

MORE'S HISTORY OF THE
PASSION

It is now over fifty years since my old teacher of Elocution, Father Paul Stapleton, O.P., taught me on the authority of Father Dominic Aylward, O.P., that usually the most important page of a book is the title page. For this reason let me set out the title of a book that was sent of God into my hands in the Lent of 1941:

ST. THOMAS MORE'S HISTORY OF THE
PASSION

Translated from the Latin by his grand-daughter
MISTRESS MARY BASSETT

Edited in modern spelling with an introduction by
RIGHT REVEREND MGR. P. L. HALLETT

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It may be said at once that every name in this title-page deserves its place. The publishers to the Holy See in undertaking the cost of this book have very effectively justified their title by publishing this last work of one who laid down his life solely for the Holy See.

The Editor with his honorary title given by the Holy Father has to-day almost an unique right to see his name on the same page as the two martyrs, St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, whose cause he has so untiringly championed.

Mistress Mary Bassett has a name that should be better known than it is among the champions of women's scholarship, and should be even better known among the champions of Catholic culture. The few facts we know of her life and home schooling are a door opened into a Catholic culture which is now largely lost.

* The price of the book is 6s.

The title page tells us that she was the grand-daughter of St. Thomas More. The Editor's Introduction tells us that she was the daughter of the Saint's accomplished and favourite daughter, Margaret (Roper), perhaps the most famous 'daughter' in English History.

The daughter of William Roper and his wife, even if she had not been the grand-daughter of More, would have had the best chance of womanly culture to be had in Europe. Her mother, the 'Meg' of More's learned and loving family, had a reputation for literary and philosophical work amongst European scholars. Her father has given us a 'Life of More' of which our most accomplished expert in English literature has written: 'Roper's life of More gives us in some seventy pages what is probably the most charming little biography in the English language.'

In the household of More his daughter Margaret had made Latinists like Erasmus admire her Latin. But in the household of Margaret her daughter Mary was to add Greek to the fluent and classical Latin of her mother. A fruit of her knowledge of the two great classical tongues is still to be seen in the British Museum. There is her manuscript now shorn of its original purple velvet binding.² It contains two translations from the (Greek) 'Ecclesiastical History' of Eusebius. The first is a translation of the first Book into Latin. The second is a translation of the first five books into English.

It is arguable that this work had no precedent in English letters as a woman's translation from the Greek. Yet she was a wife, and a young wife at that, when she wrote it. Her place in the history of English Letters may be judged by what Nicholas Harpsfield wrote of her in his *Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*. 'This Mistress Bassett is very well experted in the latine and greek tongues. She hath very handsomely and learnedly translated out of the greeke into the englishe all the ecclesiastical story of Eusebius, with Socrates, Theodoretus, Sozomenus, and Evagrius; albeit of modestie she suppresseth it and keepeth it from the print.'

¹ R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More*, p. 24.

² Harleian MSS., 1860.

'She hath also very aptly and fitly translated into the same tongue a certain booke that Sir Thomas, her grandfather, made upon the Passion; and so elegantly penned that a man might think it were originally written in the saide englishe tongue.'³

If Mary Bassett's place in English letters may be gauged by the judgement of Nicholas Harpsfield, the competence of the judge may be gauged by the judgement passed on him by an authority on the men and women of English letters. 'Nicholas Harpsfield,' says Professor Chambers, '... this eminent Englishman is the writer of a book which has the claim to be the first scholarly biography in English.'⁴ And he adds that 'the subject of that biography was in the judgement of Dean Swift a person of the *greatest virtue this kingdom ever produced.*'

Mistress Mary Bassett in her translations was as alert to the call of the time as was her grandfather. In offering to the Lady Mary an English version of the first five books on Ecclesiastical History written by Eusebius she was asking her future Queen to see in the new Christianity only the old heresies of a thousand years ago. In translating, primarily for herself, but ultimately for her fellow-English, More's History of the Passion, she was turning the eyes of the persecuted, as More's were turned, to Him Who, with fear and anguish controlled, mounted on the Cross.

In 1557, when, with a dedication to Queen Mary, William Rastell brought out his magnificent edition of all More's English works, he had persuaded Mistress Mary Bassett to allow the publication of the English translation of More's *History of the Passion*.

Rastell's words of introduction to the work are such an abstract and brief summary of England in those days that our readers must have them in full.

Lo, here, good reader, I put into your hands another work of Sir Thomas More's, compiled in Latin by him in the Tower,

³ *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*. By Nicholas Harpsfield; edited by E. V. Hitchcock; Introduction by R. W. Chambers, 1932, p. 83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xliv.

in the year of Our Lord 1534 and lately Englished by Mistress Mary Bassett (a near kinswoman of his own) . . .

A work of truth, full of good and godly lessons which he began being then prisoner and could not achieve and finish the same as he that, ere he could go through therewith (even when he came to the exposition of these words, *Et iniecerunt manus in Jesum*) was bereaved and put from his books, pen, and paper, and kept more strictly than before; and soon after was put to death itself.

This work in Latin hath been by sundry great clerks read and weighed and very well liked; and is again so set out in our tongue, and goeth so near Sir Thomas More's own English phrase, that the gentlewoman (who for her pastime translated it) is no nearer to him in kindred virtue and literature than in the English tongue. So that it might seem to have been by his own pen indited first, and not at all translated. Such a gift hath she to follow her own grandfather's vein in writing.

Somewhat I had to do ere I could come by this work for the gentlewoman which translated it seems nothing willing to have it go abroad; for that (she said) it was first turned into English for her own pastime and exercise; and so reputeth it far too simple to come into many hands.

And since there were that would fain have had it set forth in print alone (because the matter is so good and eke so well handled that it were to be wished that it might be read of all folk) which more would, but set out alone than with so many other of his works. And haply so shall it be hereafter at more leisure.

But in the meantime, take it and read it thus with the rest; and give God thanks; and pray for her that took the pains in this wise to translate it.⁵

For the present writer all the tragedy of besieged Christian culture is in these plain words of a sixteenth century Editor to his 'Good reader.'

* * * * *

Of supreme interest is the part played in this tragedy by the man who almost with a jest, and almost alone, withstood the first fierce attacks of the besiegers. That this lonely, lovable figure was saint as well as genius still gives

⁵ Pp. 3, 4.

him a unique place in the tragedy that, even at this hour, is but working itself out to some unforeseeable climax.

Happily for those of another century than More's, we, who do not know him in the flesh, know him still in his works. Indeed, so deftly did he hide himself behind his 'veil of flesh' that we now know him as well as ever he may be known in these works which perhaps undesignedly unlocked his soul. Of these three works, one, *Utopia*, was written if not at the beginning of his life, at least at the beginning of his political life under the smile of a young King of some twenty-five years. The other works are *Dialogue of Comfort in Tribulation* and our *History of the Passion*. Both are contrasted with *Utopia* and with each other. Both were written in the Tower whilst More was awaiting the fulfilment of his own witty prophecy to Roper about the King's friendship with him: 'Howbeit, son Roper, I may tell thee if my head would win him (Henry VIII) a castle in France, it should not fail to go.

Few even of the great masters of literature have left works so contrasted as are *Utopia* and the *Dialogue*. *Utopia* is the work of a young man who sees visions of what might be; the *Dialogue* is the work of an old man who dreams dreams composed of what has been. The man who wrote *Utopia* was neither fanatic nor fool. He was the most serious, or the wisest head in Europe. But he knew that to the Chadband hypocrisy of his time truth and justice could only enter with cap and bells. More's laughter was a desperately serious effort to turn even Renaissance Humanists to the realities of human life. Many of his readers mistake the seriousness of his *Utopia* because of its satire and make-believe; because they have not realised that though More could play a part he could not act a lie. In almost every line *Utopia* is contrasted with the *Dialogue of Comfort in Tribulation*. For the present writer the *Dialogue* has always seemed one of the hundred—if not the fifty—best books of the world. There is wit enough, and indeed mirth enough, in *Utopia* to set up a dozen candidates for literary or philosophical fame. Yet the *Dialogue*, written by an old man in prison, has almost wit enough and merriment enough in one chapter to make *Utopia* a world's masterpiece. No one who knew no more

of the writer of the *Dialogue* than the *Dialogue* itself could see, through its scholarly, quiet and yet sometimes most infectious humour, an old man sitting in a bare, stone-floored cell filled with wintry river fog and penning scenes that have no rival but the masterpieces of Shakespeare.

It is but twenty years since in *Utopia* he saw his young vision. Now years and suffering have made him an old man setting down in matchless literature the dreams he has dreamed. Yet interwoven with the dreams are two visions—the first, the cruel vision of death by a king's wrath; the other, a beatific vision of God's welcome as death's reward.

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A key to the contrast between the *Dialogue of Comfort* and the *History of the Passion* is to be found at the end of one of the last letters, written with a charred stick!, to his daughter Margaret. More has been warned that there may be further legislation to deal with him. He trusts that God will not allow the King's noble heart and courage to resort to such extreme unlawful and uncharitable dealings. 'But,' he concludes, 'take no thought for me, whatsoever you shall hap to hear, but *be merry in God.*'

In his last great message to his beloved England and his fellow Christians he is boldly foretelling the temptations and persecutions they may have to endure. Yet so great is his love for them, and his love to see them follow their Master, that, like his Master, he seems to smile as he says: 'Let not your heart be troubled.' The quality that earned for his beloved country the name of 'Merry England'—that made More a supreme possessor of that quality—is to be found in every line of the *Dialogue*; and in few or no lines of the *History of the Passion*. Yet the mirth of the *Dialogue* is not the hypocrite's whited sepulchre, but the hero-leader's duty of conquered fear.

The *Dialogue* is, then, a book of mirth, though written in prison on the eve of death. But it is a book of mirth because it is a dialogue between a man appointed to death and his fellow men who may find themselves soon in a like prison with a like death. But there issued from

the same prison and from the same great mind and greater heart another Dialogue between the condemned prisoner and his crucified God. In that stark unveiling not of the true but of the inner Thomas More there is not a line of merriment from first to last. It reveals a More that could only be dimly suspected from anything he had written in the many books he had already given to his fellow men. It is not just a fiery soliloquy or dialogue of the soul with God. In the writer's intent it is a dialogue between a coward, sinful man named Thomas More and his crucified Master and Redeemer as that Redeemer passes singing from the Upper Room to the Hill of Golgotha.

It is not another More we discover in his last book. It is the inner More who called himself magnificently 'God's Giglot': who found the austerities of Tower-imprisonment so slender that he had to supplement them by wearing a hair shirt; and whose considered judgement on his prison life was expressed to his daughter in these bewildering words: 'I believe, Meg, that they who have put me here ween they have done me a high displeasure. But I assure you . . . *Methinketh God maketh me a wanton, and setteth me on his lap and dandleth me.*' A mind so one with the mind of Christ could see the steps to the headman's block only as a 'ladder stretched between Heaven and Charing Cross.'

The ascetic doctrine of the book is a saint's doctrine. Yet it must never be overlooked that it is a layman's doctrine. Indeed we might almost say a somewhat scrupulous layman's doctrine. Yet in an age when the consciences of the most responsible civil and ecclesiastical rulers seemed unedged and blunt it is with gratitude to God we recognise a conscience that was a little too tremblingly alive.

But it is a slightly over-sensitive mind that has penned the following:

If a man would even of purpose endeavour to occupy his thoughts upon as many and as manifold matters as by any possibility he could devise; hardly could he, I trow, in so little a while think upon so many things, and so far distant asunder as our idle unoccupied mind wandereth about while our tongue pattereth apace upon our matins and evensong and other ac-

customed prayers. Negligent or slothful sluggishness can I not call it, but rather frantic madness and insensible deadly dullness which causeth a great many of us when we go to make our prayer unto Almighty God not with reverence attentively to pray to Him, but like careless and sleepy wretches thoughtlessly to talk with Him. Wherefore I much fear me lest we rather sorely provoke His wrath and indignation, than purchase at His Hand any favour of mercy towards us (pp. 24, 25).

It may be questioned whether More, the father, ever acted towards his children as he here supposes his Heavenly Father would act towards him. His children told of him that they would sometimes be deliberately naughty in order to have the childish delight of being scolded by him. But in these above words of his about distractions in prayer we are not listening to that most lovable character, More the father, but to that almost more lovable character, More the somewhat scrupulous self-accusing sinner.

Here and there in his Dialogue with his Redeemer this self-accusing sinner cannot withhold his sorrow at the main cause of sin's increase. When commenting on the words 'He (Jesus) came and found them sleeping,' he writes:

All that Christ did He did upon good cause. For albeit His coming unto His Apostles at that point did not so thoroughly awake them but that either they were still so heavy and drowsy and so amazed that scantily they could hold up their heads and look on Him; or else, which is yet something worse, by His sharp words had unto them being fully awaked, nevertheless as soon as His back was turned fell straight asleep again; yet did He herein both declare His earnest care towards His disciples, and by His own example give a plain lesson beside that from henceforth should the head of the Church for no sorrow fear or weariness suffer their care and diligence towards their flock in any wise to slack and decay, but evermore so use themselves as it might plainly appear that they were more careful for the safeguard of their flock than for their own selves (p. 41).

The poignancy of these words of a layman is hardly lessened by the presence of one Bishop (Fisher) in the same prison and for the same charge as More. Words of almost tragic poignancy were still to come:

But now there cometh to my remembrance that Christ is then delivered into the hands of sinners whensoever His blessed Body in the Holy Sacrament is consecrated and handled of beastly, vicious and most abominable priests. As often as we see any such case fall (and fall doth it, alas, too often a great deal) let us reckon that Christ Himself then speaketh these words unto us afresh : Why sleep you? Watch arise and pray that you enter not into temptation. For the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. For doubtless by the lewd examples of naughty priests doth vice and evil living lightly increase and creep in among the people (pp. 76, 77).

If the writer of these words was readying his soul to die for the supremacy of the Chief Priest of the Visible Church it was not through ignorant enthusiasm for the visible priesthood.

Two last extracts may show at once the subtle delicacy of More's mind and the 'elegant and eloquent' English of his translator. On the words, 'Then said He thus to Peter, Sleepest thou, Simon,' he writes:

What, Simon? here playest thou not the part of Cephas, for why shouldst thou any more be called Cephas, that is to wit, a stone; which name I gave thee heretofore to have thee steadfast and strong, when thou showest thyself so feeble and faint now sleep cometh upon thee that thou canst not abide to watch so much as one hour with Me?

What, Simon, I say art thou now fallen asleep! And well worthy art thou, perdy, to be called by thy first name Simon, for since thou art so heavy asleep how shouldst thou not be named Simon, that is to say a beaver? Or seeing that I warned thee to watch with Me, how canst thou be called obedient? Which, as soon as My back was turned, like a slothful sluggard straightways wert fallen asleep? . . .

The writer of these words, we should never forget, was penning them with a charred stick in a lonely London prison where he was preparing to die for the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome. But his vision was beyond the Thames and the Tiber, and was fixed upon an olive grove where another—though God!—was preparing to lay down His life for man.

More, the father beloved of his children and children's children, unveils his heart in speaking of His Master's

words to Judas; 'O Judas, dost thou betray the Son of Man with a kiss?'

Among all sorts of mischief can there lightly be none more odious to God than when we abuse things that be of their own nature good, and turn them contrariwise to serve us in our lewdness.

And for this consideration doth God much mislike lying, for that the words used were by Him ordained truly to express our minds by, we falsely pervert to a quite contrary use.

In which sort and manner doth he grievously displease God, also, that misturneth those laws that were devised to defend men from wrong, to be instruments to wrong men by.⁶

Christ therefore checked and controlled Judas for the detestable kind of offence where He said: O, Judas dost thou betray the Son of Man with a kiss? . . .

Was it not enough for thee, I say, to betray this Son of Man, but thou must betray Him with a kiss, too, and so make that serve thee to work thy treason by, which was first invented to be an assured token of dear love and charity?

I do not so much blame this company here which by forcible means openly set upon Me, as I do thee, O Judas, which with a traitorous kiss dost unto these rude ruffians thus unkindly betray Me (pp. 88, 89).

Two further extracts will unveil for the reader the tragedy of these words of a martyr's comment on the kiss that betrayed Christ.

In his life of Sir Thomas More, William Roper, husband of Margaret More, writes:

When Sir Thomas came from Westminster⁷ to the Tower, his daughter, my wife, desirous to see her father . . . gave attendance about the Tower wharf, where she knew he would pass by before he could enter the Tower.

There tarrying his coming as soon as she saw him after his blessing upon her knees reverently received she hastening towards him without consideration or care of herself, pressing amongst the midst of the throng and company of the guard, that with halberds and bills went round about him hastily ran to

⁶ For More, human law was the defence of the weak against the strong. For Henry VIII, the Totalitarian, human law (*i.e.* the King's will) was a defence of the strong against the weak.

⁷ He was tried in Westminster Hall.

him and there openly in sight of them all, embraced him and took him about the neck and kissed him. Who, well liking her most natural and dear daughterly affection towards him gave her his fatherly blessing and many godly words of comfort besides.

From whom after she was departed she was not satisfied with the former sight of her dear father, and like one that had forgotten herself, being all ravished with the love of her dear father, having respect neither to the press of people and multitude that were there about him ran to him as before, took him about the neck and divers times kissed him most lovingly; and at last with a full and heavy heart was fain to depart from him . . .^a

Three days after, on July 5th, the eve of his martyrdom, this loving daughter received a parcel and a letter which must have made her in grief kinswoman to her Mater Dolorosa. In the parcel was her father's hair-shirt which he had used to supplement the austerities of his prison! In the letter were the following words which made their writer blood-kinsman of his Redeemer:

God bless you, good daughter, and your good husband and all yours and all my children, and all my god-children and all our friends . . . I never liked your manner towards me better than when you kissed me last; for I love when daughterly love and dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy. Farewell my dear child and pray for me and I shall for you and all your friends that we may merrily meet in heaven.

Some of those who read these words may see a disciple of Christ following his Master along a dark way of ultimate mental sorrow. Perhaps, too, for them as for the sinner who has written what they have read, the tragedy may be nailed to their mind by three words:

Seeing His Mother.
I thirst.
It is finished.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

^a *Life of Sir Thomas More.* By William Roper. The King's Classics, pp. 96-97.