

Dialogue on Conscience

by Sir Thomas More and his Daughter Margaret ¹

Note: This dialogue was written in letter form, occasioned by a real event that occurred on August 16-17, 1534. Lord Chancellor Audley, More's successor, went to More's step-daughter's home, ostensibly to hunt, but he also had a message to be delivered to his imprisoned friend. Audley was indeed More's friend, and he had taken considerable risks to defend Sir Thomas against King Henry's wrath. Now, however, he wanted More to stop acting foolishly. The rest of the story is told in the following two letters. Alice Alington, daughter of Lady Alice (More's second wife), writes to Margaret Roper (More's eldest daughter) to deliver Audley's message so that Margaret could relate it to their father.

Letter from Alice Alington to Margaret Roper ²

17 August 1534

Sister Roper, with all my heart I recommend myself unto you, thanking you for all your kindness.

The cause of my writing at this time is to show you that at my coming home, within two hours after, my Lord Chancellor did come to take a course at a buck in our park, the which was to my husband a great comfort that it would please him so to do. Then when he had taken his pleasure and killed his deer, he went unto Sir Thomas Barmeston to bed, where I was the next day with him at his desire, the which I could not say nay to, for I thought he did bid me heartily, and most specially because I would speak to him for my father.

And when I saw my time, I did desire him as humbly as I could that he would, as I have heard say that he has been, be still good lord unto my father. And he said that it did appear very well when the matter of the nun was laid to his charge. And as for this other matter, he marveled that my father is so obstinate in his own conceit, as that every body went forth with all, save only the blind Bishop and he. "And in good faith," said my Lord, "I am very glad that I have no learning but in a few of Aesop's fables of the which I shall tell you one. There was a country in the which they were almost none but fools, saving a few which were wise. And they by their wisdom knew, that there should fall a great rain, the which should make them all fools, that should so be fouled or wet therewith. They seeing that, made themselves caves under the ground till all the rain was past. Then they came forth thinking to make the fools do what they pleased, and to rule them as they would. But the fools would none of that, but would have the rule themselves for all their craft. And when the wisemen saw they could not obtain their purpose, they wished that they had been in the rain, and had defiled their clothes with them."

When this tale was told, my Lord did laugh very merrily. Then I said to him that for all his merry fable I did put no doubts but that he would be good lord unto my father when he saw his time. He said, "I would not have your father so scrupulous of his conscience." And then he told me

another fable of a lion, an ass, and a wolf and of their confession. First the lion confessed himself that he had devoured all the beasts that he could come by. His confessor absolved him because he was a king and also it was his nature so to do. Then came the poor ass and said that he took but one straw out of his master's shoe for hunger, by the means whereof he thought that his master did take cold. His confessor could not absolve this great trespass, but by and by sent him to the bishop. Then came the wolf and made his confession, and he was strictly commanded that he should not pass sixpence at a meal. But when this said wolf had used this diet a little while, he waxed very hungry, in so much that on a day when he saw a cow with her calf come by him he said to himself, I am very hungry and fain I would eat, but that I am bound by my ghostly father. Notwithstanding that, my conscience shall judge me. And then if it be so, then shall my conscience be thus, that the cow does seem to me now but worth a groat, and then, if the cow be but worth a groat, then is the calf but worth twopence. So did the wolf eat both the cow and the calf. Now, good sister, has not my lord told me two pretty fables? In good faith, they please me nothing, nor I knew not what to say for I was abashed of this answer. And I see no better suit than to Almighty God, for he is the comforter of all sorrows, and will not fail to send his comfort to his servants when they have most need. Thus fare you well, my own good sister.

Written the Monday after Saint Lawrence in haste by

Your sister Dame,
Alice

Letter from Margaret Roper to Alice Alington ³

August 1534

When I came next unto my father after, I thought it both convenient and necessary, to show him your letter. Convenient, that he might thereby see your loving labor taken for him. Necessary, that since he might perceive thereby, that if he stand still in this scruple of his conscience (as it is at the leastwise called by many that are his friends and wise) all his friends that seem most able to do him good either shall finally forsake him, or peradventure not be able indeed to do him any good at all.

And for these causes, at my next being with him after your letter received, when I had a while talked with him, first of his diseases, both in his breast of old, and his kidneys now by reason of gravel and stone, and of the cramp also that divers nights gripes him in his legs, and that I found by his words that they were not much increased, but continued after their manner that they did before, sometime very sore and sometime little grief, and that at that time I found him out of pain, and (as one in his case might), fairly well minded, after our seven psalms and the litany said, to sit and talk and be merry, beginning first with other things of the good comfort of my mother, and the good order of my brother, and all my sisters, disposing themselves every day more and more to set little by the world, and draw more and more to God, and that his household, his neighbors, and other good friends abroad, diligently remembered him in their prayers, I added unto this: "I pray God, good Father, that their prayers and ours, and your own therewith, may purchase of God the grace, that you may in this great matter (for which you stand

in this trouble and for your trouble all we also that love you) take such a way by time, as standing with the pleasure of God, may content and please the King, whom you have always found so singularly gracious unto you, that if you should stiffly refuse to do the thing that were his pleasure, which God not displeased you might do (as many great wise and well learned men say that in this thing you may), it would both be a great blot in your worship in every wise man's opinion and, as myself have heard some say (such as yourself have always taken for well learned and good), a peril unto your soul also. But as for that point, Father, will I not be bold to dispute upon, since I trust in God and your good mind, that you will look surely thereto. And your learning I know for such, that I know well you can. But one thing is there which I and other your friends find and perceive abroad, which but if be showed you, you may peradventure to your great peril, mistake and hope for less harm (for as for good I know well in this world of this matter you look for none), than I sore fear me, shall be likely to fall to you. For I assure you, Father, I have received a letter of late from my sister Alington, by which I see well that if you change not your mind, you are likely to lose all those friends that are able to do you any good. Or if you lose not their good wills, you shall at the leastwise lose the effect thereof, for any good that they shall be able to do you."

With this my father smiled upon me and said: "What, mistress Eve (as I called you when you came first), has my daughter Alington played the serpent with you, and with a letter set you at work to come to tempt your father again, and for the favor that you bear him labor to make him swear against his conscience, and so send him to the devil?" And after that, he looked sadly again, and earnestly said unto me, "Daughter Margaret, we two have talked of this thing more often than twice or thrice, and that same tale in effect, that you tell me now therein, and the same fear too, have you twice told me before, and I have twice answered you too, that in this matter if it were possible for me to do the thing that might content the King's Grace, and God therewith not offended, there had no man taken this oath already more gladly than I would do: as he that reckons himself more deeply bound unto the King's Highness for his most singular bounty, many ways showed and declared, than any of them all beside. But since standing my conscience, I can in no wise do it, and that for the instruction of my conscience in the matter, I have not slightly looked, but by many years studied and advisedly considered, and never could yet see nor hear that thing, nor I think I never shall, that could induce my own mind to think otherwise than I do, I have no manner remedy, but God has given me to the straight, that either I must deadly displease him, or abide any worldly harm that he shall for my other sins, under name of this thing, suffer to fall upon me. Whereof (as I before this have told you to) I have ere I came here, not left unbethought nor unconsidered, the very worst and the uttermost that can by possibility fall. And albeit that I know my own frailty full well and the natural faintness of my own heart, yet if I had not trusted that God should give me strength rather to endure all things, than offend him by swearing ungodly against my own conscience, you may be very sure I would not have come here. And since I look in this matter but only unto God, it makes me little matter, though men call it as it pleases them and say it is no conscience but a foolish scruple."

At this word I took a good occasion, and said unto him thus: "In good faith, Father, for my part, I neither do nor it cannot become me, either to mistrust your good mind or your learning. But because you speak of what some call but a scruple, I assure you that you shall see my sister's letter, that one of the greatest estates in this realm and a man learned too, and (as I dare say yourself shall think when you know him, and as you have already right effectually proved him)

your tender friend and very special good lord, accounts your conscience in this matter for a right simple scruple, and you may be sure he says it of good mind and lays no little cause. For he says that where you say your conscience moves you to this, all the nobles of this realm and almost all other men too, go boldly forth with the contrary, and stick not thereat, save only yourself and one other man: whom though he be right good and very well learned too, yet would I believe, few that love you, give you the counsel against all other men to lean to his mind alone.”

And with this word I took him your letter, that he might see my words were not feigned, but spoken of his mouth, whom he much loves and esteems highly. Thereupon he read over your letter. And when he came to the end, he began it afresh and read it over again. And in the reading he made no manner haste, but advised it leisurely and pointed every word.

And after that he paused, and then thus he said: “Forsooth, daughter Margaret, I find my daughter Alington such as I have ever found her, and I trust ever shall, as naturally minding me as you that are my own. Howbeit, her take I verily for my own too, since I have married her mother, and brought up her of a child as I have brought up you, in other things and learning both, wherein I thank God she finds now some fruit, and brings her own up very virtuously and well. Whereof God, I thank him, has sent her good store, our Lord preserve them and send her much joy of them and my good son her gentle husband too, and have mercy on the soul of my other good son her first; I am daily beadsman (and so write her) for them all.

“In this matter she has used herself like herself, wisely and like a very daughter toward me, and in the end of her letter gives as good counsel as any man that wit has would wish; God give me grace to follow it and God reward her for it. Now daughter Margaret, as for my Lord, I not only think, but have also found it, that he is undoubtedly my singular good lord. And in my other business concerning the silly nun, as my cause was good and clear, so was he my good lord therein, and Master Secretary my good master too. For which I shall never cease to be faithful beadsman for them both and daily do I by my truth, pray for them as I do for myself. And whensoever it should happen (which I trust in God shall never happen) that I be found other than a true man to my prince, let them never favor me neither of them both, nor of truth no more it could become them to do.

“But in this matter, Meg, to tell the truth between you and me, my lord’s Aesop fables do not greatly move me. But as his wisdom for his pastime told them merrily to my own daughter, so shall I for my pastime, answer them to you, Meg, that are my other daughter. The first fable of the rain that washed away all their wits that stood abroad when it fell, I have heard oft of this: It was a tale so often told among the King’s Council by my Lord Cardinal [Wolsey] when his Grace was chancellor, that I cannot lightly forget it. For of truth in times past when variance began to fall between the Emperor and the French King, in such wise that they were likely and did indeed, fall together at war, and that there were in the Council here sometimes sundry opinions, in which some were of the mind, that they thought it wisdom, that we should sit still and let them alone: but evermore against that way, my Lord used this fable of those wise men, that because they would not be washed with the rain that should make all the people fools, went themselves into caves, and hid themselves under the ground. But when the rain had once made all the remnant fools and they come out of their caves and would utter their wisdom, the fools agreed together against them, and then all to beat them. And so said his Grace that if we would

be so wise that we would sit in peace while the fools fought, they would not fail after to make peace and agree and fall at length all upon us. I will not dispute upon his Grace's counsel, and I trust we never made war but as reason would. But yet this fable for his part, did in his days help the King and the realm to spend many a fair penny. But that gear is passed and his Grace is gone, our Lord absolve his soul.

“And therefore shall I now come to this Aesop's fable, as my Lord full merrily laid it forth for me. If those wisemen, Meg, when the rain was gone at their coming abroad, where they found all men fools, wished themselves fools too, because they could not rule them, then seems it that the foolish rain was so sore a shower, that even through the ground it sank into their caves, and poured down upon their heads, and wet them to the skin, and made them more noddies than those that stood abroad. For if they had had any wit, they might well see, that though they had been fools too, that thing would not have sufficed to make them rulers over the other fools, no more than the other fools over them: and of so many fools all might not be rulers. Now when they longed so sore to bear a rule among fools that so they might, they would be glad to lose their wit and be fools too, the foolish rain had washed them fairly well. Howbeit, to say the truth, before the rain came, if they thought that all the remnant should turn into fools, and then either were so foolish that they would, or so mad to think that they should, so few rule so many fools, and had not so much wit as to consider, that there are none so unruly as they that lack wit and are fools, then were these wise men stark fools before the rain came. Howbeit, daughter Roper, whom my Lord takes here for the wise men and whom he means to be fools, I cannot very well guess, I cannot well read such riddles. For as Davus says in Terence, *Non sum Oedipus*, I may say you know well, *Non sum Oedipus, sed Morus*, which name of mine what it signifies in Greek, I need not tell you. But I trust my Lord reckons me among the fools, and so reckon I myself, as my name is in Greek. And I find, I thank God, causes not a few, wherefore I so should in very deed.

“But surely among those that long to be rulers, God and my own conscience clearly know, that no man may truly number and reckon me. And I suppose each other man's conscience can tell himself the same, since it is so well known, that of the King's great goodness, I was one of the greatest rulers in this noble realm and that at my own great labor by his great goodness discharged. But whomsoever my Lord means for the wise men, and whomsoever his Lordship takes for the fools, and whomsoever long for the rule, and whomsoever long for none, I beseech our Lord make us all so wise as that we may every man here so wisely rule ourselves in this time of tears, this vale of misery, this simple wretched world—in which as Boethius says, one man to be proud that he bears rule over other men, is much like as one mouse would be proud to bear a rule over other mice in a barn—God, I say, give us the grace so wisely to rule ourself here, that when we shall hence in haste to meet the great Spouse, we be not taken sleepers and for lack of light in our lamps, shut out of heaven among the five foolish virgins.

“The second fable, Marget, seems not to be Aesop's. Since the matter goes all upon confession, it seems to be feigned since Christendom began. For in Greece before Christ's days they used not confession, no more the men then than the beasts now. And Aesop was a Greek, and died long before Christ was borne. But what? who made it, makes little matter. Nor I envy not that Aesop has the name. But surely it is somewhat too subtle for me. For whom his Lordship understands by the lion and the wolf, which both twain confessed themselves of ravine and devouring of all that came to their hands, and the one enlarged his conscience at his pleasure in the construction

of his penance, nor whom by the good discrete confessor that enjoined the one a little penance, and the other none at all, and sent the poor ass to the bishop, of all these things can I nothing tell. But by the foolish scrupulous ass, that had so sore a conscience for the taking of a straw for hunger out of his master's shoe, my Lord's other words of my scruple declare, that his Lordship merrily meant that by me: signifying (as it seems by that similitude) that of oversight and folly, my scrupulous conscience takes for a great perilous thing toward my soul, if I should swear this oath, which thing as his Lordship thinks, were indeed but a trifle. And I suppose well, Margaret, as you told me right now, that so think many more besides, as well spiritual as temporal, and that even of those that, for their learning and their virtue, myself not a little esteem. And yet albeit that I suppose this to be true, yet believe I not even very surely, that every man so thinks that so says. But though they did, Daughter, that would not make much to me, not though I should see my Lord of Rochester say the same, and swear the oath himself before me too.

“For whereas you told me right now, that such as love me, would not advise me, that against all other men, I should lean unto his mind alone, verily, Daughter, no more I do. For albeit, that of very truth, I have him in that reverent estimation, that I reckon in this realm no one man, in wisdom, learning and long approved virtue together, fit to be matched and compared with him, yet that in this matter I was not led by him, very well and plainly appears, both in that I refused the oath before it was offered him, and in that also that his Lordship was content to have sworn that oath (as I perceived since by you when you moved me to the same) either somewhat more, or in some other manner than ever I minded to do. Verily, Daughter, I never intend—God being my good lord—to pin my soul at another man's back, not even the best man that I know this day living; for I know not whither he may hap to carry it. There is no man living, of whom while he lives, I may make myself sure. Some may do for favor, and some may do for fear, and so might they carry my soul a wrong way. And some might hap to frame himself a conscience and think that, while he did it for fear, God would forgive it. And some may peradventure think that they will repent, and be shriven thereof, and that so God shall remit it them. And some may be peradventure of that mind, that if they say one thing and think the while the contrary, God more regards their heart than their tongue, and that therefore their oath goes upon what they think, and not upon what they say, as a woman reasoned once, I believe, Daughter, you were by. But in good faith, Margaret, I can use no such ways in so great a matter: but like as if my own conscience served me, I would not let todo it, though other men refused, so though other refuse it not, I dare not do it, my own conscience standing against it. If I had, as I told you, looked but lightly for the matter, I should have cause to fear. But now have I so looked for it and so long, that I purpose at the leastwise to have no less regard unto my soul than had once a poor honest man of the country that was called Company.”

And with this, he told me a tale, I think I can scant tell it you again, because it hangs upon some terms and ceremonies of the law. But as far as I can call to mind, my father's tale was this: That there is a court belonging of course unto every fair, to do justice in such things as happen within the same. This court has a pretty fond name, but I cannot happen upon it, but it begins with a pie, and the remnant goes much like the name of a knight that I have known, I think (and I believe you too, for he has been at my father's often before this, as such time as you were there), a fairly tall black man, his name was Sir William Pounder. But, tut, let the name of the court go for this once, or call it if you will, a court of pie Sir William Pounder. But this was the matter, lo, that upon a time at such a court held at Bartholomew fair, there was an eschetour^s of London that had

arrested a man that was outlawed, and had seized his goods that he had brought into the fair, taxing him out of the fair by deception. The man that was arrested and his goods seized was a northern man, which by his friends made the eschetour within the fair to be arrested upon an action, I know not what, and so was he brought before the judge of the court of pye Sir William Pounder, and at the last matter came to a certain ceremony to be tried by a quest of twelve men, a jury as I remember they call it, or else a perjury.

Now had the clothman by friendship of the officers found the means to have all the quest almost made of northern men, such as had their booths there standing in the fair. Now was it come to the last day in the afternoon, and the twelve men had heard both the parties, and their counsel tell their tales at the bar, and were from the bar taken into a place, to talk and discuss and agree upon the sentence. Nay let me speak better in my terms yet, I believe the judge gives the sentence and the quest's tale is called a verdict. They were scant come in together, but the northern men were agreed, and in effect all the other too, to cast our London echetour. They thought they needed no more proof that he did wrong, than even the name of his bare office alone. But then was there, as the devil would, this honest man of another quarter, that was called Company. And because the fellow seemed but a fool and sat still and said nothing, they made no reckoning of him, but said, we be agreed now, come let us go give our verdict.

Then when the poor fellow saw that they made such haste, and his mind nothing gave him that way that theirs did (if their minds gave them that way that they said), he prayed them to tarry and talk upon the matter and tell him such reason therein, that he might think as they did; and when he so should do, he would be glad to say with them, or else he said they must pardon him. For since he had a soul of his own to keep as they had, he must say as he thought for his, as they must for theirs. When they heard this, they were half angry with him. "What good fellow," said one of the northern men, "what win you? Be not we eleven here and you but one alone, and all we agreed? Whereto should you stick? What is your name good fellow?" "Masters," said he, "my name is called Company." "Company," said they, "now by your truth good fellow, play then the good companion, come thereon further with us and pass even for good company." "Would God, good masters," said the man again, "that there lay no more weight thereby. But now when we shall hence and come before God, and that he shall send you to heaven for doing according to your conscience, and me to the devil for doing against mine, in passing at your request here for good company now, by God, Master Dickonson (that was one of the northern men's name), if I shall then say to all you again, 'Masters, I went once for good company with you, which is the cause that I go now to hell, play you the good fellows now again with me, as I went then for good company with you, so some of you go now for good company with me'. Would you go, Master Dickonson? Nay, nay, by our Lady, nor never one of you all. And therefore must you pardon me from passing as you pass, but if I thought in the matter as you do, I dare not in such a matter pass for good company. For the passage of my poor soul passes all good company."

And when my father had told me this tale, then said he further thus: "I pray you now, good Marget, tell me this. Would you wish your poor father being at the leastwise somewhat learned, less to regard the peril of his soul, than did there the honest unlearned man? I meddle not, you know well, with the conscience of any man that has sworn, nor I take not upon me to be their judge. But now, if they do well and their consciences grudge them not, if I with my conscience to

the contrary, should for good company pass on with them and swear as they do, when our souls hereafter shall pass out of this world, and stand in judgment at the bar before the high Judge, if he judges them to heaven and me to the devil, because I did as they did, not thinking as they thought, if I should then say (as the good man Company said): My old good lords and friends, naming such a lord and such, yea and some bishops peradventure of such as I love best, I swore because you swore, and went that way that you went, do likewise for me now; let me not go alone; if there be any good fellowship with you, some of you come with me; by my truth, Marget, I may say to you, in secret counsel, here between us twain--but let it go no further, I beseech you heartily. I find the friendship of this wretched world so fickle, that for any thing that I could entreat or pray, that would for good fellowship go to the devil with me, among them all I think I should not find one. And then by God, Margfet, if you think so too, best it is I suppose that for any respect of them all were they twice as many more as they be, I have myself a respect to my own soul."

"Surely, Father," said I, "without any scruple at all, you may be bold I dare say to swear that. But, Father, they that think you should not refuse to swear the thing, that you see so many--so good men, and so well learned--swear before you, mean not that you should swear to bear them fellowship, nor to pass with them for good company, but that the credence that you may with reason give to their persons for their aforesaid qualities should well move you to think the oath such of itself, as every man may well swear without peril of their soul, if their own private conscience to the contrary be not the obstacle, and that you well ought and have good cause to change your own conscience, in conforming your own conscience to the conscience of so many others, namely being such as you know they be. And since it is also by a law made by the parliament commanded, they think that you be, upon the peril of your soul, bound to change and reform your conscience, and confirm your own as I said to other men's."

"Indeed, Margaret," said my father again, "for the part you play, you play it not much amiss. But Margaret, first, as for the law of the land, though every man being born and inhabiting therein, is bound to the keeping in every case upon some temporal pain, and in many cases upon pain of God's displeasure too, yet is there no man bound to swear that every law is well made, nor bound upon the pain of God's displeasure, to perform any such point of the law, as were indeed unlawful. Of which manner kind, that there may such happen to be made in any part of Christendom, I suppose no man doubts--the General Council of the whole body of Christendom evermore in that point except--which though it may make somethings better than others, and somethings may grow to that point, that by another law they may need to be reformed, yet to institute anything in such wise, to God's displeasure, as at the making might not lawfully be performed, the spirit of God that governs his church never has it suffered, nor never here after shall, his whole catholic church lawfully gathered together in a General Council, as Christ has made plain promises in Scripture.

"Now if it so hap, that in any particular part of Christendom, there be a law made, that be such as for some part thereof some men think that the law of God cannot bear it, and some other think yes, the thing being in such manner in question, that through divers quarters of Christendom, some that are good men and cunning, both of our own days and before our days, think some one way, and some other of like learning and goodness think the contrary, in this case, he that thinks against the law neither may swear that law lawfully was made, standing his own conscience to

the contrary, nor is bound upon pain of God's displeasure to change his own conscience therein, for any particular law made anywhere, other than by the General Council or by a general faith grown by the working of God universally through all Christian nations, nor other authority than one of these twain (except special revelation and express commandment of God); since the contrary opinions of good men and well learned, as I put you the case, made the understanding of the Scriptures doubtful, I can see none that lawfully may command and compel any man to change his own opinion, and to translate his own conscience from the one side to the other.

“For an example of some such manner things, I have I believe before this time told you, that whether our Blessed Lady were conceived in original sin or not, was sometime in great question among the great learned men of Christendom. And whether it be yet decided and determined by any general council, I remember not. But this I remember well, that notwithstanding that the feast of her conception was then celebrated in the Church--at the leastwise in divers provinces--yet was holy Saint Bernard, which as his manifold books made in the laud and praise of our Lady do declare, was of as devout affection toward all things referring toward her commendation, that he thought might well be verified or suffered, as any man was living, yet, I say, was that holy devout man against that part of her praise, as appears well by an epistle of his, wherein he right sore and with great reason argues there against, and approves not the institution of that feast neither. Nor he was not of this mind alone, but many other well learned men with him, and right holy men, too. Now was there on the other side, the blessed holy bishop, St. Anselm, and he not alone neither, but many well learned and very virtuous also with him. And they be both twain holy saints in heaven, and many more that were on either side. Nor neither part was there bound to change their opinion for the other, nor for any provincial council either.

“But like as after the determination of a well assembled general council, every man had been bound to give credence that way, and conform their own conscience to the determination of the council general, and then all they that held the contrary before, were for that holding out of blame, so if before such decision a man had against his own conscience, sworn to maintain and defend the other side, he had not failed to offend God very sore. But indeed, if on the other side a man would in a matter take away by himself upon his own mind alone, or with some few, or with never so many, against an evident truth appearing by the common faith of Christendom, this conscience is very damnable, yea, or if it be not even fully so plain and evident, yet if he sees but himself with far the fewer part, think the one way, against far the more part of as well learned and as good, as those that affirm the thing that he thinks, thinking and affirming the contrary, and that of such folk as he has no reasonable cause wherefore he should not in that matter suppose, that those which say they think against his mind, affirm the thing they say, for none other cause but for that they so think indeed, this is of very truth a very good occasion to move him, and yet not to compel him, to confirm his mind and conscience unto theirs.

“But Margaret, for what causes I refuse the oath, the thing--as I have often told you--will never show you, neither you nor nobody else, except the King's Highness should like to command me. Which if his Grace did, I have before this told you therein how obediently I have said. But surely, Daughter, I have refused it and do, for more causes than one. And for what causes so ever I refuse it, this I am sure, that is well known, that of them that have sworn it, some of the best learned before the oath given them, said and plainly affirmed the contrary, of some such things as they have now sworn in the oath, and that upon their truth, and their learning then, and that not

in haste nor suddenly, but often and after great diligence done to seek and find out the truth.”

“That might be, Father,” said I. “And yet since they might see more, I will not,” said he, “dispute, daughter Margaret, against that, nor misjudge any other man’s conscience, which lies in their own heart far out of sight. But this will I say, that I never heard myself the cause of their change, by any new further thing found of authority, than as far as I perceive they had looked on, and as I suppose, very well weighed before. Now of the self same things that they saw before me, seem some otherwise unto them now than they did before, I am for their sake the gladder a great deal. But anything that ever I saw before, yet at this day to me they seem but as they did. And therefore, though they may do otherwise than they might, yet, Daughter, I may not. As for such things as some men would haply say, that I might with reason the less regard their change, for any sample of them to be taken to the change of my conscience, because the keeping of the prince’s pleasure, and the avoiding of his indignation, the fear of the losing of their worldly substance, with regard unto the discomfort of their kindred and their friends, might haply make some men either swear otherwise than they think, or frame their conscience afresh to think otherwise than they thought, any such opinion as this is, will I not conceive of them; I have better hope of their goodness than to think of them so. For if such things should have turned them, the same things had been likely to make me do the same, for in good faith, I know few so faint_hearted as myself. Therefore will I, Margaret, by my will, think no worse of other folk in the thing that I know not, than I find in myself. But as I know well my own conscience causes me to refuse the oath, so will I trust in God, that according to their conscience, they have received it and sworn.

“But where as you think, Margaret, that they be so many more than there are on the other side that think in this thing as I think, surely for your own comfort that you shall not take thought, thinking that your father casts himself away so like a fool, that he would jeopardize the loss of his substance, and peradventure his body, without any cause why he so should for peril of his soul, but rather his soul in peril thereby too, to this shall I say to you, Marget, that in some of my causes I nothing doubt at all, but that though not in this realm, yet in Christendom about, of those well learned men and virtuous that are yet alive, they be not the fewer part that are of my mind. Besides that, that it were you know well possible, that some men in this realm too, think not so clear the contrary, as by the oath received they have sworn to say.

“Now this far forth I say for them that are yet alive. But go we now to them that are dead before, and that are I trust in heaven, I am sure that it is not the fewer part of them that all the time while they lived, thought in some of the things, the way that I think now. I am also, Margaret, of this thing sure enough, that of those holy doctors and saints, which to be with God in heaven long ago no Christian man doubts, whose books yet at this day remain here in men’s hands, their thought in some such things, as I think now. I say not that they thought all so, but surely such and so many as will well appear by their writing, that I pray God give me the grace that my soul may follow theirs. And yet I show you not all, Margaret, that I have for myself in sure discharge of my conscience. But for the conclusion, daughter Margaret, of all this matter, as I have often told you, I take not upon me neither to define nor dispute in these matters, nor I rebuke not nor impugn any other man’s deed, nor I never wrote, nor so much as spoke in any company, any word or reproach in any thing that the Parliament had passed, nor I meddled not with the conscience of any other man, that either thinks or says he thinks contrary unto mine. But as

concerning my own self, for your comfort shall I say, Daughter, to you, that my own conscience in this matter (I damn no other man's) is such, as may well stand with my own salvation, thereof am I, Meg, so sure as that God is in heaven. And therefore as for all the remnant, goods, lands, and life both (if the chance should so fortune) since this conscience is sure for me, I verily trust in God, he shall rather strengthen me to bear the loss, than against this conscience to swear and put my soul in peril, since all the causes I perceive move other men to the contrary, seem not such unto me, as in my conscience make any change."

When he saw me sitting with this very sad, as I promise you, Sister, my heart was full heavy for the peril of his person, for in faith I fear not his soul, he smiled upon me and said: "How now daughter Marget? What now mother Eve? Where is your mind now? sit not musing with some serpent in your breast, upon some new persuasion, to offer father Adam the apple yet once again?" "In good faith, Father," said I, "I can no further go, but am (as I believe Cressida says in Chaucer) come to Dulcarnon, even at my wit's end. For since the example of so many wise men cannot in this matter move you, I see not what to say more, but if I should look to persuade you with the reason that Master Harry Patenson made. For he met one day one of our men, and when he had asked where you were, and heard that you were in the Tower still, he waxed even angry with you and said, 'Why? What ails him that he will not swear? Wherefore should he stick to swear? I have sworn the oath myself.' And so I can in good faith go now no further neither, after so many wise men whom you take for no example, but if I should say like Master Harry, 'Why should you refuse to swear, Father? for I have sworn myself.'"

At this he laughed and said, "That word was like Eve too, for she offered Adam no worse fruit than she had eaten herself." "But yet Father," said I, "by my truth, I fear me very sore, that this matter will bring you in marvelous heavy trouble. You know well that as I showed you, Master Secretary sent you word as your very friend, to remember that the Parliament lasts yet." "Margaret," said my father, "I thank him right heartily. But as I showed you then again, I left not this gear unthought on. And albeit I know well that if they would make a law to do me any harm, that law could never be lawful, but that God shall I trust keep me in that grace, that concerning my duty to my prince, no man shall do me hurt but if he does me wrong--and then as I told you, this is like a riddle, a case in which a man may lose his head and have no harm-- and notwithstanding also that I have good hope, that God shall never suffer so good and wise a prince, in such wise to requite the long service of his true faithful servant, yet since there is nothing impossible to fall, I forget not in this matter the counsel of Christ in the gospel, that before I should begin to build this castle for the safeguard of my own soul, I should sit and reckon what the charge would be. I counted, Marget, full surely many a restless night, while my wife slept and thought that I had slept too, what peril was possible for to fall to me, so far forth that I am sure there can come none above. And in devising, Daughter, thereupon, I had a full heavy heart. But yet, I thank our Lord, for all that, I never thought to change, though the very uttermost should happen me that my fear ran upon."

"No, Father," said I, "it is not alike to think upon a thing that may be, and to see a thing that shall be, as you should--our Lord save you--if the chance should so fortune. And then should you peradventure think, that you think not now and yet then peradventure it would be too late." "Too late, Daughter Margaret?" said my father. "I beseech our Lord, that if ever I make such a change, it may be too late indeed. For well I know the change cannot be good for my soul that change I

say that should grow but by fear. And therefore I pray God that in this world I never have good of such change. For so much as I take harm here, I shall have at the leastwise the less therefore when I am hence. And if so were that I knew well now, that I should faint and fall, and for fear swear here after, yet would I wish to take harm by the refusing first, for so should I have the better hope for grace to rise again.

"And albeit, Marget, that I know well my lewdness has 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 as his grace has strengthened me hitherto, and made me content in my heart to lose goods, land and life too rather than to swear against my conscience, and has also put in the King toward me that good and gracious mind that as yet he has taken from me nothing but my liberty. Wherewith, as help me God, his Grace has done me so great good by the spiritual profit that I trust I take thereby, that among all his great benefits heaped upon me so thick, I reckon upon my faith my imprisonment even the very chief. I cannot, I say, therefore mistrust the grace of God, but that either he shall conserve and keep the King in that gracious mind still to do me none hurt, or else, if his pleasure be that for my other sins I shall suffer in such a case in sight as I shall not deserve, his grace shall give me the strength to take it patiently, and peradventure somewhat gladly too, whereby his high goodness shall--by the merits of his bitter passion joined thereunto, and far surmounting in merit for me, all that I can suffer myself--make it serve for release of my pain in purgatory, and over that for increase of some reward in heaven.

"Mistrust him, Meg, will I not, though I feel myself faint, yea, and though I should feel my fear even at point to overthrow me too, yet shall I remember how St. Peter, with a blast of wind, began to sink for his faint faith, and shall do as he did, call upon Christ and pray him to help. And then I trust he shall set his holy hand unto me, and in the stormy seas, hold me up from drowning. Yea, and if he suffer me to play St. Peter farther, and to fall full to the ground, and swear and forswear too--which our Lord for his tender passion keep me from, and let me lose if it so fall and never win thereby-- yet after shall I trust that his goodness will cast upon me his tender piteous eye, as he did upon St. Peter, and make me stand up again and confess the truth of my conscience afresh, and abide the shame and the harm here of my own fault.

"And finally, Marget, this know I well, that without my fault he will not let me be lost. I shall therefore with good hope commit myself wholly to him. And if he suffer me for my faults to perish, yet shall I then serve for a praise of his justice. But in good faith, Meg, I trust that his tender pity shall keep my poor soul safe and make me commend his mercy. And therefore my own good daughter, never trouble your mind for any thing that ever shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God will. And I make myself very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best. And with this, my good child, I pray you heartily, be you and all your sisters and my sons too comfortable and serviceable to your good mother my wife. And of your good husband's minds I have no manner doubt. Commend me to them all, and to my good daughter Alington, and to all my other friends, sisters, nieces, nephews, and allies, and unto all our servants, man, woman, and child, and all my good neighbors and our acquaintance abroad. And I right heartily pray both you and them, to serve God and be merry and rejoice in him. And if any thing happen to me that you would be loath, pray to God for me, but trouble not yourself: as I shall full heartily pray for us all, that we may meet together once in heaven, where we shall make merry for ever, and never have trouble

after.”

¹ This edition gives modernized spelling, punctuation, and use of pronouns. Occasional words have been changed only when the older forms would no longer be understood, such as *wiste* or *wot* for “know,” *reynes* for “kidneys,” *ween* for “suppose,” or *quod* for “said.”

² This letter appears as Letter 205 in Elizabeth Roger’s edition of *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton UP, 1947).

³ This letter appears as Letter 206 in Elizabeth Roger’s edition of *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton UP, 1947).

⁴ Margaret is trying to remember the Court of “Piepowders,” which administered justice at fairs and markets where itinerant dealers were involved.

⁵ An officer appointed for a year to report events (such as the death of a tenant who did not have a lawful heir) which would cause land to revert to the lord of the manor or to the Crown.