife for their loyalty, generosity of spirit and their unpretentious goodness. Their home was such a welcoming contrast to the commune, with its deep sofas and fresh flowers, its aroma of

baking and Brasso, sherry and furniture polish. This was a different, old-fashioned, Church of England timelessness, he thought; the oak and mahogany tables, cabinets, chests and chairs passed down the generations, watched and measured by the reassuring tick and strike of the grandfather clock in the hall.

He was in a far better mood during evensong and returned home almost cheerfully in time for a simple supper of Welsh rarebit and a bit of easy television.

Hildegard had finished her piano teaching for the day and was reading Anna the story of Little Red Riding Hood in the original German. She asked Sidney if he'd like to join them. Perhaps both father and daughter could become bilingual?

Anna laughed. 'You can be the big bad WOLF, Daddy . . .'

'I'm not sure I've got the teeth for it,' Sidney smiled indulgently before promising that he would try his best.

On Monday 20th February, the Grantchester churchwarden discovered the dead body of Fraser Pascoe in a field between the farm and the church. He had been decapitated.

There was no sign of a murder weapon. The head lay a few feet from the body, as if someone had taken an almighty swing at the victim while he was walking, but the pathologist reported that it would have required several attempts to sever it from the body and that it was more likely to have been tossed or even kicked aside once it was off.

Inspector Keating was on the scene within an hour, the farm was cordoned off and no one was allowed to leave. Road blocks were set up at Coton Road, Broadway and Mill Way, police went door to door asking for witnesses, and Sidney was summoned that evening.

'Why didn't you warn me this might happen?' Geordie asked. 'This is the man that woman in the fur coat was telling you about.'

'I didn't think it would come to this.'

'But you were uneasy. I know you, Sidney Chambers. Do you think Barbara Wilkinson could have done it herself? Taking the law into her own hands?'

'I hardly think she's responsible. She wouldn't have the strength.'

'You'd be surprised. If the axe was sharp enough . . .'

'You think it was an axe?'

'What else could it have been? We'll have to interview every member of that bloody cult. Never mind Mrs Wilkinson, I suppose any one of them could have done it.'

'Or one of their parents . . .'

'Or a local madman, for that matter. We have no leads. You'll talk to the boy; and his dreadful mother, of course. Did you ever get round to meeting the victim?'

'I didn't like him at all, Geordie, I must confess. Even the dean said he was a "perfect menace". Although I wouldn't put *him* down as a murderer.'

'All this religion has a lot to answer for.'

Sidney tried to explain the difference between good and bad religion; that it wasn't the fault of any individual belief system but misunderstandings by their followers. Even if people fall short of their ideals, it is still better to have them than not.

'I'm not so sure,' said Keating. 'Wouldn't it be preferable to have no religion at all?'

* * *