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Matthew 10:16—“Wise as Serpents” in Twentieth-Century Literature

In Matthew 10:16 Jesus says to his disciples, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” The memorable similes have often been used to describe characters (sometimes ironically or humorously) in twentieth-century English literature.¹

***Then and Now* by Somerset Maugham** (1946): “He is goodness itself, but it cannot be denied that he is a little simple. He does not combine the innocence of the dove with the craftiness of the serpent” (chap. 18).

***Unnatural Death* by Dorothy Sayers** (1927): “He is conscientious but a little lackin’ in worldly wisdom—not serpentine at all, as the Bible advises, but far otherwise” (chap. 4).

***The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler** (1903): “He had the harmlessness of the serpent and the wisdom of the dove” (chap. 28).

1. See David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 839–40.