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Product Code A0547-F

# Campion's Will

by

## Fred J. Abbate

**A Play in One Act**

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# Campion's Will

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## CHARACTERS

1F/3M

EDMUND; *a man of about forty*

THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE; *a man in his fifties*

SARA; *a housemaid, a girl of about eighteen*

WILL; *a young man of sixteen*

## SETTING

*The year is 1581, the Library of Rufford Hall, the home of Sir Thomas Hesketh, Lancashire.*

## SOME HISTORICAL (AND IMAGINED) BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

Saint Edmund Campion (1540-1581) was an academic superstar at Oxford, an intellectual who dazzled the Queen herself when she visited the university in 1564. After having serious doubts about the Church of England, he converted to Catholicism and ultimately joined the Jesuit order in 1573. He was among the first Jesuit priests sent to England on a secret mission in 1580 to minister to and support Catholics who were feeling mounting pressure from Elizabeth's government to conform to the Anglican religion. Campion became the object of a widespread manhunt throughout the country, constantly on the move, often changing his identity, hiding with dozens of families sympathetic to or covertly practicing Catholicism, and saying Mass and hearing confessions in secret, frequently from midnight to six in the morning. Among his houses of refuge were several in the Lancashire area, including Rufford Hall, the home of Sir Thomas Hesketh.

Several Shakespeare scholars—Stephen Greenblatt most compellingly in his book *Will in the World*—have suggested the fascinating possibility that the young play-writing genius could have met Campion when the 16-year-old—perhaps a burgeoning closet Catholic himself—was earning a living as a performer and sometime-schoolmaster in the Lancashire region in 1581. Although the evidence is quite slim for the reality of this interesting encounter, Rufford Hall would seem a likely prospect if we let our imaginations work some modest overtime.

Campion was finally captured on July 17, 1581 at Lyford Grange near Oxford. After refusing to forsake his Catholicism, and after months of horrific torture, he and his fellow priests were hanged and drawn and quartered at Tyburn on December 1. At least one writer has argued for the possibility that Shakespeare could have been in the crowd that witnessed the brutal execution.

Pope Paul VI canonized Edmund Campion in 1970.

## Campion's Will

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**SETTING:** *The year is 1581, the Library of Rufford Hall, the home of Sir Thomas Hesketh, Lancashire. Upstage and slightly to Stage Right is a large desk, a chair behind it allowing the occupant to face downstage. There is a chair on either side of the desk facing downstage as well. The main entrance to the room is downstage Left, but another smaller locked door is visible upstage Right. Several bookcases with many leather-bound volumes line the back wall, except that a shuttered window takes up most of the wall to the Left of the desk, its bottom about five feet from the floor. Under the window is a small sideboard. It is 6:00 PM on a weekday.*

**AT RISE:** *At curtain rise stage lights are dim. EDMUND is seen sitting at the desk illuminated only by a spot. He is wearing the plain clothes of a commoner, perhaps a domestic worker, staring ahead into space as the voice begins to be heard. THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE slowly appears from Stage Right into the outer fringes of the illuminating spot. He stares at EDMUND who continues to stare ahead without noticing the intruder.*

### LORD CHIEF JUSTICE

How say you now to the charge of treason and to the charge of murder?

### EDMUND'S VOICE

You ask how we plead, your Honor, to the charge of treason? To murder? Our plea, sir, is for sanity. You have indicted me and my fellow priests for conspiring to destroy allegiance to the Queen. And now you allege something so monstrous that its absurdity would be evident to any child. You say we are murderers simply because we minister to those of the Roman religion? You say that we have schemed to slaughter the Queen herself and that we aim to incite a rebellion in this land? Your Lordship, we are priests of the Jesuit order. We have

EDMUND'S VOICE, *Continued*

pledged our lives to our Creator—yes, the Creator of life, your Lordship, the Creator of us all. What you do here is itself a criminal act. Let me now demonstrate how foolish such travesty of justice would appear to a mind not clouded by prejudice and show the utter falsity....

*The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE withdraws as the voice begins to trail off during the last sentence and becomes inaudible as the lights come up.*

*Lights up. EDMUND begins writing for a few minutes, struggling with his thoughts. There is a knock on the door.*

EDMUND

*(Jumping up)* Who is there?

*EDMUND immediately hides what he is writing in the center desk drawer and comes forward to sit on the Left front corner of the desk.*

SARA, *Offstage*

It is I, sir.

EDMUND

Sara?

SARA, *Offstage*

Yes, sir.

EDMUND

You are unaccompanied?

SARA, *Offstage*

I am quite alone, sir.

EDMUND

*(Goes to door and slides back the bolt)* You may come in, Sara. Quickly, now.

*There is the sound of a key turning in the lock. SARA opens the door and enters carrying a tray of tea and biscuits. EDMUND bolts the door behind her.*

SARA

*(Curtsyng)* Please excuse me, sir. The master has asked me to bring you some apple wine and biscuits. Will it be acceptable, sir?

EDMUND

That would be very pleasant, Sara. Thank you very much.

*EDMUND walks back to desk, sits, retrieves the papers from the drawer and begins writing again.*

SARA

*(Placing tray on the sideboard under the window)* The house is very noisy today, sir.

EDMUND

*(Still writing)* Yes. Many people about, so I've heard. Your master's home has always been a very popular place for visitors, has it not?

SARA

*(Turns to EDMUND)* There are players and music makers here as well, sir. We have all been told there will be actors performing and songs this night. It is all very exciting.

EDMUND

I'm sure that will be very enjoyable for all in the house, Sara.

SARA

Of course, not all of our visitors are so welcome, sir.

EDMUND

*(Looking up, interested)* And who might those unwelcome guests be, Sara?

SARA

A number of days past—before you came here to us, sir—there were some fearful men who arrived. And certainly without the Master's invitation. From the Queen herself, they claimed. Very, very rude personages, if I might say so, sir. They frightened many of the servants.

EDMUND

Yes. Sir Thomas has informed me of their visit.

SARA

They tramped through every room breaking things, looking into the master's documents and every drawer in his chamber. Even the pots in our kitchen were not spared their meddling.

EDMUND

I am sorry to hear that, Sara, yet I expect they will be back again. No doubt much sooner than we would like.

SARA

Oh, dear. I hope not, Father. If they come back....

EDMUND

Sara? Have you forgotten what we carefully agreed upon? You must be very, very cautious when you address me.

SARA

Forgive me, Father. No. Not Father. Forgive me, **sir**. (*Emphasizing the third word*) I pray to our Lord and Savior that those ugly men will never come again.

EDMUND

As do I. Remember, however, that should anyone inquire of you or of anyone in the household – if anyone asks about me – you must say what?

SARA

That you are a member of Sir Thomas's body of workers, just as I am myself. You are a gardener.

EDMUND

Exactly. That is all you must say. Will you be sure to remember?

SARA

I will, Father. No, not Father. Sir. I mean to say **sir**. That is what I mean to say, Father. (*Shakes her head*) Sir.

EDMUND

You are a good girl, Sara. I have great trust in you. And I thank you for bringing the apple wine to me.

*SARA hesitates to leave.*

EDMUND

Is there some other thing you wanted to ask of me, Sara?

SARA

Well, I was about to ask...will there be...? I mean...tonight?

EDMUND

I cannot say yet, Sara. Someone will tell you where and at what time. Not, however, until much later today. Please be patient with me.

SARA

God be with you, sir.

EDMUND

And with you, Sara. As I am very certain he is.

*SARA exits Left. The door closes and one hears the sound of the key locking it. EDMUND ignores the tray on the sideboard, and resumes what he has been writing. For a few short minutes he puts his head in his hands as if trying to find the right words.*

*Again, there is the sound of a key in the lock. WILL opens the door and enters. Notices EDMUND hastily putting the papers away.*

WILL

I beg your pardon, sir. I was told that this chamber was not occupied.

EDMUND

*(Standing, visibly distressed, realizing he has forgotten to bolt the door from the inside)* Who are you? How do you come to have a key to this room?

WILL

I see, sir, that I have greatly disturbed your work. I shall return at a later hour. *(Turns and starts to leave)*

EDMUND

*(Moving toward WILL)* Hold, young man! Do not move a single step! *(WILL stops and turns to him.)* Attend carefully to me. I am asking who gives you leave to enter this room.

WILL

I am here with a company of players, sir.

EDMUND

And do all performers have keys to the rooms in this house? That most assuredly cannot be true.

WILL

No it is not, sir. When we are not acting our parts, I sometimes serve as the children's tutor. *(Displays the key)* Sir Thomas has given me this key and several others as well. It is of no consequence, sir. As I said, I will leave. *(Begins to leave again)*

EDMUND

*(Moving closer)* Stop! Please stay exactly as you are! *(WILL stops in his tracks)* What is your name?

WILL

*(Turns to face him)* I am William, but I am called Will by most. *(Turning and edging in a bit more)* My purpose, sir, was simply to explore the volumes our good host has collected here.

EDMUND

I see. A scholarly Will.

WILL

No, sir. Simply a curious Will.

EDMUND

Then, Mr. Will-So-Curious. If you are to stay in this room, what you must now do is lock the door with your key and slide the bolt closed.

WILL

But I shall leave, sir, as I have said.

EDMUND

*(Firmly)* You must stay now that you are here. I would like to ask you a number of questions when I am finished with my work. Is that idea comprehensible to you? Now, please do as I have asked and fasten the door quickly and securely.

*WILL hesitates for a moment, but goes to door and locks and bolts it.*

WILL

It is done, sir.

*HE turns to EDMUND as if not knowing what to do next.*

EDMUND

Thank you, Will. Now, please stay here and while I work I ask you to become like the white clouds in God's heaven.

WILL

How do I do so, sir?

EDMUND

By being seen yet making not the smallest noise. You may look and you may read, but you will be on your guard lest even your breathing disturb my work.

WILL

I will leave, as I have said. *(Starts to leave again)*

EDMUND

*(Forcefully)* And when you have, at length, expended your scholarly curiosity, I ask you to sit on this chair *(Indicates chair beside desk Left)* and answer some simple questions that I will ask you. Have we reached an arrangement, young scholar?

WILL

One of us certainly has, and I think it best to follow his management.

EDMUND

Excellent! There are biscuits and apple wine on the sideboard. You may enjoy them with the good wishes of Sir Thomas.

*He extracts the papers from the desk drawer, sits again and begins to write. WILL stands, still looking over at EDMUND for a moment, then looks over at the tray and walks to it. He begins to pour some wine from the decanter but immediately stops, stares, remains immobile.*

EDMUND

*(Noticing WILL)* Is there some difficulty?

WILL

*(Turning toward EDMUND)* Excuse me, sir.

EDMUND

*(Looking up to heaven)* Is this, then, how clouds sound to an actor?

WILL

I was about to say that...

EDMUND

*(Becoming more annoyed)* Yes?

WILL

...that there is only one cup.

EDMUND

And why is this discovery of such astonishing importance?

WILL

There being only one cup, sir, there will be no cup left for you if I employ it. Do you follow my reasoning, sir?

EDMUND

Ah, that reasoning seems very sound, young man. Very sound.

WILL

Thank you, sir.

EDMUND

And now may I add to the logic of your argument?

WILL

As you wish, sir.

EDMUND

Might it not also follow that I do not care to have any drink! Do you capture the complex methods of my own reasoning?

WILL

Yes, sir. Forgive me, sir.

*WILL continues to pour the wine. As he replaces the decanter it slips from his hand and hits the tray with a crashing sound. During this distracting sequence, EDMUND looks to the ceiling again in obvious frustration while tapping his fingers on the desk.*

EDMUND

Is all quite arranged for drinking yet?

WILL

Yes, sir. I am so sorry, sir.

*WILL begins to pace around the room sipping his drink peering at books and other items on the shelves. EDMUND, trying to write, is clearly distracted by WILL's movements back and forth before the desk, and looks up at him several times as he wanders from shelf to shelf. After a few moments of this business, WILL pulls a volume from a shelf and begins to read. EDMUND goes back to his writing. WILL begins to move his lips as he reads and walks and soon starts humming a tune softly but noticeably as he continues.*

EDMUND

*(Looking to the ceiling)* Youthful player, I know that I will not be forgiven the sin of stopping an eager mind its chance to acquire knowledge. Yet, please God, must you insist on bringing song to your examination of the text?

WILL

Song? Oh, the humming.

EDMUND

The humming.

WILL

It is an actor's trick, sir. You see, if I set a tune to match the words, it becomes much easier to recall them when needed. For example, the first lines of Virgil's great poem would go thus...

EDMUND

I understand! No example, please! Thank you. (*Aside*) Actors!

WILL

You do not like actors, sir?

EDMUND

(*Trying to go back to his writing*) I do not... dislike them.

WILL

I have heard it said that the great philosopher Plato thought them to be evil beings.

EDMUND

(*Writing while replying*) Well, he thought them to be very like liars in some ways. And liars, he was convinced, can damage the just arrangement of the perfect city.

WILL

I do not agree with the famous gentlemen if that is indeed what he said.

EDMUND

That is your privilege, of course. I am sure the great philosopher would be quite distressed to know of your difference of opinion. (*WILL nods.*) Yet are you not, in truth, a liar?

WILL

No, sir. I certainly am not.

EDMUND

(*Not looking up, still writing throughout the next exchange*) Do you not often pretend to be someone else in your plays and pageants—someone who is not yourself?

WILL

Yes, however....

EDMUND

Is not pretending a kind of lying?

WILL

Yes, I suppose one might say...

EDMUND

So you are a liar and you can see why Plato thought you and your fellows to be dangerous impostors.

WILL

Yet, if I may say...

EDMUND

*(Looks up)* Were you about to speak?

WILL

*(Stands silently holding his cup, trying to formulate a reply)* Yet, people come to a play expecting the actors to lie. If everyone who hears a person who lies knows that he is going to lie then, of a certainty that is not genuine lying.

EDMUND

So it is not genuine lying, then? It is insincere falsehood?

WILL

*(Obviously pleased with himself)* Exactly so!

EDMUND

And is that not even more evil? God might easily forgive a simple lie, but what in heaven's name must he think of an insincere one?

*EDMUND returns to writing trying not to show his smile.*

*WILL sits on chair by the desk, puts cup at corner Left. Makes no sound for a moment or two, thinking about his next move.*

WILL

A fortnight ago I played the part of a pious young nun helping the poor. Surely that was not an evil thing?

*EDMUND pauses for a moment. WILL begins to shake his head.*

EDMUND

Must I say it?

WILL

No. You need not, sir. Yes, yes, I lied about being a pious nun.

EDMUND

*(Puts pen down and again trying to hide his smile)* Shall we proceed now with the questions?

WILL

Those queries were not the questions, then?

EDMUND

No. We'll make a true start now.

WILL

I am ready, sir. May I begin? What is it that you are writing?

EDMUND

The questions were to be of you, not by you.

WILL

I am very sorry, sir. Then, of course, you must begin.

EDMUND

*(Feeling a bit guilty now)* Since you have asked, however, the answer is that I have been struggling much of this day to write what I foolishly believed to be a significant tract.

WILL

Not going easily, sir? It is surely my fault, I fear. I should have left you alone with your thoughts. I can leave now, if that is permissible.

EDMUND

The problem is not of your making, young man. Let us say only that upon considered inspection my written thoughts appear to have the same significance as the ravings of an idiot.

WILL

Perhaps you shall improve on it, sir. I, too, have tried to write, often with exceedingly putrid effect.

EDMUND

Ah, I see. A writer as well as a scholar!

WILL

What is your writing about, sir?

EDMUND

Another question already?

WILL

I beg your pardon, sir.

EDMUND

I would like to answer, yet it is, I fear, much too involved to explain.

WILL

You mean to a mere actor.

EDMUND

*(Smiling)* To anyone, I am afraid. I have made the device much too intricate for any human mind. *(Standing, coming around to front of desk; leaning against front edge)* So, you are called Will, young master. Named for that very faculty which moves the intellect to action?

WILL

*(Smiling)* The very same, sir, but not named for it.

EDMUND

Ah, an important distinction, indeed! Tell me, where are you from?

WILL

I was born a little distance from here. Stratford-upon-Avon.

EDMUND

I know of it. You mentioned the great poet Virgil. Do you know Latin?

WILL

I do, sir.

EDMUND

And Greek?

WILL

Better than some might suppose.

EDMUND

And your writings? What varieties do they embrace?

WILL

Nothing very eminent, sir. Some poems, a few scraps of plays.

EDMUND

A schoolmaster, an actor, a poet, a maker of plays! So many things! You are also an Englishman, of course, presuming there is space left to be some other thing as well.

WILL

*(Smiling broadly, getting the joke)* Indeed, sir.

EDMUND

Tell me, Will, are you loyal to the Queen?

WILL

I have no reason to believe that she would be offended by me.

EDMUND

Think you, then, that not giving offense is alike to loyalty?

WILL

So long as the Queen does not desire more.

EDMUND

Yet I am told... (*Quickly raising his hand to stop WILL*) Silence, please! (*No one speaks for a moment*) Did you hear something? Quiet! There is someone at the door!

*EDMUND moves quickly to the door putting his ear by it.*

WILL

I did not hear...

EDMUND

(*Shaking his head to WILL and in a stage whisper*) Silence!

*WILL stands and remains immobile as EDMUND listens at the door for a few more seconds then goes to the window carefully opening the interior shutter a little and peeking out.*

WILL

(*In a loud, slow whisper*) Are they gone?

*EDMUND comes back to desk, sits behind it and puts his writing back into the center drawer.*

EDMUND

I believe so. Most plausibly it was nothing. One can never be completely certain of late.

WILL

Certain of what, sir?

EDMUND

There are some men who often create commotion about this house, as they do in all of England.

WILL

Those who spy on others and sell what they discover?

EDMUND

And what do you know of these matters, young scholar?

WILL

Do you fear such men?

EDMUND

That was not my question. Of what were we speaking a moment ago?

WILL

Why, sir, do you fear them?

EDMUND

Have I claimed to fear anyone?

WILL

I have heard stories regarding a faction of men who have secretly come to England, and that they seek to rebel against the Queen and all her ministers.

EDMUND

And just who are these men believed to be?

WILL

They are called Jesuits. Could these be among the men whom you fear?

EDMUND

And who has been telling you such things, Will?

WILL

One of my fellow players has heard that these Jesuits wear disguises to conceal themselves. Have you heard of them?

EDMUND

*(Shaking his head with a smile)* Tell your friend that such talk is outright nonsense!

WILL

They are not, then dangerous?

EDMUND

Actors appear to allow their imaginations to overpower God-given reason. Now, what were we speaking about, Will?

WILL

Hmm... I believe it was about our Queen, if I recall aright.

EDMUND

I am going to ask you another question. I want you to think carefully on it before you answer, Will. Do you grasp my meaning?

WILL

I shall endeavor to reply as honestly as I can to question of such consequence, sir.

EDMUND

*(Stands, comes around to front of desk and leans against the Right corner)* Very well. What do you know of the Pope?

WILL

I have never met the man, sir.

EDMUND

I did not expect that you were friends! My meaning was... Well, let me put the question to you with some difference. Suppose that you have met him. How might you judge him?

WILL

I do not think he would meet someone such as me.

EDMUND

Pretend you have met him, will you not? Surely an actor who pretends can do that.

WILL

But that would be a lie, sir. As the great Plato has written...

EDMUND

*(Slightly annoyed)* You will be forgiven this once. Kindly do as I ask!

WILL

*(Stands and closes his eyes, putting his head down as if getting in character for a major role)* The Pope appears displeased. His face is increasing in color to a crimson tint as we speak.

EDMUND

Yes?

WILL

He tells me he does not like the Queen.

EDMUND

And?

WILL

*(Eyes still closed)* And he tells me that the Queen is not partial to him as well.

EDMUND

And what do you say?

WILL

*(Again eyes closed, thinking seriously)* I tell him... I do not comprehend politics.

EDMUND

Politics? Politics? Do you not comprehend religion?

WILL

Is religion not simply politics by another name?

EDMUND

Is this not a contemptuous outlook for one so young?

WILL

Is it, sir? *(Counting off on his fingers)* We appear to see nothing but papists hating what the Queen commands. The Queen then hates what the papists claim. The Puritans hate everyone. And, now, we are all afraid of Jesuits. Is that not politics, sir?

EDMUND

Religion is assuredly about being decent and honorable, about pleasing God. That is not politics. Politics is about pleasing men, not God.

WILL

Religion may be, then, in need of great touch of remedy, I respectfully propose. Those in power not only insist upon loyalty, as you have said, but tell us that God himself is firmly in their ranks and only there.

EDMUND

Do not these plays and entertainments that you yourself perform often instruct and inspire men to be decent and honorable? Is this not a moral purpose alike to religion with no politics in place to confound it?

WILL

Well, I do not truly think that plays are intended to make men righteous. They are simply entertainments, sir. They are no more than that.

EDMUND

And they merely amuse? Nothing further?

WILL

We can show the weakness, the folly, the confusion, and the cruelty of men—yes, even their horror-struck fears at times. These are seldom angels to be admired.

EDMUND

Yet, surely, many times plays do inspire souls to virtue. I remember as a boy seeing wonderful depictions of stories in our churches. Stories of miracles, of salvation, of saints doing good for others. They showed a splendid religious intention.

WILL

Were not those plays meant for children alone?

EDMUND

Yes, but surely...

WILL

Under present circumstances, our plays must especially take heed lest they inspire our audience by offending it. Some among our most attentive spectators are watch dogs who report their reflections to their political superiors. Saints, yes, can be very pure, but actors must be very vigilant.

EDMUND

*(Nodding)* I understand your caution, to be sure. It is the dilemma in which all now live.

WILL

And in which the politics have become so entwisted with religion that, like seeing Janus, we do not know which face we now witness.

EDMUND

*(Nods)* We must pray for better days, Will, days when the schemes of political men will no longer determine how we are allowed to speak—how we are allowed to live and to worship our God.

*Lights dim as LORD CHIEF JUSTICE enters slowly Right as spot on EDMUND comes up. EDMUND stares ahead.*

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE

Before the examination of the accused shall commence, he will be given leave to present arguments in his own defense. Proceed.

EDMUND'S VOICE

I repeat to you, your Lordship, that we have been given no time to prepare for this so-called examination. I have been pulled from my cell only moments ago, the marks from the shackles still raw and the pain of the rack yet pulsing throughout my limbs. I have been denied my books and my writings and I have no proper way to arrange my replies to the charges made against me and my fellow priests. This is nothing more than a biased charade. Your conclusions have been drawn well before convening this pretense of debate. The Dean of Saint Paul's sits here, but I believe that Saint Paul himself would be in tears to see such disdain for the integrity, for the common decency which is being destroyed here ....

*EDMUND'S VOICE trails off to inaudibility during the last sentence as LORD CHIEF JUSTICE withdraws.*

*Lights come back up as and spot dims on EDMUND.*

WILL

*(Thinking)* Of course, often there are unforeseen inspirations in our listeners when we perform our plays.

EDMUND

Of what kind?

WILL

On occasion those in attendance can make sounds quite unpleasant. One wonders if those who hear us have carried their pigs along as companions.

EDMUND

*(Laughing, shaking his head)* How was your apple wine? Do you desire more?

WILL

It was very superior, sir, but I am finished. Is it my turn now? With questions, I mean. *(Sits)*

EDMUND

Go on, then.

WILL

Is it not time to ask your name?

EDMUND

Are names of such consequence to our conversation? Are they not mere marks that we use to distinguish one thing from another?

WILL

May I ask the question by another means, then, with your permission?

EDMUND

Indeed.

WILL

What are you called more often than not?

EDMUND

*(Laughing again)* Let us say that I am called Edmund.

WILL

Edmund. That, too, is what I shall call you then, with your agreement.

EDMUND

Of course. So we are agreed on one thing, Will. This seems like a significant forward step.

WILL

Are you a visitor here like so many others? Forgive me, was it your turn?

EDMUND

I can answer. I am serving our host as his gardener for a time.

WILL

I see.

EDMUND

*(Looks up at WILL)* Do you, young master? Your face gives me a very different account of what you claim to see.

WILL

I did not intend...

EDMUND

You may speak aloud about whatever puzzles you, Will.

WILL

*(Hesitating)* It is that I have not chanced upon many gardeners who can read, or who can be seen writing intricate tracts and who converse with such firmness about the opinions of Plato.

EDMUND

Have you met so many gardeners?

WILL

Many more than Queens and Popes.

EDMUND

Yet are the words we speak and what we see in gardens so diverse?

WILL

I confess I have missed their resemblance.

EDMUND

Think of it, Will. Just like words, do not some plants fill us with pleasure, others with the pain of thorns or fever? Are not some words used to console, some to poison and some to destroy?

WILL

Yes, however....

EDMUND

Does not the suitor present flowers to his loved one as a sign and symbol of his intentions— a meaning as precise and as fervent as any poetic word can relate?

WILL

They do, indeed. I had not...

EDMUND

And like all living things, both words and plants need careful tending—do they not?—lest they become weak and dead and fail to do what God or the speaker intends. Is that not true?

WILL

I had not so considered it, Edmund. Yet it surely...

EDMUND

And was not God Himself a gardener? Was not Eden a place where the most marvelous of plants grew?

WILL

Yet are we not told it was a garden despoiled by the greatest of sins?

EDMUND

Ah, yes. However, since you know your Latin, *corruptio optimi pessima*. (Smiles)

WILL

The best, when befouled, becomes the most wicked.

EDMUND

Forgive me. I do not mean to go on with so much talk. My colleagues frequently tell me to control my penchant for constant lecture.

WILL

Your colleagues. The other 'gardeners' who also declaim in Latin and speak of Plato, you mean.

EDMUND

Well, not colleagues, precisely....

WILL

And so the plants have taught you to read?

EDMUND

I intended only to draw an analogy.

WILL

It was most instructive. I shall certainly remember it.

EDMUND

It was simply empty chatter of no consequence. It is best forgotten.

WILL

Empty or not, it was enlightening to grasp that one can learn to speak Latin by tilling the earth and perhaps to read Greek by spreading manure.

EDMUND

*(Laughing again)* I must say that never have I met an actor or even seasoned schoolmaster who can use his words so well. Your power with words is to God's great glory, Will, whatever noises emanate from your audience.

WILL

Oh, things more substantial, too, emanate from them at times. We are always on guard to dodge them, God help us.

EDMUND

Yes, God help us. ...Do you believe in God?

WILL

Who does not, sir?

EDMUND

Oh, there are many who claim with fierce ardor that they do, indeed, so believe, but their actions demonstrate the emptiness of their belief.

WILL

You mean those who are the sinners.

EDMUND

Are we not all sinners, Will? Those who recognize that they have sinned do so because they know in their hearts that they have offended God. To speak oddly, their very sin is evidence of their belief.

WILL

And what do we say of those who do not recognize that they have offended God?

EDMUND

We must pity them, for they are both sinful and ignorant. *(Walks downstage Right and turns toward WILL)* Have you not ever played a sinner on your stage?

WILL

Oh, yes. Sinners make the most excellent of roles. Actors always fancy playing the greatest sinners rather than the holiest of saints.

EDMUND

Why is that?

WILL

Saints appear to be buried under the weight of virtue. It is too easy to lose interest in them. Sinners, on the contrary, show us how profoundly human they are with every utterance and with each action they embark upon.

EDMUND

Saints, you say, seem to be less than human?

WILL

They do not appear to make grave mistakes. Drama must have such mistakes, whether the play be comical or tragic.

EDMUND

And do your great sinners know they have sinned?

WILL

There is no strict rule in our plays, I reflect. Some recognize their sin and may even shed tears for it. That can be excellent theater.

EDMUND

And the others?

WILL

Others appear not to know they have sinned. Perhaps they even believe they have done some noble thing. Yet that, too, can sometimes be good drama.

EDMUND

Are not the most moving dramas those where good men suffer for their very righteousness? Consider the Christian martyrs. Saint Peter, Saint Sebastian. Even the Titan Prometheus, he who brought fire to mortals.

WILL

Do not kings and queens determine what is righteous and what is not, what is sinful and what is not?

EDMUND

Rulers might believe such treacherous falsehood, but they are powerfully, vulgarly misguided.

WILL

Except that their subjects appear not to be.

EDMUND

The consent of the slave will never justify his slavery.

WILL

Is the Queen a sinner?

EDMUND

If she is human, she is a sinner.

WILL

Is she aware of her sin?

EDMUND

I am not able to say what your Queen thinks, Will. For now we speak only of plays and pageants.

WILL

*(Rising)* My Queen? Is she not your Queen as well, sir?

EDMUND

She is the Queen of many.

WILL

Not yours, however?

EDMUND

Yes, mine as well, in matters of state.

WILL

Only in matters of state? Is not religion her chief matter of state?

EDMUND

Perhaps she is confused in this.

WILL

Those men sent to the rack and to the scaffold would give us strong evidence to the contrary.

EDMUND

Let us say that she is not confused in her aims. Only in her reasons.

WILL

But sinner she is nonetheless?

EDMUND

Without doubt.

*There is a knock on the door. EDMUND jumps up.*

EDMUND

Who is there?

SARA, *Offstage*

It is Sara, sir. May I enter?

EDMUND

Are you alone, Sara?

SARA, *Offstage*

Yes, sir.

*EDMUND swiftly runs to door, and slides the bolt open.*

EDMUND

Come in, then. Quickly.

*The key turns and SARA enters Left. WILL straightens his posture and looks at her with a broad smile.*

SARA

*(Eying WILL as she speaks)* Forgive me, sir. The master inquires if you will join the family for supper.

EDMUND

Please thank Sir Thomas, Sara, but I cannot do so this night.

*SARA comes over to the desk, crosses WILL, takes his cup and moves over to the sideboard. She picks up the tray and begins to walk to the door.*

SARA

I shall so inform him, sir. *(Turns to EDMUND but looks at WILL)* I hope the drink was satisfactory, sir.

EDMUND

*(Glancing over at WILL)* I have it on very good evidence that it was most agreeable. *(Walks back to corner of desk)*

WILL

*(Stands, clears his throat and runs toward her)* Please allow me to carry this for you, my Lady.

*WILL tries to take the tray from her, but SARA resists. They struggle for a moment.*

EDMUND

Leave Sara to her duties, Will.

*WILL whispers to SARA; she smiles but does not release the tray.*

EDMUND

Please let the girl be!

WILL

I seek to help the child only. Surely, helping our neighbor is the Christian behavior we are urged to perform. Is that not so?

EDMUND

Only when one's motives are pure. Even a blind beggar would clearly see your intentions.

WILL

*(Releases the tray)* Do you like plays, Sara? I am an actor. *(Bows dramatically)* Tonight we perform a splendid story of love and passion. I would be most pleased if...

EDMUND

*(Sternly)* You may leave us, Sara!

SARA

*(Curtseys, turns and begins to exit Left)* Thank you, Father... Thank you, sir.

*Just before going through the door, SARA turns and smiles at WILL, turns again and leaves. The key is heard turning in the lock from outside. Immediately there is a crash of the tray and its contents outside the door.*

WILL

*(Sits, this time at Right of desk)* Perhaps the timbre of your voice has agitated her presence of mind.

EDMUND

*(Walking back to the doors, bolts it, then back to desk)* I urge you to concentrate on your own mind's presence, my young friend. I have heard all about how actors behave and it is not the most enriching of stories. Plato is beginning to seem ever more perceptive by the moment.

WILL

But I was merely...

EDMUND

Yes, I know. Christians helping others, indeed! Now, of what thing were we speaking?  
(*Leans against the left side front of the desk*)

WILL

(*Shrugs*) My recollection is that we were speaking once more of the Queen. We seem unable to avoid her company. Yet we have agreed that she is a sinner.

EDMUND

Yes.

WILL

Yet she may not know that she has offended God?

EDMUND

That is possible, but it is for God and the Queen to judge.

WILL

Is the Pope also a sinner, Edmund?

EDMUND

He would, I am sure, admit it without question.

WILL

Does he know that he is one?

EDMUND

Of course. The Pope is a man of God. Even saints know they are sinners.

WILL

Saints, too? I confess my perplexity here. Are they not saints for the very reason that they are not sinners?

EDMUND

Human beings will always be weak, Will, no matter what their station in the eyes of God. That is why you should not think so scornfully that saints trade their humanity for virtue. They often struggle with temptation, as do all of us. God sees us and understands our struggle.

WILL

God, we are told, sees every one of our sins, does he not?

EDMUND

Every one of them. Even those sins hidden in our hearts, sheathed in the metal of our thoughts.

WILL

God, then, looks down from the place where he sits and witnesses everything we do.

EDMUND

Is that not in large part what it means to be God?

WILL

God, then, is very like one enjoying an exceptional play whose plot turns and curls and bends in so many directions.

EDMUND

That is unlikely. God is not merely an onlooker to his creation. He sustains it and tries to guide it.

WILL

*(Stands, walks downstage Left a bit, considering)* Possibly our sins are as interesting to the Godhead as they are to us, especially when the sinner is aware of his sin.

EDMUND

Sin, Will, offends God. His wish is for us to avoid committing it.

WILL

Perchance what we call an offense against God might not truly offend him. Can it not be that it is simply his fascination with our sinning? Might he not perhaps absorb it in the way that an audience takes pleasure in our plays when they hit their mark?

EDMUND

*(Raising his voice)* These thoughts are very near blasphemy, Will. Rid yourself of them at once. God does not take delight in our sinning, only in our victory over sin.

WILL

I mean not to disrespect the Deity, but does not the Bible say that we are all spectacles unto God?

EDMUND

Yes, those are the words of Saint Paul—in Corinthians, I believe. How come you to know such verses?

WILL

It is a much loved sentence by actors. Think on it, Edmund. It is as if we are – all of us – acting our parts for the Creator. Surely God should find such things of peculiar interest.

EDMUND

Saint Paul is not speaking of plays and performances, my young theologian. He is telling us that our strong faith shows the glory and goodness of God. That is the only role God wants for us. Unlike actors we make our own character and are free to play a different role than the one we deem we are assigned.

WILL

Do not our actions ever astonish the Deity?

EDMUND

No. God is not surprised by anything we do.

WILL

He would make, then, a very unsatisfactory audience of plays.

EDMUND

That may be. Yet he would certainly not generate ugly noises or hurl harmful objects at the players, you can be sure.

WILL

*(Laughs)* He would have the gratitude of my company companions for this.

EDMUND

*(Smiles)* I'm sure he would be grateful for your approval. *(Rises, walks downstage Right and turns toward WILL shaking his head)* Where has one so young acquired such ideas?

WILL

Where gardeners, perhaps, have learned the finely wrought themes of theology and Greek philosophy. Not, I expect, from kneeling so long in the muck of estates.

EDMUND

*(Laughing)* I speak not as gardener, but as any sinner—one who awakens daily to the certainty of his sinfulness.

WILL

*(Sits)* That seems quite a cheerless daybreak to face each morn.

EDMUND

Oh, not in the smallest sum, Will. Sins, we know, are forgiven. The darkness of our sins is made right again with the clear light of absolution. That is the Good News that Christ has sent us.

WILL

By his torture and death?

*Lights dim as LORD CHIEF JUSTICE enters and the spot on EDMUND comes on. EDMUND closes his eyes, hands by his side.*

LORD CHIEF JUSTICE

It is the judgment of this, Her Majesty's Privy Council, that you and those accused with you are guilty and merit the penalty of death. Is there any reason why you should not be so condemned?

EDMUND'S VOICE

You ask, your Lordship, if there is any reason why the sentence of death should not be given to us. You ask it now that we have been condemned on evidence given by those who have betrayed both God and man, those who have nothing left to swear by—neither their religion nor their honesty. What we say to you is this: if our religion has made us traitors to England, then we are worthy to be condemned. Yet, otherwise, we are as good subjects as ever the Queen has had. By condemning us you condemn your own ancestors—priests, bishops and kings—all that was once the glory of England, the island of saints, the most devoted child of the See of Peter. What have we taught that they did not teach? You have no answer. There can be no answer to that question. Yet you give it the name of treason! To be condemned with these lights—not of England only, but of the world—by their degenerate descendants is both gladness and a glory to us. We know what this judgment will be seen by... (*VOICE trails off*)

*Lights slowly up as LORD CHIEF  
JUSTICE withdraws and spot on  
EDMUND dims.*

EDMUND

(*Turning to WILL*) Yes, by his torture and death. That is what has saved us. And his rising again. Do you believe that?

WILL

I was taught so as a child.

EDMUND

That is not what I asked. Can you answer?

WILL

I make such beliefs known to very few in these uncertain times.

EDMUND

A wise young man, indeed.

WILL

Wise, perhaps, but assuredly watchful. I honor the saints who have entered heaven as martyrs, Edmund, but I am not eager to join their holy number. (*Pauses, looking directly at Edmund*) Are you not afraid of death?

EDMUND

A martyr is rarely eager to die, Will. What martyrs are eager to do is live by their faith, to live unimpaired in the union they seek with their God.

WILL

That is not what I asked, Edmund. Can you now answer?

EDMUND

(*Smiling faintly*) No, I am not eager to die.

WILL

I once inquired of my teachers why death was the only gateway to our eternal happiness. Could not God have arranged things in a less fear-provoking manner?

EDMUND

And how did your tutors reply?

WILL

With anger and several swings of the rod.

EDMUND

*(Faint smile)* Think you, then, that death is something to be feared?

WILL

Yet you yourself proclaim that you are not eager to die.

EDMUND

You are too young, Will, to understand that there are many things more terrifying than death.

WILL

Is it not also an end, Edmund? Surely you shall not be able to garden so favorably when you are dead.

EDMUND

We must pray, Will, and ask for strength, for help to meet death bravely. It is only an end to one kind of life.

WILL

And the pain of it? The rack and torture that I spoke of earlier?

EDMUND

God will take notice of our pain...and our fears of it.

WILL

Say, then, that you are afraid of the pain, will you not? Say it to me now.

EDMUND

Why is my answer of such interest to you? No man can answer such a question truly until the pain has become actual to him.

WILL

You do not agree as I have said, then, that we are spectacles for God?

EDMUND

Not in the way you have meant it. I do not agree. I cannot. We were not created for God's entertainment, Will, but to seek and capture a heavenly reward.

WILL

Perhaps even poor players who are fooled by gardeners?

EDMUND

Fooled? What do you mean by that word?

WILL

And yet... *(Stops himself from continuing)*

EDMUND

You were about to speak?

WILL

Does not one of us fool the other?

EDMUND

What are you saying?

WILL

Do you not endeavor to fool me even as you ask what I am saying?

EDMUND

And how have I fooled you?

WILL

Did you not swear to me that you are a gardener?

EDMUND

That is what I have told you.

WILL

And yet you say that you do not deceive me?

EDMUND

I have tried to tell you the truth, Will.

WILL

Since when do gardeners stay behind locked doors, alarmed by those who make a sound or dare to knock?

EDMUND

There are things that...

WILL

That girl knows who you are, does she not? She was about to address you as...

EDMUND

I have been working in Sir Thomas's gardens this very morning.

WILL

Yes, I am sure that is true. And the remainder of your time?

EDMUND

It is best that our questions end for today.

WILL

Have the answers become suddenly perilous, then?

EDMUND

More than you can be aware, my young friend.

WILL

So you are not always gardening, then, Edmund?

EDMUND

That is all you need to know, Will. It has now come time to speak of other things.

WILL

You shall tell me no more?

EDMUND

What I have told you is all that I can relate to you now.

*A clock chimes seven times loudly offstage. WILL stands for a moment trying to decide if the point is worth pursuing. He then begins to move Left as he fumbles for his key.*

WILL

I am off to prepare for our comedy tonight, Edmund.

EDMUND

*(Stands, comes over close to WILL)* You must tell no one that we have spoken or even that you have seen me. This I urge above all. Say to me that you understand this, Will, and promise to abide by my desire.

WILL

I shall not betray you, Edmund. Do not be troubled.

EDMUND

I talk not of my betrayal. There are those who will accomplish such treachery soon enough, I am very sure. I speak now only of your own safety. Attend to me, Will!

WILL

Be at ease, Edmund. I shall lie like the very finest of actors.

EDMUND

I do not ask you to lie! Indeed, you must not lie, for those who question you will turn your lies back upon you. You could pay with your very life as the price. They are masters of such demonic arts.

WILL

*(Orating)* All who hear me shall be convinced that the gardener of Rufford Hall does not exist! Of course, it is quite possible that truly he does not exist, be that as it may.

EDMUND

Do not tell lies, Will. Simply say nothing of our encounter.

WILL

And if these masters of trickery you have named inquire about you?

EDMUND

Then say, truthfully, that you have, indeed, met a man who claimed he was the gardener of Rufford Hall.

WILL

In the library? Writing tracts too complex to comprehend?

EDMUND

Perhaps, then ...say not in the library.

WILL

*(Taking EDMUND's hand)* It is my sincere promise and I swear it on my oath.

EDMUND

*(Puts his hand on WILL's shoulder)* There can be grave danger for you, my new friend. We are not playing parts on a stage here. You must realize that so much as knowing me can be very dangerous for you! They have tortured men for much less.

WILL

*(Now visibly becoming concerned)* Yet what of you? You say nothing of the peril you face? If you are discovered what suffering awaits you?

EDMUND

That is not of consequence. You must do as I ask. Mark all that I say, Will.

WILL

It has become of consequence to me, Edmund.

EDMUND

I have willingly chosen that peril, Will. And what comes with it. You have not.

WILL

What peril? Tell me more of the danger you face, Edmund. Perhaps I know of some men who can help shield you. I want to....

**This is Not the End of the Play**  
**Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Fred J. Abbate holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Columbia University, a Master's degree from Boston College, and an A.B. from Fairfield University. He has taught on the Philosophy faculties of Rutgers University, Iona College, and the New York City University system and has been teaching philosophy at the Pennoni Honors College of Drexel University for the past several years, including classes on the Philosophy of Shakespeare. He was given the first ever Award for Outstanding Teaching by the Honors College in 2010.

He has published two books on philosophy--*The Philosophic Impulse* and *Preface to the Philosophy of the State*-- as well as numerous articles and monographs on politics and law, leadership theory, educational policy, and organizational decision-making; he also lectures, conducts seminars and consults widely in these areas. His play, *The Idea of Edison*, was produced by New Jersey Public Television, and he wrote, directed, and performed in *Keeping Time*, the official play of the New Jersey State House Bicentennial Celebration. His mystery novel, *A Perfectly Logical Murder*, was published in 2006 and he is the co-author of *Journey to a High-Achieving School*, published in 2013.