

Thomas More Reader: Historical Tales and Commentaries: Part Three

37. "The Murder of Edward V and his Brother, the Duke of York"

[From *The History of King Richard the Third* ; Works, pp. 67a-69a]

When he had begun his reign the [26th] day of June, after this mockish election, then was he crowned the [6th] day of the same month [i.e., July]. And that solemnity was furnished for the most part with the self-same provision that was appointed for the coronation of his nephew.

Now fell there mischiefs thick. And as the thing evil gotten is never well kept, through all the time of his reign never ceased there cruel death and slaughter, till his own destruction ended it. But as he finished his time with the best death, and the most righteous, that is to wit, his own, so began he with the most piteous and wicked, I mean the lamentable murder of his innocent nephews, the young King and his tender brother, whose death and final unfortune hath nevertheless so far come in question that some remain yet in doubt whether they were in his days destroyed or no. But for that only that Perkin Warbeck, by many folk's malice, and more folk's folly, so long space abusing the world, was as well with princes as the poorer people reputed and taken for the younger of those two, but for that also that all things were in late days so covertly demeaned, one thing pretended and another meant, that there was nothing so plain and openly proved but that yet for the common custom of close and covert dealing, men had it ever inwardly suspect, as many well counterfeited jewels make the true mistrusted. Howbeit, concerning the opinion with the occasions moving either party we shall have place more at large to entreat, if we hereafter happen to write the time of the late noble prince of famous memory, King Henry the seventh, or parcase that history of Perkin, in any compendious process by itself.

But in the meantime, for this present matter I shall rehearse you the dolorous end of those babes, not after every way that I have heard, but after that way that I have so heard by such men, and by such means as methinketh it were heard but it should be true.

King Richard, after his coronation, taking his way to Gloucester to visit in his new honor the town of which he bare the name of his old, devised as he rode to fulfill the thing which he before had intended. And forasmuch as his mind gave him, that his nephews living, men would not reckon that he could have right to the realm, he thought therefore without delay to rid them, as though the killing of his kingsmen could amend his cause and make him a kindly king.

Whereupon he sent one John Green, whom he specially trusted, unto Sir Robert Brackenbury, Constable of the Tower, with a letter and credence also that the same Sir Robert should in any wise put the two children to death. This John Green did his errand unto Brackenbury, kneeling before Our Lady in the Tower, who plainly answered that he would never put them to death to die therefore, with which answer John Green returning recounted the same to King Richard at Warwick yet in his way. Wherewith he took such displeasure and thought that the same night he said unto a secret page of his: "Ah, whom shall a man trust? Those that I had went would most surely serve me, even those fail me, and at my commandment will do nothing for me." "Sir,"

quoth his page, "there lieth one on your pallet ' without that I dare well say to do your Grace's pleasure, the thing were right hard that he would refuse," meaning this by Sir James Tyrell, which was a man of right goodly personage and for nature's gifts worth to have served a much better prince, if he had well served God and by grace obtained as much truth and good will as he had strength and wit. The man had an high heart, and sore longed upward, not rising yet so fast as he had hoped, being hindered and kept under by the means of Sir Richard Ratcliff and Sir William Catesby, which longing for no more partners of the prince's favor, and namely not for him, whose pride they wist would bear no peer, kept him by secret drifts ' out of all secret trust. Which thing this page well had marked and known. Wherefore this occasion offered of very special friendship he took his time to put him forward and by such wise do him good that all the enemies he had except the devil could never have done him so much hurt.

For upon this page's words, King Richard arose—for this communication had he sitting at the draught, ' a convenient carpet for such a council!—and came out into the pallet-chamber ' on which he found in bed Sir James and Sir Thomas Tyrell, of person like and brethren of blood, but nothing of kin in conditions. Then said the King merrily to them: "What, sirs, be ye in bed so soon?" And calling up Sir James, broke to him secretly his mind in this mischievous matter. In which he found him nothing strange. ' Wherefore on the morrow he sent him to Brackenbury with a letter, by which he was commanded to deliver Sir James all the keys of the Tower for one night, to the end he might there accomplish the King's pleasure, in such thing as he had given him commandment.

After which letter delivered and the keys received, Sir James appointed the night next ensuing to destroy them, devising before and preparing the means. The prince, as soon as the Protector left that name and took himself as King, had it shewed unto him that he should not resign, but his uncle should have the crown. At which word the prince sore abashed, began to sigh and said, "Alas, I would my uncle would let me have my life yet, though I lose my kingdom." Then he that told him the tale used him with good words and put him in the best comfort he could. But forthwith was the prince and his brother both shut up and all others removed from them, only one called Black Will, or William Slaughter, except, set to serve them and see them sure. ' After which time the prince never tied his points " nor ought wrought of himself but with that young babe his brother, lingered in thought and heaviness till this traitorous death delivered them of that wretchedness. For Sir James Tyrell devised that they should be murdered in their beds. To the execution whereof he appointed Miles Forest, one of the four that kept them, a fellow fleshed in murder beforetime. To him he joineth one John Dighton, his own horsekeeper, a big broad, square " strong knave.

Then all the others being removed from them, this Miles Forest and John Dighton, about midnight—the silly " children lying in their beds—came into the chamber and suddenly lapped, " them up among the clothes so be-wrapped them and entangled them, keeping down by force the featherbed and pillows hard unto their mouths, that within a while smored " and stifled, their breath failing, they gave up to God their innocent souls into the joys of heaven, leaving to the tormentors their bodies in the bed. Which after that the wretches perceived first by the struggling with the pains of death and after long lying still to be thoroughly dead, they laid their bodies naked out upon the bed and fetched Sir James to see them. Which upon the sight of them, caused these murderers to bury them at the stair foot, meetly deep in the ground under a great heap of

stones. Then rode Sir James in great haste to King Richard and shewed him all the manner of the murder, who gave him great thanks and (as some say) there made him knight. But he allowed not (as I have heard) that burying in so vile a corner, saying that he would have them buried in a better place because they were a King's sons. (Lo! The honorable courage ^{is} of a king!) Whereupon, they say that a priest of Sir Robert Brackenbury took up the bodies again and secretly interred them in such places (as by the occasion of his death) which only knew it could never since come to light.

Very truth is it and well-known that at such time as Sir James Tyrell was in the Tower, for treason committed against the most famous prince, King Henry the seventh, both Dighton and he were examined and confessed the murder in manner above written. But whether the bodies were removed, they could nothing tell. And thus as I have learned of them that much knew and little cause had to lie, were those two noble princes, these innocent tender children, born of most royal blood, brought up in great wealth, likely long to live to reign and rule in the realm, by traitorous tyranny taken, deprived of their estate, shortly shut up in prison, and privily slain and murdered; their bodies cast, God wot where, by the cruel ambition of their unnatural uncle and his despiteous ^{is} tormentors. Which things on every part well pondered: God never gave this world a more notable example, neither in what unsurety standeth this worldly weal, or what mischief worketh the proud enterprise of an high heart, or finally, what wretched end ensueth such despiteous cruelty. For first to begin with, the ministers: Miles Forest at Saint Martin's piecemeal rotted away; Dighton indeed yet walketh on alive in good possibility to be hanged ere he die. But Sir James Tyrell died at Tower Mill, beheaded for treason. King Richard himself, as ye shall hereafter hear, [was] slain in the field, hacked and hewed of his enemies' hands, harried ^{is} on horseback dead, his hair in despite torn, and tugged ^{is} like a cur-dog. And the mischief that he took within less than three years of the mischief that he did; and yet all the meantime spent in much pain and trouble outward, much fear, anguish and sorrow within. For I have heard by credible report of such as were secret within his chambers that after this abominable deed done he never had quiet in his mind, he never thought himself sure. Where he went abroad his eyes whirled about, his body privily fenced, ^{is} his hand ever on his dagger, his countenance and manner like one always ready to strike again. He took ill rest a-night, lay long waking and musing, sore-wearied with care and watch, rather slumbered than slept; troubled with fearful dreams, suddenly sometimes start up, leap out of his bed and run about the chamber, so was his restless heart continually tossed and tumbled with the tedious impression and stormy remembrance of his abominable deed. Now had he out-ward no long time in rest, for hereupon soon after began the conspiracy or rather good confederation between the Duke of Buckingham and many other gentlemen against him.

NOTES

(1) Apparently More forgot the precise days on which " **Richard had begun his reign and was crowned** ," and his editor, William Rastell, did not supply the information. King Edward IV died April 9, 1483. Parliament, on June 25, was presented with a roll setting forth both the invalidity of Edward IV's marriage with Elizabeth Woodville, and the right of the Duke of Gloucester to the crown. Richard began his reign the next day, June 26, and was crowned ten days later.

(2) **Nephew** , i.e. Prince Edward, who arrived in London to be crowned on May 4, 1483, but the

coronation was postponed until June 22. Edward was lodged in the Tower from May 19, and was joined by his younger brother, Richard, Duke of York, on June 16; both were murdered in the Tower probably in August, 1483. The first account of their murder was given by Sir Thomas More in his *History of Richard III*. Whether or not Richard was responsible for their murder is still debateable. In 1674 a wooden chest, unearthed at the Tower of London, was found to contain the bones of two boys of about the ages of the two princes. Believed to be the bones of Edward V and his brother, they were buried in Henry VII's chapel at Westminster Abbey. On July 6, 1933, the urn containing the bones was opened and examined, and traces of death by suffocation were found. The story of their death and the belief by some that Henry VII, not Richard III, had the children murdered, has given rise to a multitude of comment, scholarship and fiction. For a summation of the evidence *pro* and *con* see Paul M. Kendall.

(3) **Perkin Warbeck** (1474-1499), Flemish Pretender to the throne of England, was thought by some to be a son of George, Duke of Clarence, or even of Richard III. He himself finally insisted he was Richard, Duke of York. In 1494 he was recognized by Emperor Maximilian I as King Richard IV, and so proclaimed himself in 1496, invading England the following year. He was captured, imprisoned, and in November 1499 by order of King Henry VII, hanged. More in fact did not write a history of King Henry VII (died 1509), nor one of Perkin Warbeck. The best-known early history of Henry VII was written by another famous Lord Chancellor, Sir Francis Bacon, who turned to history after his calamitous fall from favor in 1621.

(4) **John Green** is possibly the Green who was engaged to supply "horsemeat" for the King's stables (J. Gairdner, p. 129), or possibly the escheator for the Duchy of Lancaster (1483-85) who died in 1486 (R.J. Sylvester and D.P. Harding, *Wolsey*, p. 263). According to Marius, John Howard, a close friend of Richard, father of Thomas Howard, grandfather of Duke of Norfolk, was in charge of the Tower of London until July 17, 1483 when **Sir Robert Brackenbury** was made Constable. More may have got much of his information for his *History* from the Howard Family (*Thomas More*, p.111). He was later made Keeper of the Lions a few months before being killed at Bosworth Field on August 22, 1485. **Sir James Tyrell** was Richard's Master of the Horse, and a Yorkist supporter. Thomas Tyrell was his younger brother. Sir James was beheaded in 1502, having "confessed" [?] to the murder of the children. **Sir Richard Ratcliff** and **Sir William Catesby** were King Richard's most influential counsellors. **Black Will**, **Dighton** and **Forest** are not identified, but see R. Sylvester, *Wolsey*, for some suggestions.

(5) **Saint Martin's** : i.e., the postern outside the college of St. Martin's Le Grand, which was used as a prison. **Tower Hill** : i.e., the site of a scaffold and gallows for the execution of traitors and others "delivered out of the Tower," located just north-west of the Tower of London. Sir James Tyrell was beheaded here.

(6) **carpet** : i.e., a mocking allusion to the phrase "on the carpet," that is, "of the Council Table." King Richard was legislating from the toilet!

(7) **King Richard...slain in the field** : Richard III was slain at the Battle of Bosworth Field, August 22, 1485. After Lord Stanley deserted and then turned against him, Richard charged at Richmond (later Henry VII) but was thrown down, his head split open and his brains scattered. His crown was retrieved from the bush and placed upon Richmond's head. (Compare Shakespeare's reenactment of this extraordinary scene in his *Richard III* [Act V, scenes iii-iv].)

38. "The Duke of Bourbon and the Sack of Rome"

[From *A Dialogue concerning Heresies* ; Works, pp. 258b-259b]

Of this sect was the great part of those ungracious people also which late entered into Rome with the Duke of Bourbon, not only robbing and spoiling the city, as well their own friends as the contrary part, but like very beasts did also violate the wives in the sight of their husbands, [and] slew the children in the sight of their fathers. And to extort the discovering of more money, when men had brought out all that ever they had to save themselves from death or further pain, and were at pacts ^ⁿ and promises of rest without further business, then the wretched tyrants and cruel tormentors, as though all that stood for nothing, ceased not to put them eftsoons ^ⁿ to intolerable torments.

And old ancient honorable men, those fierce heretics let not ^ⁿ to hang up by the privy members, and from many they pulled them off and cast them in the street. And some brought out naked with his hands bound behind him and a cord tied fast unto his privy members. Then would they set before him in his way other of those tyrants with their moorish pikes, the points toward the breasts of these poor naked men. And then one or two of those wretches would stand behind those moorish pikes and draw the poor souls by the members toward them. Now then was all their cruel sport and laughter either to see the silly ^ⁿ naked men in shrinking from the pikes to tear off their members or, for pain of that pulling, to run their naked bodies in deep upon the pikes.

Too piteous and too abominable were it to rehearse the villainous pain and torments that they devised on the silly women to whom, after that they had beastly abused them, wives in the sight of their husbands and the maidens in the sight of their fathers, they were reckoned for piteous that did no more but cut their throats.

And very certain is it that not in Rome only but also in the country of Milan that they kept and oppressed, after torments used and money fet ^ⁿ out that way, then some, calling himself a gentleman in Almaine or Spain, would feign himself fallen in love of his hostess's daughter, and that he would marry her in any wise; and then make much earnest business for to have some money with her. And whether he gat ought or gat nought by that device he letted long after to put the father, the mother, the fair daughter, and all the whole house to new torments to make them tell where any more money were, were there any or none. And some failed not to take the child and bind it to a broach ^ⁿ and lay it to the fire to roast, the father and mother looking on. And then begin to come to a price for the sparing of the child, asking first an hundred ducats, then fifty, then forty, then twenty, then ten, then five, then twain, when the silly father had not one left but these tyrants had all before. Then would they let the child roast to death. And yet in derision as though they pitied the child, they would say to the father and the mother, "Ah, fie, fie, for shame. What marvel is it though God send a vengeance among you. What unnatural people be you that can find in your hearts to see your own child roasted afore your face rather than ye would out with one ducat to deliver it from death."

[*IN MARGIN : O What Cruelty!*]

Thus devised these cursed wretches so many divers fashions of exquisite cruelties that I ween they have taught the devil new torments in hell that he never knew before and will not fail to prove himself a good scholar and surely render them his lesson when they come there, where it is to be feared that many of them be by this. For soon after that they had in Rome exercised a while this fierce and cruel tyranny and entered into the holy churches, spoiled the holy relics, cast out the blessed sacrament, pulled the chalice from the altar at mass, slain priests in the church, left no kind of cruelty or spite undone, but from hour to hour embruing their hands in blood, and that in such wise as any Turk of Saracen would have pitied or abhorred, our Lord sent soon after such a pestilence among them that he left not of them the third part alive. For this purpose I rehearse you their heavy mischievous dealing that ye may prove by their deeds what good cometh of their sect. For as our Saviour saith, "Ye shall know the tree by the fruit."

NOTES

(1) The **Duke of Bourbon** had been in command of the armies of Francis I as Constable of France until he was recalled and his lands transferred. Infuriated, the Duke defected to his enemy, Charles V, and was given command of crack German troops. In August, 1523, a treaty was signed by the English ambassador in the Low Countries with Charles and the Duke of Bourbon, the English promising to give money to Bourbon for his German mercenaries. However, King Henry VIII sent out secret word to his emissary, Sir John Russell, to keep back all monies promised; thus, "for want of victuals" the Duke's men "began to grudge and mutter" (R. Sylvester, *Wolsey*, p. 40).

Out of cash, Bourbon led his starving men against the Italian town of Pavia, which had been fortified by the French. He won the battle, but discovered among captured documents that a league had been concluded between the King of England and the French King, "which perceived, he began to smell the impediment of his money, which should have come to him from the King." Cheated and deceived, Bourbon planned to vent his spleen by ingloriously sacking the holy city of Rome and in taking prisoner Pope Clement VII, who had been vacillating in his support of first one and then another of the maverick monarchs. In the spring of 1527 some 14,000 to 20,000 mercenaries, mostly Lutherans, crossed the Alps and joined up with the Duke of Bourbon for an assault on Rome. Frundsberg, the leader of the German division, suffered a stroke, so Bourbon personally led the combined forces on "the fifth of May, 1527, at 5:00p.m, with his entire army," to the city walls of Rome, according to Guicciardini (p. 77): see below. On scaling a wall, Bourbon was killed, possibly by the artist Benvenuto Cellini, who claims that he and others shot someone in the fog and they later learned that one of their shots had killed the Duke (Trans., G. Bull, p. 71). For eight days the soldiers committed all forms of rapine and debauchery, massacring over 4000 Romans, defiling convents, churches, even Saint Peter's Basilica. Cardinal Como, a first-hand witness to the carnage, claims that many friars were beheaded, old nuns beaten, young ones violated, and (as More recounts) that infants were "tormented with unheard-of cruelties—the son in the presence of his father, the babe in the sight of its mother" (A.F. Pollard, p. 139). Sir Thomas More utilizes this horrendous attack on Rome by Lutheran soldiers to excoriate Lutheran "heretics".

Louis A. Schuster (CW 8, p.1187) believes More's shocking recapitulation of the Sack of Rome had but one purpose, "to jab at the apathy of his countrymen, to startle them into realizing that what happened in Rome could happen in London." (See also Germain Marc'hadour's note in *Moreana* 34 (1997), 96-97 on Luigi Guicciardini's contemporary work *The Sack of Rome* (trans. by James H. McGregor, 1993); and see also Richard Marius, CW 6, p.773.

The plague followed soon after the sack of Rome and (ironically) consumed the French armies which Francis I had sent into Italy to revenge the barbarous acts of the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor!

¹ I.e., King Richard III

² *Secret page* : i.e., one who is a confidant

³ Weened, believed

⁴ Straw bed

⁵ Schemes

⁶ Toilet

⁷ *Pallet-chamber* : bed chamber

⁸ Unwilling

⁹ Secure

¹⁰ *Tied his points* : laced his shirt and/or hose

¹¹ Strongly built

¹² Innocent

¹³ Bundled, rolled

¹⁴ Smothered

¹⁵ Nature

¹⁶ Contemptuous, cruel

¹⁷ Dragged

¹⁸ Mauled, pulled roughly

¹⁹ Protected

²⁰ *At pacts* : i.e., in agreement

²¹ Forthwith

²² *Let not* : i.e., went so far as; did not withhold

²³ Innocent

²⁴ Drawn

²⁵ Spit