

DIALOGUE ON CONSCIENCEⁱ
Tower of London, August 1534

5 *This dialogue, related in the form of letters, was occasioned by real events that occurred on 16 and 17 August 1534. Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley, More's successor, went to More's stepdaughter's home, ostensibly to hunt, but primarily to communicate a message he wanted delivered to his imprisoned friend. Audley had taken considerable risks to defend Sir Thomas against the wrath of King Henry. Now, however, he wanted More to put a stop to what he considered foolishness. The rest of the story is told in the following two letters. The first was sent by Alice Alington, daughter of More's second wife, to Margaret Roper, More's eldest daughter. The second is a dialogue between Sir Thomas and Margaret, but in Rastell's words, whether this dialogue was "written by Sir Thomas More in his daughter Roper's name or by herself...is not certainly known."*ⁱⁱ

205. Alice Alington to Margaret Roper

17 August <1534>

15 *In August in the year of our Lord 1534, and in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of King Henry the Eighth, the Lady Alice Alington (wife to Sir Giles Alington, Knight, and daughter to Sir Thomas More's second and last wife) wrote a letter to Mistress Margaret Roper, the copy whereof here followeth. [Workes 1433]*

20 Sister Roper, with all my heart I recommend me unto you, thanking you for all kindness.

 The cause of my writing at this time is to show¹ you that at my coming home, within two hours after, my Lord Chancellor did come to take a course at² 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 methought 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 desire³ him as humbly as I could that he would, as I have heard say that he hath been, be still good lord unto my father. And he said it did appear very well when the matter of the nun⁴ was laid to his charge. And as for this other matter,⁵ he marveled that my father is so obstinate in his own conceit,⁶ as that⁷ everybody went forthwithal⁸ save only the blind bishop⁹ 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 there 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 that¹⁰ should so be fouled or wet therewith. They, seeing that, made them¹¹ caves under the ground till all the rain was past. Then they came forth, thinking to make the fools to do what they list,¹² and to rule them as they

¹ tell

² *take a course at*: hunt

³ ask

⁴ Elizabeth Barton; see Letter 200 above.

⁵ *other matter*: More's refusal to take the oath

⁶ notion, conception, idea

⁷ *as that*: since

⁸ immediately

⁹ *blind bishop*: John Fisher

¹⁰ who

¹¹ themselves

¹² wanted

would. But the fools would none of that, but would have the rule themselves, for all¹³ their craft. And when the wise men saw they could not obtain their purpose, they wished that they had been in the rain, and had defouled¹⁴ 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
 5 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 him that he had devoured all the beasts that he
 could come by. His confessor assoiled¹⁵ him because he was a king and also it was his nature so to do. Then
 10 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 assoil this great trespass, but by
 and by¹⁶ sent him to the bishop. Then came the wolf and made his confession, and he was straitly¹⁷
 commanded that he should not pass six pence at a meal. But when this said wolf had used this diet a little
 while, he waxed¹⁸ very hungry, insomuch that on a day when he saw a cow with her calf come by him he said
 to himself, “I am very hungry and fain¹⁹ would I eat, but²⁰ that I am bounden by my ghostly²¹ father.
 15 Notwithstanding that, my conscience shall judge me. And then if it be so, then shall my conscience be thus:
 that the cow doth seem to me now but worth a groat,²² and then if the cow be but worth a groat, then is the
 calf but worth two pence.” So did the wolf eat both the cow and the calf. Now good sister, hath not my lord
 told me two pretty fables? In good faith, they pleased me nothing, nor I wist²³ not what to say for I was
 abashed of²⁴ this answer. And I see no better suit than to almighty God, for he is the comforter of all
 20 sorrows, and will not fail to send his comfort to his servants when they have most need. Thus fare ye well,
 mine own good sister.

Written the Monday after Saint Lawrence in haste by

Your sister Dame,

Alice Alington

25

206. Margaret Roper to Alice Alington

<August 1534> [

30 *When Mistress Roper had received a letter from her sister Lady Alice Alington, she, at her next repair²⁵ to her father, showed
 him the letter. And what communication was thereupon between her father and her, ye shall perceive by an answer here following
 (as written to the Lady Alington). But whether this answer were written by Sir Thomas More in his daughter Roper’s name or
 by herself, it is not certainly known. [Workes 1434]*

¹³ *for all*: in spite of, notwithstanding

¹⁴ dirtied

¹⁵ absolved, forgave

¹⁶ *by and by*: immediately

¹⁷ strictly

¹⁸ became

¹⁹ gladly

²⁰ except

²¹ spiritual

²² a coin worth four pence

²³ knew

²⁴ *abashed of*: confused or disconcerted by

²⁵ visit

When I came next unto my father after, methought it both convenient and necessary to show him your letter: convenient,²⁶ 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 peradventure²⁷ 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 reins²⁸ now by reason of gravel and stone²⁹—and of the cramp also that diverse nights grippeth him in his legs, and that³⁰ I found by his words that they were not much increased but continued after their manner that they did before, sometimes very sore³¹ and sometimes little grief, and that³² at that time I found him out of pain, and (as one in his case might) meetly³³ well-minded, after our seven psalms³⁴ and the litany³⁵ said,³⁶ 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 abroad³⁷ 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 betime³⁸ as, standing with the pleasure of God, may content and please the King, whom ye have always founden so singularly gracious unto you that if ye 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 worship³⁹ 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 ye will look surely thereto. And your learning I know for such that I wot⁴⁰ well you can. But one thing is there which I and other your friends find and perceive abroad, which, but if⁴¹ it be showed you, you may—peradventure to your great peril— mistake and hope for less harm (for as for good I wot well in this world of this matter ye 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 ye change not your mind, you are likely to lose all those friends that are able to do you any good. Or if ye lose not their good wills, ye 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), hath my daughter Alington played the serpent with you, and with a letter set you awork to come tempt your

²⁶ appropriate

²⁷ perhaps

²⁸ kidneys

²⁹ *gravel and stone*: kidney stones

³⁰ when

³¹ much

³² when

³³ suitably

³⁴ *seven psalms*: the penitential psalms, i.e., Pss 6, 31(32), 37(38), 50(51), 101(102), 129(130), & 142(143)

³⁵ the Litany of the Saints

³⁶ had been said

³⁷ outside (the Tower)

³⁸ in good time

³⁹ reputation

⁴⁰ know

⁴¹ *but if*: unless

father again⁴² 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 oft⁴³ 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 hath no man taken this oath already more gladly than I would do, as he that reckoneth himself more deeply bounden unto the King's Highness for his most singular bounty, many ways showed and declared, than any of them all besides. But since, standing⁴⁴ my conscience, I can in no wise⁴⁵ 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 mine own mind to think otherwise than I do—I have no manner⁴⁶ remedy but God hath given me to the strait:⁴⁷ that either I must deadly displease him, or abide any worldly harm that he shall for mine other sins, under name of this thing, suffer⁴⁸ to fall upon me. Whereof⁴⁹ (as I before this have told you too) I have, ere⁵⁰ I came here, not left unbethought nor unconsidered the very worst and the uttermost that can by possibility fall. And albeit that⁵¹ I know mine own frailty full well and the natural faintness of mine 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 mine 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 maketh me little matter though men call it as it pleaseth 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 that—that some call it but a scruple—I assure you, you shall see my sister's letter, that one of the greatest estates⁵² 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, accounteth your conscience in this matter for a right simple scruple; and you may be sure he saith it of good mind and layeth⁵³ no little cause.⁵⁴ For he saith that where you say your conscience moveth you to this, all the nobles of this realm, and almost all other men too, go boldly forth with the contrary and stick⁵⁵ not thereat, save only yourself and one other man,⁵⁶ whom, though he be right good and very well-learned too, yet would I ween⁵⁷ 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 loveth and esteemeth highly. Thereupon he read over your letter. And when he came

⁴² See Gn 3.

⁴³ more often

⁴⁴ continuing or remaining with

⁴⁵ way

⁴⁶ kind of

⁴⁷ narrow place

⁴⁸ allow

⁴⁹ Of that [harm]

⁵⁰ before

⁵¹ *albeit that*: although

⁵² noblemen

⁵³ puts forward

⁵⁴ reasoning

⁵⁵ hesitate; scruple

⁵⁶ Bishop John Fisher

⁵⁷ think

to the end, he began it afresh and read it over again. And in the reading he made no manner haste, but advised⁵⁸ it leisurely and pointed⁵⁹ every word.

And after that he paused, and then thus he said: “Forsooth,⁶⁰ 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 mine own. Howbeit,⁶¹ her take I verily⁶² for mine own too, since I have married her mother, and brought up her of⁶³ a child as I have brought up you, in other things and learning both, wherein, I thank God, she findeth now some fruit, and bringeth her own up very virtuously and well. Whereof⁶⁴ God, I thank him, hath 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 mine other good son her first;⁶⁵ I am daily beadsman⁶⁶ (and so write her) for them all.

“In this matter she hath used⁶⁷ herself like herself: wisely and like a very daughter toward me, and in the end of her letter, giveth as good counsel as any man that wit hath 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 mine other business concerning the seely⁶⁸ nun,⁶⁹ as my cause was good and clear, so was he my good lord therein, and Master Secretary⁷⁰ my good master too, for which I shall never cease to be faithful beadsman for them both and daily do I, by my troth,⁷¹ 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 thee and me, my lord’s Aesop’s fables do not greatly move me. But as his Wisdom,⁷² for his pastime, told them merrily to mine one daughter, so shall I, for my pastime, answer them to thee, Meg, that art mine other daughter. The first fable, of the rain that washed away all their wits that⁷³ stood abroad⁷⁴ when it fell, I have heard often ere this. It was a tale so often told among the King’s Council by my Lord Cardinal⁷⁵ when his Grace was chancellor that I cannot lightly forget it. For of troth, in times past, when variance began to fall between the Emperor⁷⁶ and the French King⁷⁷ 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,⁷⁸ because they

⁵⁸ examined

⁵⁹ marked, noted

⁶⁰ Indeed

⁶¹ However

⁶² truly

⁶³ since

⁶⁴ of which (children)

⁶⁵ her deceased first husband, Thomas Elrington

⁶⁶ one who prays for another

⁶⁷ conducted

⁶⁸ pitiable, foolish

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Barton

⁷⁰ Thomas Cromwell

⁷¹ truthfulness, faithfulness

⁷² Audley, the Lord Chancellor

⁷³ *their wits that*: the wits of those who

⁷⁴ outside

⁷⁵ Cardinal Wolsey, More’s predecessor as Lord Chancellor

⁷⁶ Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor

⁷⁷ Francis I

⁷⁸ who

would not be washed with the rain that should make all the people fools, went themselves into caves and hid them⁷⁹ under the ground. But when the rain had once made all the remnant fools and that they⁸⁰ come out of their caves and would utter their wisdom, the fools agreed together against them, and there all-to⁸¹ 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

5 would not fail after⁸² 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 gear⁸³ is passed and his Grace is gone, our Lord assoil⁸⁴ his soul.

10 "And therefore shall I now come to this Aesop's fable, as my lord full merrily laid it forth for me. If those wise men, 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 seemeth it that the foolish rain was so sore⁸⁵ 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 noddies⁸⁶ than them 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

15 the 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, they so might⁸⁷—they would be glad to lose their wit and be fools too, the foolish rain had washed them meetly⁸⁸ 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

20 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 taketh here for the wise men and whom he meaneth to be fools, I cannot very well guess; I cannot well read such riddles. For as Davus saith in Terence, *Non sum Oedipus*,⁸⁹ I may say, you wot⁹⁰ well, *Non sum Oedipus, sed Morus*,⁹¹ which name of mine, what it signifieth in Greek, I need not tell you. But I trust my lord reckoneth me among the fools, and so reckon I

25 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 mine own conscience clearly knoweth that no man may truly number and reckon me. And I ween 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

30 and that, at mine own great labor by his great goodness, discharged. But whomsoever my lord meaneth for the wise men, and whomsoever his lordship take for the fools, and whosoever long for the rule, and whosoever 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 saith, one man to be proud that he beareth rule over other men is much like as one mouse would be proud to

⁷⁹ themselves

⁸⁰ *that they*: if they (the wisemen)

⁸¹ utterly, completely

⁸² afterwards

⁸³ matter, talk

⁸⁴ absolve, forgive

⁸⁵ intense

⁸⁶ fools

⁸⁷ *that so they, they so might*: that in whatever way they (were able to obtain rule), they would (obtain it)

⁸⁸ fairly; quite

⁸⁹ *Non sum Oedipus*: "I am not Oedipus." See Terence's *Andria* 1.2.23. Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx.

⁹⁰ know

⁹¹ *sed Morus*: "but More"; in Greek, *Morus* means "fool."

bear a rule over other mice in a barn⁹²—God, I say, give us the grace so wisely to rule ourselves 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.⁹³

5 “The second fable, Marget, seemeth not to be Aesop’s. For by that⁹⁴ the matter goeth all upon confession, it seemeth 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 ere Christ was born. But what? Who made it, maketh little matter. Nor I envy not⁹⁵ that Aesop hath the name.⁹⁶ But surely it is somewhat too subtle for me. For whom his lordship understandeth by the lion and the wolf (which both twain⁹⁷ confessed themselves of ravin⁹⁸ and devouring of all that came to their hands, and the one enlarged his conscience at his pleasure in the construction⁹⁹ of his penance), nor whom by the good discreet 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 sore¹⁰⁰ 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 seemeth by that similitude) that of oversight and folly my scrupulous conscience taketh for a great perilous thing toward my soul if I should swear this oath, which thing, as his lordship thinketh, were indeed but a trifle. And I suppose well, Margaret, as you told me right now, that so thinketh many more beside, as well spiritual as temporal,¹⁰¹ and that even of those that, for their learning and their virtue, myself not a little esteem. And yet albeit that¹⁰² I suppose this to be true, yet believe I not even very surely that every man so thinketh that so saith. But though they did, daughter, that would not make much to me, not though I should see my Lord of Rochester¹⁰³ 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—meet¹⁰⁴ to be matched and compared with him, yet, that in this matter I was not led by him very well and plainly appeareth both in that I refused the oath before it was offered him and in that also that his lordship was content to have sworn of that oath (as I perceived since by¹⁰⁵ 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 hap¹⁰⁶ to carry it. There is no man living of whom, while he liveth, 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

⁹² *one man ... in a barn*: Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2. Pr. 6.147

⁹³ Mt 25:1–13

⁹⁴ *by that*: inasmuch as

⁹⁵ *Nor ... not*: Nor am I envious (the double negative was standard at More’s time)

⁹⁶ fame, glory

⁹⁷ together

⁹⁸ the act of taking prey

⁹⁹ construing

¹⁰⁰ distressed

¹⁰¹ *as well ... temporal*: clergy as well as laymen

¹⁰² although

¹⁰³ *Lord of Rochester*: Bishop Fisher, the only bishop who refused to swear the oath

¹⁰⁴ suitable, worthy

¹⁰⁵ *perceived since by*: learned subsequently from

¹⁰⁶ happen

fear, God would forgive it. And some may peradventure¹⁰⁷ think that they will repent, and be shriven¹⁰⁸ 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 regardeth their heart than their tongue, and that therefore their oath goeth upon that they think and not upon that they say, as a woman reasoned once—I trow,¹⁰⁹ daughter, you were by. But in good faith, Marget, I can use no such ways in so great a matter; but like¹¹⁰ as if mine own conscience served me, I would not let¹¹¹ to do it though other men refused, so though others refuse it not, I dare not do it, mine own conscience standing against it. If I had (as I told you) looked but lightly for¹¹² 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 ween¹¹³ I can scant¹¹⁴ tell it you again, because it hangeth 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 course¹¹⁵ unto every fair, to do justice in such things as happen within the same. This court hath a pretty fond¹¹⁶ name, but I cannot happen upon it, but it beginneth with a pie, and the remnant goeth much like the name of a knight that I have known, iwis¹¹⁷ (and I trow you too, for he hath been at my father’s often ere this, at such time as you were there), a meetly tall black¹¹⁸ man; his name was Sir William Pounder. But tut,¹¹⁹ let the name of the court go for this once, or call it, if ye will, a court of pie Sir William Pounder.¹²⁰ But this was the matter, lo: That upon a time, at such a court held at Bartholomew Fair,¹²¹ there was an escheator¹²² of London that had arrested a man that was outlawed,¹²³ and had seized his goods that he had brought into the fair, tolling¹²⁴ him out of the fair by a train.¹²⁵ The man that was arrested and his goods seized was a northern man, which, by¹²⁶ his friends, made the escheator within the fair to be arrested upon an action¹²⁷ (I wot nere¹²⁸ what), and so was he brought before the judge of the court of pie Sir William Pounder, and at the last, the matter came to a certain ceremony to be tried by a quest¹²⁹ of twelve men, a jury, as I remember they call it, or else a perjury.

¹⁰⁷ perhaps

¹⁰⁸ forgiven in the sacrament of confession

¹⁰⁹ believe

¹¹⁰ just

¹¹¹ hesitate

¹¹² into

¹¹³ think

¹¹⁴ hardly, scarcely

¹¹⁵ *of course*: routinely

¹¹⁶ silly

¹¹⁷ indeed, certainly

¹¹⁸ having black hair or eyes; dark-complexioned

¹¹⁹ no matter

¹²⁰ *pie Sir William Pounder*: The court at an English fair is called a “Court of Piepowders” from French *pieds poudrés* (dusty feet), as justice was administered without delay to all who came, dusty as they were from traveling.

¹²¹ a fair that was held annually from 1133 to 1855, at West Smithfield

¹²² a law officer

¹²³ a technical legal term meaning (in this case) that he had been stripped of his property rights by a court

¹²⁴ debarring (a legal action)

¹²⁵ course of action; deceit

¹²⁶ *which, by*: who, by the help of

¹²⁷ i.e., a legal suit or warrant

¹²⁸ *wot nere*: know not

¹²⁹ body of people appointed to hold an inquiry

Now had the clothman,¹³⁰ by friendship of the officers, founden the means to have all the quest, almost, made of the northern men, such as had their booths there standing in the fair. Now was it come to the last day¹³¹ 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, had into a place to talk and commune¹³² and agree upon their sentence. Nay, let me speak better in my terms yet: I trow the judge giveth the sentence and the quest's tale is called a verdict. They were scant¹³³ come in together, but the northern men were agreed—and in effect all the others too—to cast¹³⁴ our London escheator. They thought they needed no more to prove that he did wrong than even the name¹³⁵ of his bare office alone. But then, was there then (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 prayed¹³⁶ them to tarry¹³⁷ 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?” quoth one of the northern men. “Where wonnest thou?¹³⁸ Be not we eleven here and you but ene la alene,¹³⁹ and all we agreed? Whereto¹⁴⁰ shouldst you stick?¹⁴¹ What is thy name, gude¹⁴² fellow?” “Masters,” quoth he, “my name is called Company.” “Company,” quoth they, “now by thy troth,¹⁴³ gude fellow, play then the gude companion; come thereon¹⁴⁴ forth with us and pass,¹⁴⁵ even for gude company.” “Would God, good masters,” quoth the man again, “that there lay no more weight¹⁴⁶ 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 passing¹⁴⁷ at your request here for good company now, by God, Master Dickenson” (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 ye go, Master Dickenson? Nay, nay, by our Lady, nor never one of you all. And therefore must ye pardon me from passing as you pass; but if¹⁴⁸ I thought in the matter as you do, I

¹³⁰ the defendant, who was at the fair to sell cloth

¹³¹ a legal term for a court session

¹³² discuss, confer

¹³³ hardly

¹³⁴ defeat in a legal action

¹³⁵ The officer was called both an “escheator” and a “cheator” at this time.

¹³⁶ asked

¹³⁷ wait

¹³⁸ *Where wonnest thou?*: Where do you live? (“Wonnest” is a word of northern England's dialect)

¹³⁹ *ene la alene*: northern dialect for “one all alone”

¹⁴⁰ For what reason?

¹⁴¹ persist; remain fixed

¹⁴² northern dialect for “good”

¹⁴³ truth, faithfulness

¹⁴⁴ on that subject

¹⁴⁵ render a verdict (legal term)

¹⁴⁶ *lay weight*: were attached importance

¹⁴⁷ voting for a verdict

¹⁴⁸ *but if*: unless

dare not in such a matter pass for good company. For the passage of my poor soul passeth¹⁴⁹ all good company.”

And when my father had told me this tale, then said he further thus: “I pray thee now, good Marget, tell me this: wouldst you wish thy 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 wot¹⁵⁰ well) with the conscience of any man that hath sworn; nor I take not upon me to be their judge. But now if they do well, and that their conscience grudge¹⁵¹ them not, if I, with my conscience to the contrary, should for good company pass on with them and swear as they do, when all our souls hereafter shall pass out of this world and stand in judgment at the bar before the high Judge, if he judge 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): ‘Mine 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 troth, Marget, I may say to thee—in secret counsel, here between us twain (but let it go no farther, I beseech thee heartily)—I find the friendship of this wretched world so fickle that for anything that I could treat¹⁵² or pray, that would for good fellowship go to the devil with me, among them all I ween¹⁵³ I should not find one. And then, by God, Marget, if you think so too, best it is, I suppose, that for¹⁵⁴ any respect of them all, were they twice as many more as they be, I have myself a respect to mine own soul.”

“Surely, father,” quoth I, “without any scruple at all you may be bold, I dare say, for 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 let,¹⁵⁵ and that ye well ought and have good cause to change your own conscience, in conforming your own conscience to the conscience of so many others, namely¹⁵⁶ 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, bounden to change and reform your conscience, and conform your own, as I said, to other men’s.”

“Marry,¹⁵⁷ Marget,” quoth my father again, “for the part that 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 bounden 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 bounden to swear that every law is well made, nor bounden 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 hap¹⁵⁸ to be made in any part of Christendom, I suppose no man doubteth, the General Council of the whole body of Christendom evermore in that point except,¹⁵⁹ which,¹⁶⁰ though it may make some things

¹⁴⁹ surpasses

¹⁵⁰ know

¹⁵¹ trouble, disturb

¹⁵² entreat

¹⁵³ think

¹⁵⁴ despite

¹⁵⁵ hindrance

¹⁵⁶ especially

¹⁵⁷ Indeed (from “by Mary”)

¹⁵⁸ happen

¹⁵⁹ excepted

¹⁶⁰ that [Council]

better than others and some things 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 governeth his Church, never hath yet suffered,¹⁶¹ nor never hereafter shall, his whole Catholic Church lawfully gathered together in a General Council—as Christ hath 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, for¹⁶² 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 diverse quarters of Christendom some that are good men and cunning,¹⁶³ 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 thinketh against the law neither may swear that law lawfully was made, standing his own conscience to the contrary, nor is bounden 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 twain¹⁶⁴ (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 translate¹⁶⁵ his own conscience from the one side to the other.

“For an example of some such manner things, I have, I trow,¹⁶⁶ before this time told you that, whether our Blessed Lady were conceived in original sin or not, was some time 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 feast¹⁶⁷ of her conception was then celebrated in the Church (at the leastwise in diverse 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 sounding 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 appeareth well by an epistle of his wherein he right sore¹⁶⁸ and with great reason argueth thereagainst and approveth 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 Saint 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 bounden 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 bounden 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, marry, if on the other side a man would in a matter take away¹⁶⁹—by himself upon his own mind alone, or with some few, or with never so many—against an evident truth appearing by the

¹⁶¹ permitted

¹⁶² because of

¹⁶³ learned; clever

¹⁶⁴ two

¹⁶⁵ convey; transfer

¹⁶⁶ trust

¹⁶⁷ of the Immaculate Conception

¹⁶⁸ *right sore*: very strongly

¹⁶⁹ from its actual condition

common faith of Christendom, this conscience is very damnable; yea, or if it be not even fully so plain and evident, yet if he see 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 are that affirm the thing that he thinketh) thinking and affirming the contrary, and that of such folk as he hath no reasonable cause wherefore he should not in that matter
 5 suppose that those which say they think against his mind affirm the thing that they say for none other cause but for¹⁷⁰ that they so think indeed: this is, of very truth, a very good occasion to move him, and yet not to compel him, to conform his mind and conscience unto theirs.

“But Margaret, for what causes I refuse the oath, the thing (as I have often told you) I will never show you, neither you nor nobody else, except the King’s Highness should like to command me. Which if his
 10 Grace did, I have ere¹⁷¹ 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 soever I refuse it, this am I sure: that it is well known that, of them that have sworn it, some of the best-learned, before the oath given them, said and plain affirmed the contrary of some such things as they have now sworn in the oath—and that upon their troth, and their learning then, and that not in haste nor suddenly, but often and after great diligence done to seek
 15 and find out the truth.”

“That might be, father,” quoth I.

“And yet since they might see more, I will not,” quoth he, “dispute, daughter Margaret, against that, nor misjudge any other man’s conscience, which lieth in their own heart, far out of my sight. But this will I say, that I never heard myself the cause of their change, by any new further thing founden of authority, than as far
 20 as I perceive they had looked on, and as I suppose, very well weighed before. Now, if the selfsame things that they saw before seem some otherwise unto them now than they did before, I am, for their sakes, 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 haply¹⁷² say that I might with reason the less regard their change, for any example of them to be taken
 25 to the change of my conscience because that the keeping of the Prince’s pleasure and the avoiding of his indignation, the fear of the losing of their worldly substance,¹⁷³ with regard unto the discomfort of their kindred and their friends, might hap 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
 30 them, the same things had been likely to make me do the same; for, in good faith, I knew few so fainthearted 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 mine only conscience¹⁷⁴ causeth me to refuse the oath, so will I trust in God that according to their conscience they have received it and sworn.

“But whereas you think, Marget, that they¹⁷⁵ be so many more than there are on the other side that think
 35 in this thing as I think, surely for your own comfort—that you shall not take thought, thinking that your father casteth himself away so like a fool that he would jeopard¹⁷⁶ the loss of his substance, and peradventure¹⁷⁷ 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 thee, Marget, that in some of my causes I nothing doubt at all but that,

¹⁷⁰ *but for*: except

¹⁷¹ before

¹⁷² perhaps

¹⁷³ wealth, property

¹⁷⁴ *mine only conscience*: my conscience alone

¹⁷⁵ those who have sworn

¹⁷⁶ jeopardize, risk

¹⁷⁷ perhaps

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,¹⁷⁸ ye wot¹⁷⁹ 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.

5 “Now this far-forth¹⁸⁰ 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 doubteth, whose books yet at this day remain here in men’s hands, there 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
10 me the grace that my soul may follow theirs. And yet I show you not all, Margaret, that I have for myself in the 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 of reproach in anything that the Parliament had passed; nor I meddled not with the conscience of any other man
15 that either thinketh or saith he thinketh contrary unto mine. But as concerning mine own self, for thy comfort shall I say, daughter, to thee, that mine own conscience in this matter (I damn none other man’s) is such as may well stand with mine own salvation; thereof am I, Meg, so sure, as that is, 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
20 this conscience to swear and put my soul in peril, since all the causes that I perceive move other men to the contrary seem not such unto me as in my conscience make any change.”

When he saw me sit with this¹⁸¹ very sad—as I promise you, sister, my heart was full heavy¹⁸² 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 how, mother Eve? Where is your mind now? Sit not musing with some serpent in your breast, upon
25 some new persuasion, to offer father Adam the apple yet once again?”

“In good faith, father,” quoth I, “I can no further go, but am (as I trow¹⁸³ Cressida saith in Chaucer)¹⁸⁴ comen to dulcarnon,¹⁸⁵ 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 if¹⁸⁶ I should look to persuade you with the reason that Master Harry Patenson¹⁸⁷ 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 even¹⁸⁸ angry with you and said, ‘Why? What aileth him that he will not swear? Wherefore¹⁸⁹ should he stick¹⁹⁰ to swear? I have sworn the oath myself.’ And so I can

¹⁷⁸ *that it were*: it could be

¹⁷⁹ know

¹⁸⁰ to a great extent

¹⁸¹ *me sit with this*: that this made me

¹⁸² sad, distressed

¹⁸³ believe

¹⁸⁴ *Cressida saith in Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde*, 3.930–31

¹⁸⁵ a point of perplexity

¹⁸⁶ *but if*: except, unless

¹⁸⁷ *Harry Patenson*: More’s household jester

¹⁸⁸ *waxed even*: became quite

¹⁸⁹ Why

¹⁹⁰ hesitate; scruple

in good faith go now no further neither, after so many wise men whom ye take for no example, but if I should say like Master Harry: Why should you refuse to swear, father? For I have sworn myself.”¹⁹¹

At this he laughed and said, “That word was like Eve too, for she offered Adam no worse fruit than she had eaten herself.”

5 “But yet father,” quoth I, “by my troth, I fear me very sore¹⁹² 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 very¹⁹³ friend to remember that the Parliament lasteth yet.”¹⁹⁴

10 “Margaret,” quoth my father, “I thank him right heartily. But as I showed you then again, I left not this gear¹⁹⁵ unthought on. And albeit¹⁹⁶ I know well that if they would make a law to do me any harm, that law could never be lawful, but that¹⁹⁷ 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 do 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 suffer¹⁹⁸ 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,¹⁹⁹ I forgot not in this matter the counsel of Christ in the Gospel²⁰⁰ that ere I should begin to build this castle for the safeguard of mine 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 weened²⁰¹ 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,²⁰² 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 hap²⁰³ me that my fear ran upon.”

20 “No, father,” quoth I, “it is not like²⁰⁴ to think upon a thing that may be, and to see a thing that shall be, as ye should (our Lord save you) if the chance should so fortune.²⁰⁵ And then should²⁰⁶ you peradventure²⁰⁷ think that you think not now and yet then peradventure it would be too late.”

25 “Too late, daughter” (quoth my father) “Margaret? I beseech our Lord that if ever I make such a change, it may be too late indeed. For well I wot 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 good²⁰⁸ 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

¹⁹¹ After this line in the 1557 *Workes*, a marginal note reads: “She toke the othe with this excepcion [:] as farre as would stande with the law of god” (1441).

¹⁹² greatly

¹⁹³ true

¹⁹⁴ *lasteth yet*: is still in session

¹⁹⁵ matter

¹⁹⁶ although

¹⁹⁷ *but that*: but [notwithstanding]

¹⁹⁸ allow; permit

¹⁹⁹ happen

²⁰⁰ Lk 14:28

²⁰¹ thought

²⁰² thinking out; examining

²⁰³ happen to

²⁰⁴ the same

²⁰⁵ *the chance ... fortune*: it does happen to turn out that way

²⁰⁶ might

²⁰⁷ perhaps

²⁰⁸ benefit

were²⁰⁹ that I wist²¹⁰ well now that I should²¹¹ faint and fall, and for fear swear hereafter, 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 wot well my lewdness²¹² hath been such that I know myself well worthy that God should let me slip, yet can I not but trust in his merciful goodness, that as his grace hath strengthened
 5 me hitherto, and made me content in my heart to lose goods, land, and life too, rather than to swear against my conscience, and hath also put in the King toward me that²¹³ good and gracious mind that as yet he hath taken from me nothing but my liberty—wherewith²¹⁴ (as help me God) his Grace hath 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 prisonment even the very chief— I cannot, I say, therefore mistrust the
 10 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 mine other sins I shall suffer in such a case in sight²¹⁵ 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, over²¹⁶ that,
 15 for increase of some reward in heaven.

“Mistrust him, Meg, will I not; though I feel me faint, yea, and though I should feel my fear even at point to overthrow me too, yet shall I remember how Saint 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.²¹⁷ 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 suffer²¹⁸ me to play St. Peter
 20 further, and to fall full²¹⁹ 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,²²⁰ and never win thereby—yet after shall I trust that his goodness will cast upon me his tender piteous eye,²²¹ 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 harm here of mine own fault.

“And finally, Marget, this wot I well, that without my fault²²² he will not let me be lost. I shall therefore
 25 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 commend²²³ his mercy. And therefore, mine own good daughter, never trouble thy mind for anything that ever shall hap me in this world. Nothing can come but that that²²⁴ God will. And I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, seem it never so bad in sight, it shall indeed be the best. And with this, my
 30 good child, I pray you heartily, be you and all your sisters and my sons, too, comfortable²²⁵ and serviceable to

²⁰⁹ *so were*: it was the case

²¹⁰ knew

²¹¹ would

²¹² sinfulness

²¹³ such a

²¹⁴ by doing so

²¹⁵ *in sight*: apparently

²¹⁶ in addition to

²¹⁷ *St. Peter ... help*: Mt 14:30

²¹⁸ permit

²¹⁹ *fall full*: Mt 26:69–75

²²⁰ happen

²²¹ *cast ... eye*: Lk 22:61

²²² failing, sin

²²³ praise

²²⁴ *but that that*: except that which

²²⁵ encouraging, supporting

your good mother my wife. And of your good husbands' minds I have no manner²²⁶ doubt. Commend me to them all, and to my good daughter Alington, and to all my other friends, sisters, nieces, nephews, and allies,²²⁷ 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
 5 anything hap 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 forever, and never have trouble after.”

ⁱ The original text can be found in *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Rogers (Princeton University Press, 1947), #205 and 206, pp. 511-32.

ⁱⁱ *The Workes of Sir Thomas More*, p. 1434 (1557 edition).

²²⁶ kind of

²²⁷ in-laws