

## The Paris Newsletter Account of More's Trial and Execution, August 4, 1535

— From *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, Vol. 8, #996. <sup>1</sup>

On the 1st July 1535, Master Thomas More, Chancellor of England, was brought before the judges and the accusations against him read in his presence. The Chancellor and the Duke of Norfolk turned to him and said, "You, Master More, have gravely erred against the King; nevertheless we hope by his clemency that if you repent and correct your obstinate opinion in which you have so rashly persevered, you will receive pardon." He replied, "My Lords, I thank you very heartily for your good will. I pray God preserve me in my just opinion even to death. As to the accusation against me, I fear words, memory, and judgment would alike fail me to reply to such a length of articles, especially considering my present imprisonment and great infirmity." A chair was then ordered to be placed for him, and he proceeded as follows:

"As to the first article, charging me with having always maliciously opposed the King's second marriage, I will only answer that what I have said has been according to my conscience. I never wished to conceal the truth, and if I had, I should have been a traitor. For this error, if error it should be called, I have been condemned to perpetual imprisonment, which I have already suffered for fifteen months, and my goods confiscated. For this reason I will only reply to the principal charge against me, that I have incurred the penalty of the Statute made in the last Parliament since I was in prison, by refusing to the King his title of Supreme Head of the Church, in proof of which you allege my reply to the Secretary and Council, that as I was dead to the world, I did not care to think of such things, but only of the passion of Christ. I reply that your Statute cannot condemn me to death for such silence, for neither your Statute nor any laws in the world punish people except for words or deed,—surely not for keeping silence." To this the King's proctor replied that such silence was a certain proof of malice intended against the Statute, especially as every faithful subject, on being questioned about the Statute, was obliged to answer categorically that the Statute was good and wholesome. "Surely," replied More, "if what the common law says is true, that he who is silent seems to consent, my silence should rather be taken as approval than contempt of your Statute. You say that all good subjects are obliged to reply; but I say that the faithful subject is more bound to his conscience and his soul than to anything else in the world, provided his conscience, like mine, does not raise scandal or sedition, and I assure you that I have never discovered what is in my conscience to any person living.

"As to the second article, that I have conspired against the Statute by writing eight letters to the bishop of Rochester, advising him to disobey it, I could wish these letters had been read in public, but as you say the Bishop has burnt them, I will tell you the substance of them. Some were about private matters connected with our old friendship. Another was a reply to one of his asking how I had answered in the Tower to the first examination about the Statute. I said that I had informed my conscience, and so he also ought to do the same. I swear that this was the tenor of the letters, for which I cannot be condemned by your Statute.

"Touching the third article, that when I was examined by the Council, I answered that your Statute was like a two-edged sword, for he who approved it would ruin his soul, and he who

contradicted it, his body; and that the bishop of Rochester answered similarly, showing that we were confederates, I reply that I only answered thus conditionally, that if the Statute cut both ways like a two-edged sword, how could a man behave so as not to incur either danger? I do not know how the Bishop replied, but if he answered like me, it must have been from the agreement between us in opinion, but not because we had ever arranged it between us. Be assured I never did or said anything maliciously against the Statute, but it may be that this has been maliciously reported to the King.”

Then they ordered an usher to summon 12 men according to the custom of the country, and these articles were given to them that they might judge whether More had maliciously contravened the Statute. After a quarter of an hour's absence they declared him guilty of death, and sentence was pronounced by the Chancellor “selon la lettre de la nouvelle loy.”

More then spoke as follows: "Since I am condemned, and God knows how, I wish to speak freely of your Statute, for the discharge of my conscience. For the seven years that I have studied the matter, I have not read in any approved doctor of the Church that a temporal lord could or ought to be head of the spirituality." The Chancellor interrupting him, said, "What, More, you wish to be considered wiser and of better conscience than all the bishops and nobles of the realm?" To this More replied, "My lord, for one bishop of your opinion I have a hundred saints of mine; and for one parliament of yours, and God knows of what kind, I have all the General Councils for 1,000 years, and for one kingdom I have France and all the kingdoms of Christendom." Norfolk told him that now his malice was clear. More replied, "What I say is necessary for discharge of my conscience and satisfaction of my soul, and to this I call God to witness, the sole Searcher of human hearts. I say further, that your Statute is ill made, because you have sworn never to do anything against the Church, which through all Christendom is one and undivided, and you have no authority, without the common consent of all Christians, to make a law or Act of Parliament or Council against the union of Christendom. I know well that the reason why you have condemned me is because I have never been willing to consent to the King's second marriage; but I hope in the divine goodness and mercy, that as St. Paul and St. Stephen whom he persecuted are now friends in Paradise, so we, though differing in this world, shall be united in perfect charity in the other. I pray God to protect the King and give him good counsel."

On his way to the Tower one of his daughters, named Margaret, pushed through the archers and guards, and held him in her embrace some time without being able to speak. Afterwards More, asking leave of the archers, bade her have patience, for it was God's will, and she had long known the secret of his heart. After going 10 or 12 steps she returned and embraced him again, to which he said nothing, except to bid her pray to God for his soul; and this without tears or change of color. On the Tuesday following he was beheaded in the open space in front of the Tower. A little before his death he asked those present to pray to God for him and he would do the same for them [in the other world.] He then besought them earnestly to pray to God to give the King good counsel, protesting that he died his faithful servant, and God's first.

<sup>1</sup> Great Britain. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*. Ed. J.S. Brewer and James Gairdner. London: Longmans and Co., 1882.