

Thomas More Reader: Memorabilia: Personal Remembrances: Part Two

85. "George Constantine's Escape from the Stocks"

[From *The Apology of Sir Thomas Knight* ; Works, pp. 901b-902a]

And of all that ever came in my hand for heresy (as help me, God), saving as I said the sure-keeping of them, and yet not so sure neither but that George Constantine could steal away, or else had never any of them any stripe or stroke given them, so much as a fillip^v on the forehead.

And some have said that when Constantine was gotten away, I was fallen for anger in a wonderful rage. But surely, though I would not have suffered him go if it would have pleased him to have tarried still in the stocks, yet when he was neither so feeble for lack of meat but that he was strong enough to break the stocks; nor waxen so lame of his legs with lying, but that he was light enough to leap the walls; nor by any mishandling of his head, so dulled or dazed in his brain, but that he had wit enough when he was once out wisely to walk his way. Neither was I then so heavy for the loss but that I had youth enough left me to wear it out, nor so angry with any man of mine that I spake them any evil word for the matter more then to my porter that he should see the stocks mended and locked fast, that the prisoner steal not in again.

And as for Constantine, myself I could him, in good faith, good thank. For never will I for my part be so unreasonable as to be angry with any man that riseth if he can when he findeth himself that he sitteth not at his ease!

NOTES

(1) **George Constantine** was a Protestant reformer and surgeon who worked with William Tyndale in Antwerp. He returned to England to sell Protestant books and was arrested in the autumn of 1531. He was kept in confinement at More's home in Chelsea (London) and was persuaded by the Lord Chancellor to inform on his friends, which he did, in order to save his life and protect his family. More had him stocked, but he escaped and fled to Antwerp on December 6, but More had by then gleaned from him new information on the brisk illegal Protestant book trade in England, and almost certainly had learned that Tyndale and George Joye were the ringleaders of this trade. Butterworth and Chester claim that it is practically certain that the arrest of Joye's friend, Richard Bayfield, a former monk, who was then active in circulating heretical books in England, resulted from information which More extracted from Constantine (*Butterworth* , p. 83f). More saw Bayfield sentenced by Stokesley, Bishop of London, in November 1531, to be burned at Smithfield. John Frith returned from Antwerp to enlist help from the Prior of Reading and to find a replacement for Constantine (see No. 88, n. 2). Edward Halle's *Chronicle* records a curious conversation purportedly held between Constantine and Sir Thomas More in which Constantine revealed somewhat facetiously that "'it is the Bishop of London that hath holpen us, for he hath bestowed among us a great deal of money in New Testaments to burn them , and that hath, and yet is our only succour and comfort'" (*The Union of the...two noble and illustrious Famelies York and Lancaster* , [1542] f. 186^v). Constantine

alludes undoubtedly to Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall's banning of Tyndale's *New Testament* on October 20, 1526, and of the burning of that work with other "heretical" books on October 28 in a bonfire at St. Paul's. He alludes probably also to Archbishop Warham's attempt to buy up the entire edition of the Testament, "a procedure which supplied Tyndale with enough money to revise his original version" (J.C. Mackie, p. 345; see also R. Pineas, p. 38, and J.B. Trapp, CW 9, pp. 366-368).

86. "The Perjury of Richard Webbe"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, pp. 727a-728a]

But yet as wily as that invention was, Tyndale is therein beguiled, and God hath gone beyond him and made his wily folly found out more plainly then of late appeared and came to controlment the selfsame wily folly in Richard Webbe. This Webbe while I was Chancellor to the king's highness, was by diverse heretics detected unto me that he had sold and used continually to sell many of these heretic books, forbidden by the king's gracious proclamation to be brought into the realm. And further, I was by good and honest men informed that in Bristol, where he then dwelled, there were of those pestilent books some thrown in the streets and left at men's doors by night; that where they durst not offer their poison to sell they would of their charity poison men for nought.

Now being thus informed of him, and having very sure knowledge that he was a great meddler in such ungracious matters and uttering of such poisoned books (of which I had a dosser^s delivered into my hands by Michael Lobley, whom I had attached^s for like matters, and which had received the same dosser and books of Webbe, and afterward abjured his heresies), I gave out a commission to certain good worshipful folk at Bristol to attach Richard Webbe. Whereupon after sureties there found to appear before me, he went at large, and coming up to London the day before he came at me, got him to Saint Catherine's to Robert Necton, to whom he had uttered of his book before, and fell in a secret agreement with him what each of them should say therein when they were examined thereof. And when Webbe thought he made the matter safe and sure there, then came he boldly to me.

But now was he shrewdly beguiled, for yet ere he came at me, Necton, fearing that Webbe might hap to tell the truth, thought he would himself be before him, and sent me word in great haste of Webbe's being with him and of all the communication that had been between them, too. And so Webbe unaware thereof, being examined on the morrow, first of divers other things answered on his oath many a false answer (as I very well perceived) saving the salve^s of his remembrance. Forever for the more part he referred and restrained all to his remembrance. And when he had all done and saw that I found no fault nor nothing objected against his answers, but so used myself as though I believed them, then he began to look piteously upon me and said that he had ever heard that whoso were in his examination true and plain unto me had been always wont to find me good and favorable; and said that for that cause he had himself shewed me all that ever was in his stomach, as plainly as he knew it himself upon his faith to his remembrance. Whereupon I shewed him that if I found him true, he should find me favorable, but I feared that his answers were not all true.

"Sir," quoth he, "if ye find any one false, never be good lord unto me, nor never trust me afterwhile ye live."

Then, for a say, ° I thought of his so many lies to assay him with some one. And then I asked him again of one Sir Nicholas, to whom he had answered me before that he never sold any such books, but that the priest had, he said, offered him such books to sell, but he would none buy, and that he had not seen the priest this half year, and the last time he saw him was at Bristol. And when he still abode thereby upon his oath that this was true, and else would I should never believe him in anything nor shew him any favor, then I asked him whether Bristol were in Holborn and whether six weeks were half a year.

And when he perceived by those questions that I knew of a certain assembly of theirs in Holborn within six weeks before, then he cast down the head and said he had forgot it. And when I laid unto him his perjury, he said he swore for no further than he remembered. But when he could not make me believe that he had forgot it, then down he fell upon his marrowbones 7 and piteously prayed me to forgive him that one lie in which the devil, he said, ought ° him a shame: "For in good faith, sir, there is not in all mine answers any one thing untrue but that."

"Well, Webbe," quoth I, "in faith if that be true then will I wink at this one and let it go for none. But now if there be any more lies, call them again betime, and I will then take your first tale for untold."

"Nay, Sir," quoth he, "and ye find any one more, then never believe me while ye live, but take all for lies that ever I tell you, and put me to open shame, and make me an example to all the false perjured knaves in the realm."

"Well," said I, "by likelihood the remnant be well-tried truths, ye would not else Webbe make so large an offer."

"No, in faith, sir," saith he, "but if I were sure that all were true I would not be so mad to say as I do, and forsake your favor so foolishly."

"Well," quoth I, "when saw you Robert Necton, then?"

"Now, by my soul, sir, as I have shewed your lordship upon mine oath, I saw him not this half year to my remembrance."

"Well," quoth I, "remember yourself well; ye know, pardie, where he dwelleth, and he where you dwell, and therefore remember whether ye were with him at Saint Catherine's, or he with you at Bristol, or that ye met by chance together anywhere else within these three or four months."

Then he began to study a little and claw his head and rub his forehead, and said, "Nay, in faith, to my remembrance we met not together this half year, and by my troth I cannot now call to mind well where we met then neither."

"Well, Webbe," quoth I, "let that pass then and tell me another thing. Was yesterday half year ago? And were ye not yesterday with him at Saint Catherine's? Are ye not now shamefully forsworn? I wot well ye had not forgotton this."

Then, down went the head again into the bosom, and yet he mumbled because I said he was forsworn, as though I could not look into his breast to see whether he remembered it or no. He would have seemed not to remember such a point since yesterday.

NOTES

(1) **Richard Webbe** was a Bristol bookseller whom More, as Lord Chancellor, had attached and examined at "St. Catherine's" in London for distributing heretical works. Webbe had agreed with one Robert Necton to commit perjury when examined, but Necton, fearing Webbe might tell the truth, revealed all to More in advance. Webbe was unaware of this deceit and More feigned that he believed him. The merry encounter masks the seriousness of the charges against Webbe (see below, n. 3 and also No. 92).

(2) Sir Thomas More was given the Great Seal as **Lord Chancellor** at Greenwich on October 26, 1529, following Cardinal Wolsey's arrest for high treason. More was succeeded as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, which post he had held since 1525, by Thomas Audeley who, coincidentally, became Lord Chancellor following More's resignation May 10, 1532.

(3) **Proclamation:** I.e., the royal proclamation of June 22, 1530. The flow of Lutheran-Protestant works into England increased immeasurably after 1525, spear-headed by the publication and clandestine dissemination of Tyndale's translation of the *New Testament*. Such unauthorized translations had earlier been made strictly illegal by Archbishop Arundel's *Oxford Constitutions* of 1408. In 1530 a special commission was struck to identify heretical books. Sir Thomas More, together with Archbishop Warham, Cuthbert Tunstall, Nicholas Wilson and twelve delegates from the Universities, served on this commission which reported its findings on May 24, 1530. The seven books listed by them were officially proscribed by the royal proclamation of June 22, 1530, which More refers to in the passage here quoted. (For a full account of the heretical book trade during the period from 1525 to 1535, see W.A. Clebsch, pp. 258-270).

(4) **I was...informed** : As Lord Chancellor More administered a large domestic spy ring (G.R. Elton, pp. 19-34; and Clebsch, p. 100).

(5) Apparently, like George Constantine, **Michael Loble**y was a turn-coat informer whom More arrested and examined. He abjured in 1531 for having brought prohibited books into England, for speaking against images and purgatory, and for saying that Bilney was a good man. (John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, edd. R.P. Mendham and Josiah Pratt, V, 38).

(6) **St. Catherine's** : Probably refers to a Court of Chancery held in Westminster Hall, a usual place of pleadings. **Robert Necton** was a colleague of Richard Webbe who informed Wolsey of Simon Fish's sale of translations of the *New Testament*. He abjured in 1528, but by the time More had written the preface to the *Confutation*, early in 1532, Necton had relapsed.

(7) **Holborn** : More presumably refers to the main thoroughfare, and general area adjacent to it, which runs west from Newgate outside the City of London past the Inns of Court to St. Giles in the Field. Prisoners were taken from the Tower of London across the length of the City along Holborn to Tyburn for execution. A great lawyers' quarter, Holborn was also the location of taverns and other buildings used frequently then by Protestants for clandestine meetings.

87. "Segar, a Bookseller from Cambridge, and False Detractors"

[From *The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight* ; Works, p. 902a-b]

But now tell the brethren many marvelous lies of much cruel tormenting that heretics had in my house; so farforth that one, Segar, (a bookseller of Cambridge, which was in mine house about four or five days and never had either bodily harm done him or foul word spoken him while he was in mine house) hath reported since (as I hear say to divers) that he was bound to a tree in my garden and thereto too piteously beaten, and yet besides that, bound about the head with a cord and wrung, [so] that he fell down dead in a swoon.

And this tale of his beating did Tyndale tell to an old acquaintance of his own and to a good lover of mine, with one piece further yet, that while the man was in beating I spied a little purse of his hanging at his doublet, wherein the poor man had (as he said) five marks, and that caught I quickly to me and pulled it from his doublet and put it in my bosom, and that Segar never saw it after. And therein I trow he said true, for no more did I neither, nor before neither, nor I trow no more did Segar himself neither, in good faith.

But now when I can come to goods by such goodly ways it is no great marvel, though I be so suddenly grown to so great substance of riches (as Tyndale told his acquaintance and my friend, to whom he said that he wist well that I was no less worth in money and plate and other moveables than twenty thousand marks! ') And as much as that have divers of the good brethren affirmed here nearer home.

And surely this will I confess, that, if I have heaped up so much goods together, then have I not gotten the one half, by right. And yet by all the thieves, murderers, and heretics that ever came in my hands, am I not (I thank God) the richer of one groat, " and yet have they spent my twain. " Howbeit, if either any of them or of any kind of people else that any cause have had before me or other wise any meddling with me, find himself so sore grieved with anything that I have taken of his, he had sometime to speak thereof. And now, sith no man cometh forth to ask any restitution yet but hold their peace and slack " their time so long, I give them all plain peremptory warning now, that they drive " it off no longer. For if they tarry till yesterday and then come and ask so great sums among them as shall amount to twenty thousand marks, I purpose to purchase such a protection for them that I will leave myself less than the fourth part, even of shrewdness rather than ever I will pay them.

And now, dare I say, that, if this Pacifier had by experience known the truth of that kind of people, he would not have given so much credence to their lamentable complainings, as it seemeth me by some of his "Some-says" he doth.

Howbeit, what faith my words will have with him in these mine own causes I can not very surely say, nor yet very greatly care. And yet stand I not in so much doubt of myself but that I trust well that among many good and honest men (among which sort of folk I trust I may reckon him) mine own word would alone even in mine own cause be somewhat better believed than would the oaths of some twain of this new brotherhood, in a matter of another man.

NOTES

(1) **Segar, a Bookseller** is not identified. More uses Segar as an example of unfair charges by Protestants of cruelty and harassment.

(2) In England **the mark** was then worth about 8 ounces of silver, or two-thirds of a pound sterling. Each ounce was worth 20 pence, thus five marks was valued at 13 shillings and 4 pence.

(3) "**Some-says**" : see above, No. 5.

88. "Certain Heretics and False Rumors"

[From *The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight* ; Works, p. 902b-903a]

But now to come to some spiritual men's causes against whom there are laid like lies, one Symonds, a long well-known heretic walking about the realm, was taken not long ago by the officers of the right reverend Father, my Lord Bishop of Winchester, and being put in a chamber to keep, and breaking out at a window, hath told many of his brethren since that he was marvelously tormented by the Bishop's officers in prison and should have been murdered therein too, and that else he would never have run his way. But he would never since complain of his harms to the King or his council but will rather of perfection "suffer them all patiently, than to pursue and prove them with his forth-coming again.

Would God this Pacifier might have the examination of that matter. It would peradventure do him great good hereafter to find out the truth of such a false heretic's tale.

And now notwithstanding that the brethren boast much of his happy scape, yet if he happened to die or be hanged somewhere there as no man wist where but they, they would not let for a need to say that he scaped not at all, but was privily killed in prison and privily cast away. For so said some of them by George Constantine, not only upon his first flight out of my keeping but also even now of late notwithstanding that they well know that many merchants of our own had seen him since laugh and make merry at Antwerp.

Such lust have these blessed brethren that ever talk of faith and spirit and truth and verity, continually to devise and imagine lies of malice and hatred against all those that labor to make them good.

And such a pleasure hath either Frith himself or else some other false foolish brethren of his sect.

For he told one or twain and caused the brethren to blow it further about that word was sent him into the Tower that the Chancellor of London ¹⁵ said it should cost him the best blood in his body.

Now, whether Frith lied or his fellows, let them draw cut between them. For surely where they tell it under such manner as though Master Chancellor should rejoice and have a cruel desire of the man's death. I know him so well that I dare well say they falsely help him therein.

NOTES

(1) **Symonds** : possibly John Simonds of Great Marlow, mentioned in a list of persons accused of heresy during the years 1518-1521 by John Foxe (Taft, p. 316). A John Simonds also was accused of heresy before the Bishop of Lincoln (see R. Mendham and P.J. Pratt, IV, 240).

(2) **John Frith** , Protestant reformer, suffered martyrdom in 1533. He, together with George Constantine, William Roye and George Joye, all from the University of Cambridge, went abroad to assist William Tyndale in his publication of the *New Testament* . Frith returned to England in 1531, and through his intelligence network More learned of his visit and in March ordered his arrest at Reading, where Frith had gone to enlist the help of the prior of Reading in the book trade and to find an agent to replace George Constantine, who had defected and informed on his friends. Frith, however, escaped and returned to Antwerp and there published his *A Disputacion of Purgatorye* . In July 1532 he again returned to England and was hounded at every step by the new Lord Chancellor, Thomas Audeley, and in attempting to escape in early October was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower. He stood trial on June 20, 1533, was condemned for heresy, sentenced, and burnt at Smithfield on July 4, 1533. (See also No. 51).

¹ Smart blow (see also *notes* to No. 107)

² *Could him...good thank* : i.e., am grateful to him, in all good faith

³ Basket (full of books)

⁴ Indicted

⁵ *Saving the salve* : i.e.,? excusing his poor (remembrance)

⁶ Assay, a testing (of one's honesty, etc.)

⁷ Knees

⁸ Owed

⁹ *Twenty...marks* : i.e., about US \$13,330 (1960's)

¹⁰ I.e., 1/8 an ounce of silver

¹¹ *Spent my twain*: (ironic) i.e., those funds spent he really never received

¹² Waste

¹³ Put

¹⁴ *Of perfection* : (ironic) out of holiness

¹⁵ I.e., Doctor Foxford, "a great persecutor," - according to John Foxe.