ST. THOMAS MORE

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INTRODUCTION

THE pamphlet on Blessed Thomas More, which has for long appeared in the catalogue of the C.T.S., was but a portion of an address originally given by the late Justice O'Hagan to the Catholic Union of Ireland. This excellent piece of work is printed in full as the Introduction to More's Utopia and Dialogue of Comfort in Everyman's Library. When in 1929 I was asked, in view of information since discovered, to revise the C.T.S. pamphlet, it was with some qualms of conscience that I agreed to alter the text of another man's work, and now, upon a new edition being required, it would seem better to write a fresh pamphlet, though in many respects I cannot hope to equal the excellence of Justice O'Hagan's work.

In a pamphlet of this size it would not be wise to give, in lengthy notes, the pros and cons of the many doubtful points or the evidence for the facts that I have incorporated. Once for all I must express my indebtedness to the work of Professors Chambers and Reed, of London University, and their devoted fellow-workers, who in the notes to the new edition of More's English works, to Harpsfield's Life of More (E.E.T.S.), and elsewhere, have printed such valuable new material.

I have tried to tell the story, within the narrow limits of a pamphlet, very largely in the words of More himself and his early biographers. Comment has been reduced ruthlessly, as almost an intrusion upon the eloquence of the simple facts and the beauty of the Tudor diction.

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(Ed. Note: Ss. Thomas More and John Fisher were canonised by Pius XI in 1935, subsequent to the publication of this pamphlet.)

ON April 24th, 1474, in the parish of St Giles, Cripplegate Without, John More, gentleman, took to wife Agnes Graunger. Of this union six children were the fruit, of whom the second, Thomas, is the subject of this sketch. The exact date of his birth is uncertain, but probably it occurred on Friday, February 7th, 1477. Whether by this time his father had moved into the house in Milk Street, Cheapside, which he afterwards occupied, is also uncertain, but in any case the future martyr was born within the sound of Bow Bells and all his life remained a lover of London, its sights, its busy life, its varied types of people.

As a boy he attended St Anthony's School, a free school attached to the Hospital of St Anthony in Threadneedle Street, and later on was received into the household of Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, at Lambeth Palace. Here lads would act as pages and at the same time have opportunity to advance in learning. At Christmas-time, when a play was being acted before my Lord Cardinal, young Thomas More would take his place among the players and commence with them an impromptu dialogue which never failed to give the greatest amusement to the audience. The old Cardinal marked his wit and intelligence and would often say, " This child here waiting at the table, whoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man."

By the Cardinal he was sent to Canterbury College, Oxford, now part of Christ Church, where he diligently studied literature and philosophy. His father kept him very short of money, so that even for necessary repairs to clothing or boots he had to write home to obtain funds. In after life More used to praise his father's wisdom in thus teaching him habits of frugality.

His father, Sir John More, was a successful lawyer, who eventually became a judge in the Court of King's Bench. Wishing his son to follow in his footsteps he recalled him from Oxford and placed him at New Inn, an Inn of Chancery, for the study of law. The young man's brilliant talents soon brought him to the fore. He studied at Lincoln's Inn, he was reader at Furnival's Inn, he lectured at St Lawrence Jewry on St Augustine's De Ciaitate Dei to crowded and enthusiastic audiences. Nor did he neglect his studies in literature. With such scholars as Linacre, Grocyn, and Lily he studied both Greek and Latin, translating speeches and epigrams from one language into the other, becoming

one of the best Latin orators in the country and in general taking his place as one of the foremost scholars in England in that time of great scholars.

Thus did fortune smile upon young Thomas More and the world attract him with gilded promises. Yet never was man less easily deceived by specious appearances. One of his earliest poems scoffs at fortune

"And yet her brittle gifts long may not last. He that she gave them looketh proud and high. She whirl'th about and pluck'th away as fast, And giveth them to another by-and-by . . . . Thus when she changeth her uncertain course, Up start'th a knave and down there fall'th a knight; The beggar rich and the rich man poor is Hatred is turned to love, love to despite. This is her sport, thus proveth she her might. Great boast she maketh if one be by her power Wealthy and wretched both within an hour."

And the clear-sightedness which was so characteristic in him and the foundation of so much of his wit was supernaturalized by his deep religious convictions and his practice of constant meditation. For about four years he lived with the monks of the London Charterhouse, continuing his legal and literary studies, but joining in the prayers and penances of the monks, though taking no vows himself. During this time he debated with himself and his friends the question of his vocation. At one time he thought of becoming a Franciscan, at another of becoming a secular priest, but finally decided, in his humility, that he was unworthy of the high dignity of the priesthood and would be unable to reach the sanctity which it demanded.

Deciding therefore to marry, he visited Mr. Colt of Nether Hall in Essex, who was the father of "three daughters whose honest conversation and virtuous education provoked him there especially to set his affection." Thus speaks Roper, More's son-in-law, to whose happy sketch all biographers of More are primarily indebted. He continues, "And albeit his mind most served him to the second daughter, for that he thought her the fairest and best favoured, yet when he considered that it would be both great grief and some shame also to the eldest to see her younger sister in marriage preferred before her, he then of a certain pity framed his fancy towards her and soon after married her."

No marriage could have been happier. Though the eldest, Jane Colt was still in her teens, and More, now about 28 years old, taking her from the country to Bucklersbury in the very heart of London, found his delight in instructing her in literature and music. Three daughters, Margaret, Elizabeth, and Cecily, and one son, John, came to gladden the happy couple, but the eldest was only six when death claimed the young wife. Poor Mr. More must have been at his wits' end to know how to manage the four babies. Small wonder that without delay he married again, "rather for the ruling of his children, house, and family, than for any bodily pleasure," says his biographer.

A most interesting letter written in 1535 by a Carthusian, Father John Bouge, who formerly had been in charge of St Stephen Walbrook, close by More's house, gives us a picture of his former parishioner . . . .

"I christened him two goodly children. I buried his first wife, and within a month after he came to me on a Sunday at night late and there he brought me a dispensation to be married the next Monday without any banns asking; and as I understand she is yet alive. This Mr. More was my ghostly child; in his confession to be so pure, so clean, with great study, deliberation, and devotion, I never heard many such; a gentleman of great learning, both in law, art, and divinity, having no man like now alive of a layman. Item, a gentleman of great soberness and gravity, one chief of the King's Council. Item, a gentleman of little refection and marvellous diet. He was devout in his divine service, and what more . . . he wore a great hair (shirt) next his skin in so much that my mistress marvelled where his shirts was washed. Item, this mistress his wife desired me to counsel (him) to put (off) that hard and rough shirt of hair . . . it tamed his flesh till the blood was seen in his clothing."

This second wife was Alice Middleton, the widow of a City merchant, by whom she had a daughter. She was not of the same spiritual fibre as her second husband, but she was a good manager, which was fortunate as More himself was generous to the point of extravagance, and she was a kind mother to his children. He used to rally her for her petty vanities, her talkativeness, and her sharp tongue, but they lived most happily together. No one could well get cross with so cheerful a husband as Thomas More. Between them there was constant good-humoured jesting. One day coming home after going to confession his wife bade him be merry, "for I have," said she, "this day left all my shrewdness, and to-morrow will begin afresh." She, like the first wife, was taught by her husband to sing and play the lute, for music, in opposition to dicing and card-playing was a pastime of which he approved. In the epitaph which More wrote for himself and which may still be read in Chelsea Old Church, he testifies to her great devotion to his

children and declares that he cannot make up his mind which of his two wives was dearer to him.

Another anecdote, illustrative of his merry banter of his wife, may be given. She thought him not sufficiently ambitious of worldly advancement and upbraided him

"What will you do, that you list not to put forth yourself as other folk do? Will you sit still by the fire, and make goslings in the ashes with a stick as children do?"

"What would you do, I pray you?" replied her husband.

"By God, go forward with the first; for as my mother was wont to say—God have mercy on her soul—it is ever better to rule than to be ruled. And, therefore, by God, I would not, I warrant you, be so foolish as to be ruled where I might rule."

"By my troth, wife," said her husband, "in this I dare say you say truth, for I never found you willing to be ruled yet."

Though he thought little of worldly honours, yet by the mere force of genius it was inevitable that More should rise to eminence. After leaving the Charterhouse he entered Parliament and soon secured an unenviable distinction by opposing King Henry VII's demands for a subsidy. The king was very angry that his plans were foiled by "a beardless boy," but not wishing to appear to interfere with Parliament's right of freedom of speech, on some frivolous pretext he threw More's father into the Tower, from which the old gentleman was glad to purchase release by a fine of £100.

In later years Sir Thomas was chosen as Speaker of the House of Commons.

Meanwhile he was building up a large practice at the Bar. He would try, whenever possible, to get the litigants to come to terms, and never would he accept any case in which he was not satisfied of the right of his client. He became immensely popular in the City and in 1510 was elected an Under-Sheriff. For the next few years he was constantly occupied in City affairs, in the business of the various guilds, the Fishmongers, the Bakers, the Saddlers, in arbitration, in the care of food-stuffs, in looking after the management of the sewers, of London Bridge, etc. Twice he went abroad on the affairs of City merchants, once to Flanders and once to Calais, and these visits opened up important literary connections. His labours as a peacemaker in the riots of "Evil May Day," 1517, have their place in the history and the literature of the country.

The young King Henry VIII had already noticed the brilliant lawyer. More had visited him at Eltham Palace years before, and upon his accession had presented him with a poem of congratulation. Already the king had made tentative efforts to secure More's services for himself, but More had no love of Court life and, as it used to be said of him, made as great efforts to keep out of the Court as others made to enter it. Curiously enough it was a case in which More successfully defended the property of the Pope against the royal claims that finally determined the king to permit no further refusal but to demand that More should enter his service. He made him Master of Requests and a month later Privy Councillor, giving him, as More afterwards sadly recalled, as notable and worthy a lesson as ever prince gave to his servant, viz., that he should first have respect and regard to Almighty God, and after that to the king his master. More now (July, 1518) resigned his office in the City and had to be in constant attendance upon the king. He accompanied him upon his progresses and attended him to the "Field of the Cloth of Gold" in 1520. He was constantly invited to supper with him and Queen Catherine, where he was expected to keep them merry with his wit and then to engage in learned discourse on astronomy or divinity.

Poor More began to chafe at the gilded fetters of Court life and to long for more leisure to spend in the company of his beloved wife and family. Sometimes indeed he would pretend to have lost his merriment, and the king would good-naturedly take the hint and allow him leave of absence. Even then the king would sometimes follow him and sit down, unheralded, to dinner with him and his family at Chelsea, or walk arm-in-arm with More along the garden paths. There is no doubt that the king was fond of More (who was not?) and he promoted him to one office after another, knighting him in 1521, and making him Under-Treasurer of the Kingdom, and then in 1525 Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. But More was not blinded by the royal favour. When Roper, his son-in-law, congratulated him, he replied, with that uncanny foresight of his, "I thank Our Lord, son, I do believe His Grace doth as singularly favour me as any subject within this realm. Howbeit, I have no cause to be proud thereof. For if my head would win him a castle in France, it should not fail to go."

It was in 1524 that More bought the land at Chelsea upon which he built himself a large and commodious mansion.

Here, when his busy life permitted, he would dwell with delight surrounded by the numerous members of his household. Sir John More, his father, who, in spite of his "merry" saying that choosing a wife was like putting a hand into a sack filled with some harmless eels, but many more poisonous vipers, seems to have been married four times, was still living with his son. Mores four children married early in life and, instead of setting up separate homes, continued to live with their father, so that, by the time of his imprisonment, there were eleven grandchildren in his house. There were others, too, that More took into his household, the best known being Margaret Gigs, who married one of the tutors, John Clements, and is more commonly called by his name.

Erasmus, who stayed with More both at Bucklersbury and at Chelsea, was enraptured with his happy family life. It was, he said, as if Plato's Academy had once more been established on earth. Yet though learning was insisted on, piety was put in the first place. More bade his household take piety and learning for their meat, play for their sauce. Roper gives a touching picture of the example More gave:

" As Sir Thomas Mores custom was daily, if he were at home, besides his private prayers with his children, to say the seven psalms, litany and suffrages following, so was his guise nightly, before he went to bed, with his wife, children, and household to go to his chapel, and there upon his knees ordinarily to say certain psalms and collects with them: and because he was desirous for godly purposes some time to be solitary, and sequester himself from worldly company; a good distance from his mansion house builded he a place, called 'The New Building,' wherein was a chapel, a library, and a gallery, in which as his use was upon other days to occupy himself in prayer and study together, so on the Fridays there usually continued he from morning unto evening, spending his time duly in devout prayers and spiritual exercises; and to provoke his wife and children to the desire of heavenly things, he would sometimes use these words unto them: 'It is now no mastery for you children to go to heaven for . . . everybody giveth you good example. But if you live in the time'" (again that clear foresight !) "'that no man will give you good counsel nor no man will give you good example, when you shall see virtue punished and vice rewarded, if you will then stand fast and firmly stick to God upon pain of life, if you be but half good, God will allow you for whole good.' . . . . We may not look at our pleasure to go to heaven in feather beds, it is not the way.'"

No one in that model household was allowed to be idle. More ascribed many of the evils of the day to the crowds of idle retainers kept by some of the noblemen, and he himself assigned tasks to everyone, so that when they left his service they were able to get employment. "I would not that any man were suddenly sent away he wot ne'er whither." His own children had to study with close application and write him constantly accounts in Latin of their progress. Some of his charming letters in reply are preserved by Stapleton in his biography of More. It was unusual for ladies then to be so carefully educated and More must be regarded as a pioneer in the higher education of women. So proficient were his daughters that they once held a formal Latin disputation in Philosophy before the king. Margaret, the wife of John Roper, the eldest and best-beloved of this happy family, was also the most gifted. She corresponded on literary matters with Erasmus, the first scholar in Europe, with whose correspondence her letters are printed.

Amongst More's epigrams is preserved a letter in Latin verse which he wrote to his children when he was travelling on horseback. He reminds them how he is ever thinking of them, how he never fails to bring back some little present for each of them, how they receive from him many more kisses than strokes with the rod, the rod itself being but a bundle of peacock's feathers.

When correction was required he gave it so gently that Margaret Clements in later years used to relate that sometimes she deliberately committed some trifling fault, so sweet and loving was his reproof.

To his parish church—now called Chelsea Old Church—he was a constant benefactor, giving generously altar plate, vestments, etc. He built for himself and his family the chapel which now forms the south aisle. He thought it an honour, even when Lord Chancellor, to serve Mass or to put on a surplice and chant in the choir. Once the Duke of Norfolk, coming to dine with him, found him so employed and remonstrated with him, "God's body, my Lord Chancellor! What! a parish clerk, a parish clerk! You dishonour the king and his office!" "Nay," replied Sir Thomas smiling, "Your Grace may not think that the king, your master and mine, will with me for serving God his Master be offended, or thereby account his office dishonoured."

In the processions of the Rogation Days, which covered several miles around the countryside, More would carry the cross, and even when Chancellor he refused to ride, following his Master (he said) who went on foot.

During the sixteen years Roper lived in his house he bears witness that he never once saw him angry. Yet Roper himself was clearly trying at times. He became imbued for a time with Lutheran ideas and conceived an unreasoning abhorrence for his father-in-law. Long did More gently reason with him, but to no purpose. At last he told Margaret that he would argue no more, but pray for her husband. Very soon afterwards Roper saw his folly and ignorance and became one of the most fervent of Catholics.

Another example of the efficacy of More's prayers was given when his daughter Margaret lay dying of the sweating sickness. The physicians gave no hope and "God's marks, evident undoubted token of death, plainly appeared upon her," but to Sir Thomas, most fervently praying in his chapel for her recovery, came suddenly the remembrance of a hitherto unemployed remedy. He mentioned it to the physicians, who wondered that they had not themselves thought of it, and it was successful. Had she not been restored to him, he had determined that he would never more "meddle with worldly matters."

Throughout the whole of his busy life More never neglected the study and practice of literature. As a guide to his own life, he translated into English, probably about the time of his marriage, the life of another who, like himself, aimed at combining the practice of Christian perfection with the "New Learning," viz., John Picus, Earl of Mirandula. About 1513 he wrote the *History of Richard III*, a classic of our language, epoch-making in an age of chroniclers.

Then, whilst on his embassy in Flanders, he had begun to write his most famous book, which has been translated into practically every European tongue and given a new word to every language, the Utopia. This extraordinary work brought him friends from all over Europe. We cannot now deal with the many problems it suggests, but it may be well to say that whilst there is much in it upon which More felt most deeply, e.g., the depopulation of the countryside owing to the change of arable into grazing lands, yet it would be the greatest mistake to take everything in the book as More's serious and considered opinion. More loved to mystify his family and friends, who found it hard to know when he was jesting. "Ye use to look so sadly," one complains, "when ye mean merrily." More gives the Utopians women priests, but when Tyndale makes a similar suggestion More makes great fun of him. "His heresy reckoneth every woman a priest, and as able to say Mass as ever was St Peter. And in good faith, as for such Masses as he would have said, without the canon, without the secrets, without oblation, without sacrifice, without the Body or Blood of Christ, with bare signs and tokens instead of the Blessed Sacrament, I ween a woman were indeed a more meet priest than St Peter." Then again More, himself a lawyer, makes the Utopians distrust lawyers and refuse to have them in the country, and he tells us how in their hatred of avarice they use gold for pots and pans and the basest of uses, and as chains for malefactors. Yet amidst much that is merely whimsical there is plenty of sound common-sense which has made More into almost a patron saint of social reformers.

About the year 1522 he began to write a book "On the Four Last Things." Of death he treats powerfully and at length, so that it is clear that the thought of death was one on which he constantly dwelt. The book was never finished, for when he begins to treat of the vice of sloth, with unconscious humour the editor notes, "Sir Thomas More wrote no farther of this work."

But momentous events were occurring and More was swept farther away from the quiet and leisure that he loved. Luther had revolted from his allegiance to the Holy See and had begun to attack Catholic doctrine. Henry VIII wrote against him, and when Luther replied with foul-mouthed abuse, More wrote on his master's behalf a Latin work which, in Stapleton's words, left Luther "more dumb than a fish." There is in the book plenty of hard-hitting and even coarse abuse, as was the style of contemporary controversy, but it is nevertheless full of powerful reasoning.

Luther's teaching, however, was penetrating into England, and the old method of confiscating and burning heretical books was proving insufficient. It says much for More's learning, skill, and devotion to religion that he was the person selected by the Bishops to undertake to reply to the heretics in the vernacular. The licence he received to read and retain their books is dated March, 1528, and before the year was out he had produced the first and most brilliant of a long series of controversial works, *The Dialogue*. Full of humour ("A merry tale," says More, "cometh never amiss to me") it nevertheless bears eloquent witness to the firmness of Mores faith in spite of his clear sight of many current abuses, and to his profound grief at the harm done by heresy. In the next five years there flowed from his pen those writings that fill the large volume of his "*English Workes*," which, as Stapleton asserts, did so much good under the short-lived Catholic restoration of Queen Mary's reign. How during these busy years, he found the time to

write these immensely long treatises is perhaps explained by Stapleton’s assertion that he rarely gave more than four or five hours to sleep that he rose at two o’clock and devoted himself to study and prayer until 7.00 a.m. At any rate, during these years he conducted the English controversy single-handed (though Blessed John Fisher had written much in Latin), and produced more than all other English Catholic writers, clergy and laity combined. The clergy wanted to testify to their appreciation of his labour by an offering of money. He, whilst thanking them, told them he would rather have cast their money into the Thames than take a penny of it, that it was for God’s sake he had undertaken the labour and that no money could repay him for half the labour and business that he had taken.

Other troubles had arisen. It was an evil day for England when first Henry VIII set eyes on Anne Boleyn. We need not enter into the long story of Henry’s machinations to rid himself of Catherine, his wife. It was upon the rock of the divorce that the fair ship of Wolsey’s fortunes had foundered. Sir Thomas had been consulted by Henry, but though he made it clear that he could not condemn the marriage with Catherine, yet he managed to escape the anger of the king, who said he would henceforth employ him in matters in which he felt no scruple of conscience. Now when Wolsey had been deprived of his office of Chancellor, the king forced More, much against his will, to be his successor. It was an unprecedented thing for a commoner like More to hold the Great Seal, though Wolsey said indeed that no one in England was more worthy of the honour. It was commonly thought, both in England and abroad, that Henry was offering a bribe to obtain support in the business of the divorce, but if this was Henry’s intention he had utterly failed to understand Mores character.

More set himself to work with diligence and impartiality. When later on he had lost the royal favour, he was charged, by persons anxious to please the king, with corrupt practices, but in no case could the charge be substantiated. His own relatives complained that they found no favour at his hands, but without success, for, as he said, “if the parties will at my hand call for justice, then were it my father stood on the one side and the devil on the other side (his cause being good) the devil should have right.”

The mention of his father recalls the fact that the old gentleman lived to see his son Chancellor and indeed was still acting at that time as a judge in the King’s Bench. As More passed through that court on his way to Westminster Hall, he would go up to his father and, in the sight of all, kneel and ask his blessing.

So expeditious was he that on one occasion all the outstanding cases were finished. “Thanks be to God,” cried More, “that for once this busy tribunal is at rest.” A punning rhyme recalls the fact:

“When More some time had Chancellor been
No more suits did remain.
The like will never more be seen
Till More be there again.”

In the curious epitaph which More composed for himself he tells posterity that whilst he had the favour of both nobles and people he was “grievous to thieves, murderers, and heretics.” The company in which he places them clearly shows how sincerely he regarded heretics as pestilent disturbers of public tranquillity, and he set in force the laws against them which under Wolsey had been laxly administered. Yet so long as his influence lasted, no one was put to death in London for religion. It was when Henry’s ecclesiastical difficulties began to grow acute that he sought to assure his people, or perhaps himself, of his own orthodoxy by relighting the fires of Smithfield.

More had loyally served his king as long as his conscience allowed him, but seeing Henry’s growing infatuation for Anne Boleyn, and the danger of schism looming large on account of Henry’s impatience with the Pope, he made the excuse of bad health, not without real foundation, and persuaded the king to accept his resignation. The monarch commended his valuable services and promised that in any suit More might hereafter have, he should find him a good and gracious lord unto him. “Put not your trust in princes.”

More returned with delight to his beloved retirement, “to bestow,” as he said, “the residue of my life to come about the provision for my soul in the service of God,” and redoubled his activity in writing works of controversy as if he foresaw that his time was now short. His wife and children were not so pleased at his resignation, for he was now a comparatively poor man, but he strove to make them contented with their condition. At the worst, as he said to them, “we may yet with bags and wallets go a-begging together, and hoping that for pity some good folks will give us their charity, at every man’s door to sing Salve Regina, and so still keep company and be merry together.” For lack of other

fuel they used at night to make a blaze of dry bracken to warm themselves "and so without any other fires to go to their beds."

More knew quite well in what danger he stood, in spite of the king's fair promises, more especially when, in June, 1533, he refused to be present at the coronation of Anne Boleyn. The Duke of Norfolk told him how perilous it was to quarrel with the king. "*Indignatio principis mors,"** quoted His Grace. "Then," replied More calmly, "the only difference between us is that I shall die today, and you will die tomorrow." He tried to prepare his family by re-counting to them stories of the early Christian martyrs and by emphasizing the happiness of the martyr's death. "A man may very easily lose his head," he used to say, "and yet come to no harm."

Mutterings began to be heard of the coming storm. He was accused of printing an answer to a manifesto issued by the King's Council in justification of the king's new marriage. He had no difficulty in disposing of that lie.

More serious was the matter of Elizabeth Barton, a nun of Canterbury, who was commonly known as the Holy Maid of Kent. She claimed to have received revelations from God which she was commissioned to deliver to the king, warning him of a terrible chastisement if he went on in his evil ways. She visited the Archbishop of Canterbury and the saintly Bishop of Rochester, who advised her to see the king himself, which she did. More met her on a visit to the convent at Sion House and seems to have been impressed by her goodness. He refused, however, to listen to any word concerning the king and warned her very earnestly not to meddle in the affairs of the realm.

The sequel was a Bill of Attainder in which the nun and several of her friends were charged with treason, More, Fisher, and others with misprision (or concealment) of treason. More wrote to Cromwell, the king's secretary, a detailed account of his cautious dealing with the accused nun, but he was nevertheless summoned for examination before four of the King's Council. The king's intention clearly was that they should win More over to approval of the divorce policy, "wherein," says Roper, "His Grace was much deceived." They began by recounting the many favours More had received from the king and suggesting that out of gratitude he ought to add his consent to what had been agreed upon by the Parliament, the bishops, and the universities. More humbly acknowledged his indebtedness to his sovereign, but added, "Howbeit, I verily hoped I should never have heard of this matter (of the divorce) more since I have always from the beginning so plainly and truly declared my mind unto His Grace; which His Highness ever seemed to me, like a most gracious prince very well to accept, never minding, as he said, to molest me more therewith."

Much more was said, but seeing that their words were without effect, the Councillors took a different line and began to charge him with villainous and treacherous behaviour in inducing Henry VIII to speak on behalf of the Pope's authority in his book against Luther, and to warn him of the fearful anger of the king.

More smiled. "These terrors be arguments for children," he cried, "not for me." He went on to show how, on the contrary, he had advised the king not to emphasize too much the temporal authority of the Pope, but had been overruled.

So merry was he on his return to Chelsea that Roper ventured to say that he trusted all was well. "It is so indeed, son Roper, I thank God," replied More.

"Are you then put out of the Parliament Bill?"

"By my troth, son Roper, I never remembered it."

"Never remembered it," said Roper in dismay, "a case that toucheth yourself so near, and all of us for your sake . . . . I verily trusted, when I saw you so merry, that all had been well."

Then said More: "Wilt thou know, son Roper, why I was so merry? I rejoiced, son, that I had given the devil a foul fall and that with those lords I had gone so far as, without great shame, I could never go back again."

Meanwhile the Lords had reported to the king, who angrily commanded them to proceed with the Bill of Attainder.

More, however, had appealed to be heard by the House of Lords, who indeed were anxious to hear his defence. The king's councillors knew that he had been so circumspect and blameless in the matter that they feared that the Lords would throw out the whole Bill if his name were not removed from it. They had, however, to go upon their knees to the king before he would consent to its omission. The Bill then passed and, after a public recantation, how obtained we need not stop now to enquire, the nun and several of her friends were executed at Tyburn (April 21st, 1534).

** The anger of a prince is death.*

Cromwell sent a message to More that he was left out of the Bill, but the latter said ominously to his daughter on receipt of the news, "*Quod differtur, non aufertur*" (i.e., the danger is but postponed).

There was indeed not long to wait. In less than a month's time after More's examination, there had received the royal assent (March 30th, 1534) the Act of Succession, which empowered the royal commissioners to require an oath from the king's subjects to observe the contents of the Act. More received a summons to attend at Lambeth Palace to take this oath on April I3th. Let Roper tell in his own touching words what he witnessed. "Then Sir Thomas More as his accustomed manner was always ere he entered into any matter of importance to go to the church and to be confessed, to hear Mass and to be housled." (i.e., to receive Holy Communion), "so did he likewise in the morning early the self-same day that he was summoned to appear before the Lords at Lambeth. And whereas he used evermore before, at his departure from his house and children (whom he loved tenderly), to have them bring him to his boat, and there to kiss them all, and bid them farewell, then would he suffer none of them forth of the gate to follow him, but pulled the wicket after him, and shut them all from him, and with an heavy heart (as by his countenance it appeared), with me and our four servants, there took his boat, towards Lambeth. Wherein sitting still sadly awhile at the last he rounded me in the ear and said 'Son Roper, I thank Our Lord the field is won.' What he meant thereby, then I wist not. Yet loath to seem ignorant I answered, 'Sir, I am thereof very glad.' But as I conjectured afterwards it was for that the love he had to God wrought in him so effectually that it conquered in him all his carnal affections utterly."

A happy home the esteem of men, the king's favour, honours, and wealth would have been his, had he been willing to act against his conscience. But it was not for nothing he had watched, prayed, fasted, and worn the hair-shirt. At the moment when the world seemed most alluring, when life seemed sweetest, calmly and open-eyed he turned aside to prison and to death.

In a long letter to his beloved Margaret he described how on that day the clergy of the London district and others obsequiously and eagerly took the oath, which, to make what excuse for them we may, had already been taken by the members of both the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. But More was not the man "to pin his soul to any man's back," however holy or learned. He expressed his willingness to swear to the succession as fixed by king and Parliament, but to the oath in the form in which it was presented to him, implying a denial of the authority of the Pope, he said he could not swear "without the jeoparding of his soul to perpetual damnation," and from that position, despite their most earnest argument and persuasion, he refused to budge.

For four days he was committed to the charge of the Abbot of Westminster, whilst the king deliberated upon the course to pursue. Then on April 17th, as guilty under the act of misprision of treason, he was sent to the Tower to be detained during the king's pleasure, i.e., for life.

Entering by the "Traitors' Gate," More was in his usual high spirits. The porter as a perquisite demanded his upper garment. More, with a twinkle in his eye, offered him his cap. At first a certain liberty within the Tower was accorded him, and in all sincerity he used to say that the king had never done him a greater favour than to send him where he had relief from the pressure of business and leisure for his devotions. With a reference to his lifelong love of the monastic life he assured Margaret, who managed to get access to him under the pretext that she might be able to move him from his resolution, that had it not been for his wife and children, he would not have failed long ere that to have closed himself "in as strait a room and straiter too." The Lieutenant came to him to apologize for the meagre fare. Sir Thomas replied, "Mr. Lieutenant, I heartily thank you. Assure yourself I do not mislike my cheer, but whensoever I do so, then thrust me out of your doors."

His wife, too, was able to visit him and was even less understanding than Margaret. How could they be blamed for considering him to be the victim of some strange delusion, when all the bishops, save Fisher, and practically all the clergy, had taken the oath. "I marvel," began the irate dame, "that you, that hitherto have been taken for a wise man, will now so play the fool, to lie here in this close, filthy prison, and be content thus to be shut up among mice and rats, when you might be abroad at your liberty, and with the favour and goodwill both of the king and his Council, if you would but do as all the bishops and best-learned of this realm have done." Then she went on to speak of his house at Chelsea, his library, his garden, his so dearly-loved family, etc. With a smile he answered, "Is not this house as nigh heaven as mine own?" And when she replied impatiently he went on, "How long, then, Mistress Alice, do you think I may enjoy a happy life at Chelsea?" "A full twenty years," she said, "you are not old yet." "My good wife," he gently

replied, “you are not very skilful at a bargain. Would you have me, for twenty years, give up eternity?”

During the earlier days of his imprisonment he wrote a *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, which in its wit, its repose, its deep piety and pathos must rank very high amongst spiritual classics. Also he began a history of Our Lord’s Passion, but when he reached the words “and they laid hands on Him,” for some reason or other all his books and papers were taken from him and his imprisonment was made much stricter. He drew the curtains of his prison cell and sat in the dark. “When all the goods are sold,” he explained to the Lieutenant, “the shutters must be put up.”

His imprisonment lasted fifteen months and was ended only by his death. He suffered much from an old disease of the chest, “and was now grieved in the reins by reason of gravel and stone, and with the cramp that divers nights gripped his legs.” He told his daughter that again and again the pain was so great that he would have welcomed relief by death, yet nothing could break down his strong resolution.

There is hardly anything more touching in the world’s literature than the series of More’s last letters to his daughter. The later ones were often written with a stick of charcoal on a scrap of paper, since the king had confiscated his writing materials.

He is careful to judge no man; he will not even express his objections to the oath; if others can take it with a good conscience, let them do so. But as for himself, to take it would be a deadly offence against God, deserving of eternal damnation. He knows his own weakness, but prays himself and begs his loved ones to pray that God may strengthen him and not suffer him to fall away. His charity to his enemies, his utter resignation to God’s will, his deep humility, all mark the saint of God. We must find room for a few extracts. “I assure you, Margaret, on my faith, I never have prayed God to bring me hence nor deliver me from death, but referred all things whole unto His only pleasure, as to Him that seeth better what is best for me than myself doth. And never long I, since I came hither, to set my foot in mine own house, for any desire of or pleasure of my house: but gladly would I sometime somewhat talk with my friends, and specially my wife and you that pertain to my charge. But since that God otherwise disposeth, I commit you all wholly to His goodness.

Again “Surely, Meg, a fainter heart than thy frail father hath canst thou not have. And yet I verily trust in the great mercy of God that He shall of His goodness so stay me with His holy hand that He shall not finally suffer me to fall wretchedly from His favour . . . . And verily, my dear daughter, in this is my great comfort, that albeit I am of nature so shrinking from pain that I am almost afeard of a fillip, yet in all the agonies I have had, whereof . . . I have had neither small nor few . . I thank the mighty mercy of God I never in my mind intended to consent that I would... .do any such thing, as I should in mine own conscience . . think to be such as should damnably cast me in the displeasure of God.”

“Albeit, Margaret, that I wot well my lewdness hath been such that I know myself well worthy that God should let me slip, yet can I not but trust in His merciful goodness that . . if I shall suffer, His grace shall give me the strength to take it patiently, and *peradventure somewhat gladly too*. . . Mistrust Him, Meg, will I not, though I feel me faint. . . This wot I very well that without my fault He will not let me be lost. . . Therefore, mine own good daughter, never trouble thy mind for anything that ever shall hap me in this world. And I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best.”

And finally, for we must reluctantly come to an end, let us choose this delightful note:

“Mine own good daughter, Our Lord be thanked I am in good health of body, and in good quiet of mind: and of worldly things I no more desire than I have. I beseech Him make you all merry in the hope of heaven. And such things as I somewhat longed to talk with you all, concerning the world to come, Our Lord put them into your mind, as I trust He doth, and better too, by His Holy Spirit: who bless you and preserve you all.

“Written with a coal by your tender loving father, who in his poor prayers forgetteth none of you all, nor your babes, nor your nurses, nor your good husbands, shrewd wives, nor father’s shrewd wife neither, nor our other friends.

And thus fare ye heartily well for lack of paper.

THOMAS MORE, Knight.”

What a rebuttal of the calumny that those who love God are lacking in natural affection!

A new session of Parliament opened in November, 1534, and Acts were quickly passed conferring upon the king

the title, "Only supreme head in earth of the Church of England," and making it high treason to deprive him of this title. Here at last, in this Act of Supremacy, was a weapon ready to the king's hand to encompass the judicial murder of Sir Thomas More. More than once Commissioners were sent to the Tower to examine him. He protested that he had never said one word against the statute, but that his conscience was his own, that he wished never more to meddle in princes' titles but to spend his time in preparation for death. Nothing further could they make him say. Brutally they replied that if he was not afraid to die why did he not speak out plainly against the statute? He made the noble answer, "I have not been a man of such holy living as I might be bold to offer myself to death, lest God, for my presumption, might suffer me to fall; and therefore, I put not myself forward, but draw back. Howbeit, if God draw me to it Himself, then trust I in His great mercy that He shall not fail to give me grace and strength."

On May 4th, 1535 Margaret Roper again managed to get access to her father, and as they were standing together at the window of his cell, probably in the Bell Tower, they saw Richard Reynolds, a Brigettine monk, John Haile, vicar of Isleworth, and three Carthusian priors being led out to die as traitors under the new Act of Supremacy. They were the first-fruits of the golden harvest of the English Martyrs of the Reformation, the long line that extended through 150 years and embraced over 600 heroes. The day, May 4th, has been chosen as their feast day and may it ever be in honour!

Listen to More's touching humility. "Lo, dost thou not see, Meg, that these blessed fathers be now as cheerfully going to their deaths as bridegrooms to their marriage? Wherefore, thereby thou mayest see, mine own good daughter, what a great difference there is between such as have in effect spent all their days in a strait and penitential and painful life religiously, and such as have in the world, like worldly wretches (as thy poor father hath done), consumed all their time in pleasure and ease licentiously." (Four hours' sleep! Rising at 2.00 a.m.!! The massive volume of English Controversy!!! How wonderful is the humility of the saints!) "For God, considering their long-continued life in most sore and grievous penance, will no longer suffer them to remain here in this vale of misery, but speedily hence taketh them to the fruition of His everlasting Deity. Whereas thy silly father, Meg, that like a wicked caitiff hath passed forth the whole course of his miserable life most sinfully, God, thinking him not worthy so soon to come to that eternal felicity, leaveth him here still in this world further to be plagued and turmoiled with misery."

But Henry VIII had not long to wait before finding one who if he could not induce More to commit himself, at any rate was ready to swear that he had, nor had More long to wait for the martyr's crown which he so ardently desired. On June 12th, Richard Rich, the Solicitor-General, came to interview More in the Tower. He put various suppositions. "Could not Parliament make him king?" More agreed, and asked in return whether Parliament could decree that God did not exist. Rich scouted the idea as absurd, but put a case which he said was intermediate to these two extreme cases. "Could not Parliament make the king Head of the Church?" This question he afterwards asserted that More answered in the negative.

On July 1st the trial took place in Westminster Hall, where More had himself so often acted as supreme judge. The indictment is still extant and is of enormous length. It proceeds upon the Act of Supremacy and charges More with not replying when examined in the Tower by the king's councillors, with corresponding in the Tower with Bishop Fisher and arranging to give similar answers, and with a direct denial to Mr. Rich of the power of the Parliament to give to the king the title of Supreme Head of the Church. More, for his evident weakness, was accommodated with a chair, and, in accordance with his resolution not to presume to offer himself for martyrdom, defended himself skilfully. Surely he could not be condemned for silence. Treason must be shown in word or deed and he had shown none. If his answers were similar to Fisher's, it was because their sentiments were similar and how could this be treason? As to Mr. Rich's evidence he uttered these solemn words: "If I were a man, my Lords, that did not regard an oath, I need not (as it is well known) in this place, at this time, nor in this case to stand as an accused person. And if this oath of yours, Mr. Rich, be true, then pray I that I may never see God in the face, which I would not say, were it otherwise, to win the whole world." Then reciting exactly their conversation as it had taken place, he added: "In faith, Mr. Rich, I am sorrier for your perjury than for mine own peril." Was it likely, he went on, that he would utter to Mr. Rich, who, he was sorry to say, was of very light reputation, the secret of his conscience which he had guarded so tenaciously from the king's Council? There was no other witness to what Mr. Rich asserted, and even were it true, there was no evidence of malice such as was required by the Act of Supremacy.

Though Rich's perjury must have been evident to the whole court, yet the verdict of "Guilty" was a foregone conclusion and More received it gladly. Now at length was he free to deliver his soul. "Seeing that I am condemned, and God knows how justly, for the discharge of my conscience, I will now speak freely." He had studied the matter carefully for seven years and had never found in any approved writer that a layman could be Head of the Church. Moreover, he protested that one country could not make a law against the whole of Christendom of which it was itself a part, any more than the City of London could make a law against the rest of England. Thus he ended with a noble plea against the disruption of Christendom by schism: "I am not bound to conform my conscience to the council of one realm against the general council of Christendom."

Then the Lord Chancellor pronounced the barbarous sentence which the law imposed upon traitors, that he should be hanged, drawn, and quartered. How Christ-like was More's reply! "As the blessed Apostle St Paul was present and consented to the death of St Stephen, and yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, so I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your Lordships have now in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together to our everlasting salvation."

The Constable of the Tower who led him back there was his very dear friend and could not restrain his tears. More comforted him : "Good Mr. Kingston, trouble not yourself but be of good cheer. For I will pray for you, and my good lady your wife, that we may meet in heaven together, where we shall be merry for ever and ever."

A harder trial awaited him. His daughter Margaret met him at the Tower Wharf. We must give the sequel in Roper's words: "As soon as she saw him, after his blessings on her knees reverently received, she, hasting towards, without consideration or care of herself, pressing in among the midst of the throng and company of the guard, that with halberds and bills went round about him, hastily ran to him, and there openly, in sight of them, embraced him, and took him about the neck and kissed him." He comforted her as well as he could, but no sooner had she left him than she returned to his embrace, "like one that had forgotten herself, being all ravished with the entire love of her father." Even the guards were moved to tears.

Ignorant when the summons might come, he spent the intervening days in prayer and penitential exercises. On July 5th he wrote, with a charred stick, what proved to be his last letter to her. "Our Lord bless you, good daughter," he begins, "and your good husband, and your little boy, and all yours, and all my children, and all my god-children and all our friends. He goes on to send messages to one after another of his family. Then, "I cumber you, good Margaret, much, but I would be sorry if it should be any longer than tomorrow, for it is St Thomas's even and the utas" (octave) "of St Peter; and therefore tomorrow long I to go to God. It were a day very meet and convenient for me.

I never liked your manner towards me better than when you kissed me last; for I love when daughterly love and, dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy. Farewell, my dear child, and pray for me, and I shall for you and all your friends, that we may merrilv meet in heaven." As his parting gift he sent her the hair shirt of which, even in the Tower, he had not abandoned the use.

The next morning, Tuesday, July 6th, a message came that he was to die. "And so," said More, "God help me, am I bounden to his Highness most of all, that it pleaseth him so shortly to rid me of the miseries of this wretched world; and therefore will I not fail earnestly to pray for His Grace both here and also in the world to come."

An earlier message had come that the king, as a favour, had commuted the sentence to beheading. "God keep my friends from such favours," he answered.

Now he walked slowly out of the fortress and up Tower Hill to the site of the scaffold. He was clothed in simple frieze, he was very pale and prematurely aged, his beard was long. He carried in his hand a little cross of wood to aid him to meditate on Christ's Passion. A good woman offered him a cup of wine. He thanked her, but declined it. "Christ on Calvary," he said, "had but gall and vinegar." Another woman cried out that he had done her a great wrong when he was Chancellor. "Madam," he replied, "I remember your case well, and if I had to give my decision again, it would be exactly the same as before."

He dealt out blessings to the last. A man of Winchester who had long suffered grievous temptations to despair had been introduced by a friend to More and had received from him much helpful counsel. When upon More's imprisonment he could no longer visit him his difficulties returned. Hearing that More was to die he hastened to the Tower and managed to speak to him on his last journey. "Do you know me, Sir Thomas?" he cried. "I pray you, for

Our Lord's sake, help me: I am as ill troubled as ever I was." Sir Thomas replied: "I remember thee full well. Go thy ways in peace, and pray for me: and I will not fail to pray for thee." So long as he lived the man of Winchester was never again troubled with these temptations.

Coming at length to the scaffold, he put his feet on the ladder, saying merrily to the Lieutenant, "See me safe up, I pray you. At my coming down let me shift for myself." He asked the people's prayers. "I have always been," he said, "the faithful servant of the king, but first of all the faithful servant of God." Was this not the counsel the king himself had given him?

He knelt down to say his favourite psalm, the Miserere, and then, his prayers finished, he got up to joke with his executioner. He gave him money, he embraced him and said, "Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thy office. My neck is very short; take heed therefore thou strike not awry for saving of thy honesty." He laid his head on the block, but even at the last moment his light-heartedness would not be denied. "One moment," he cried, "let me move my beard. Pity that should be cut: that has not committed treason."

And so, with a smile on his lips, the merry martyr went to his God. "A man may very well lose his head, yet come to no harm."

A fortnight before, More's friend, Blessed John Fisher, had won his crown, but whereas his body had been shamefully exposed the whole day upon the scaffold by order of the king and only at nightfall cast ignominiously into a grave, More's body, by permission of the king, was carefully tended by his beloved Margaret. Henry, indeed, could hardly forget his former love for his Chancellor. It is recorded that when news was brought of the execution, the king rose from the table where he had been playing dice with Anne Boleyn, accused her of being the cause of More's death, and left the room shedding bitter tears.

Margaret, then, had from early morning been visiting the City churches, giving alms and asking for prayers for her father. When the time for the burial came, she found she lacked some linen and neither she nor her maid had any money left. She sent her maid into a shop to ask for what was required, and as the latter was about to say to the shopkeeper that she had forgotten to bring her money, she opened her purse and there found the exact amount required.

The body was buried in the little chapel of St Peter in Chains within the precincts of the Tower, and by its side, either then or later, seems to have been laid the body of his friend and companion, Bishop Fisher. There is indeed some doubt whether there was not afterwards a removal to Chelsea, but probably the bodies still lie in the Tower, though unidentified, awaiting their glorious resurrection.

The head of the martyr was set upon London Bridge, where many ghastly heads of malefactors were placed upon pikes to strike terror into the beholders. With the help, however, of her friends, Margaret obtained possession of it from the officer and kept it during her life as a precious relic. The Ropers lived in Canterbury and possessed a vault in their parish church of St Dunstan. In that vault the skull still rests, the object of devout pilgrimage by Catholics and honoured even by those who do not share the beliefs for which Blessed Thomas More died.

He was beatified by Leo XIII on December 29th, 1886, together with Blessed John Fisher and many others of the English Martyrs.

In 1930 his cause, coupled with that of Blessed John Fisher, was "re-assumed," i.e., reopened, with a view to the advancement of the joint cause to the final stage of Canonization. We conclude by asking the prayers of our readers that God may grant miracles, for nothing else is now lacking to that end.

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