

The Dinner Party

Freedom is a precious thing. To have it taken away is a terrible tragedy. Thomas Cranmer thought he was a free man that September day in 1553. The journey from Lambeth Palace to the Palace of Westminster in London, England, would only take about fifteen minutes by foot. As the weather was fair, he thought he might leave the horse in the stable and walk. Thomas had been summoned to appear before the judges of the Star Chamber. It was a court in England, set up to hear cases of people who held influential positions in society, without the judges being intimidated by the defendants high status in life.

His wife, Margarete, had a look of fear in her eyes. ‘Do not worry, my dear,’ said Thomas softly, taking her hands. ‘I will be ok.’ He brought her hands to his lips and kissed them. ‘The good Lord is with me,’ he said. ‘What can they do to me? As our Lord Christ Jesus said in Matthew’s Gospel, “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”’ He smiled.

Since Mary had ascended to the throne of England. Thomas knew that he might be a target for the Queen of England's anger.

Thomas had been the Archbishop of Canterbury in England for twenty years. He was a clever man – a gentle and kind man. Thomas loved God. He loved the Bible. He loved people and he loved prayer. Thomas knew from his study of the Scriptures, that those who follow Christ will suffer for His name. He was a man of God, an ambassador of Christ the King. He prayed that the Lord would grant him the strength and courage to continue the fight against sin, the world, and the devil, even if that fight took away his freedom, or his life.

Archbishop Cranmer arrived at the Palace of Westminster and was led swiftly to the Star Chamber. The doors opened and Thomas was ushered in. He was directed to stand before the judges.

‘My Lord Archbishop,’ said the leading judge. ‘We are grateful that you have come. We are concerned that you have written reproachful comments regarding the Latin Mass. And the queen is most perplexed. What say you?’

‘It was never my intention to have my statement copied and distributed across London in the way it was. I am sorry that it passed from my hands into the hands of another bishop. He then had numerous copies made. Whereas I had planned to pin it to the door of St Paul's, and to other church doors around the city, with my own episcopal seal on it.’

‘Your intention matters not. However, your words do. I am instructed to charge you with treason against the Crown. You will be incarcerated in the Tower of London immediately. Guards!’

The archbishop was shocked and could hardly get a word out in his defence. A group of guards armed with long pikes rushed to his side and roughly restrained him. Then Thomas was frogmarched out of the Chamber and pushed into an armoured carriage that was waiting outside. The three-mile journey to the Tower of London was very uncomfortable over bumpy roads. Thomas would have to get used to being uncomfortable. The cells in the Tower were dark and dank. Not very comfortable at all. Once there, the guards grabbed Thomas by the arms and pulled him out of the carriage. They bundled him along the pathways to his cell. Once inside, they removed his restraints.

‘Make yourself at home,’ said the jailer dryly, as he closed the cell door. ‘You’ll be here a while.’

Thomas walked to the wall that was farthest from the cell door and sat down on the cold stone floor. He closed his eyes and cast his mind back to the time when it all started – when his life as a Cambridge don changed forever. Little did Thomas know that when he finished the evening meal at the Cressy home in Waltham, Essex, he would begin the journey to the highest position in the Church of England. He didn’t desire to be Archbishop of Canterbury. He was a lowly professor of divinity at Jesus College in Cambridge.

And he liked it that way. He loved his college and his students. He thought that he would remain there long into his dotage. He had no aspirations to join the ranks of elite gentry in the king's court. And he wasn't interested in making a name for himself in the Anglican Church.

The plague drove him to the safe sanctuary of the Cressy home on 2nd August 1529. Like his college colleagues back in Cambridge, Thomas wanted to put as much distance between him and the plague as quickly as possible. He arrived with the two Cressy boys at their home. The boys were receiving tuition from Thomas at his Cambridge university, and he wanted to bring them home to their father in Waltham.

The travellers received a hearty welcome from Mr and Mrs Cressy. 'Dr Cranmer, it is so good to see you!' declared Mr Cressy. The boys were being squeezed tightly by their mother. 'Welcome to our home.'

'You are most kind, Mr Cressy,' replied Thomas. 'Things are a little dire in the city with the return of the plague. I am very grateful to you and Mrs Cressy for your hospitality.'

'Not at all,' said Mr Cressy. 'Let's get you to your room. Dinner will be served shortly, Dr Cranmer.'

After settling into his quarters, Thomas made his way to the dining room. He could hear familiar voices resonating from the other side of the door. Thomas turned the handle and walked into the room. The

pleasant aroma of roast chicken and cooked vegetables filled his nostrils as he entered.

Mr and Mrs Cressy were sitting at the table with the two boys. Then he noticed his friends seated beside them. Dr Edward Fox and Dr Stephen Gardiner sat opposite each other at the dining room table.

‘Well, if it isn’t my old friends, Dr Fox and Dr Gardiner!’ exclaimed Thomas jovially. The men stood and shook Thomas’s hand vigorously.

‘Dr Cranmer, what a pleasant surprise,’ said Edward Fox.

‘What brings you here?’ asked Stephen Gardiner, as the three men sat down at the table. All three were educated in Cambridge, although at different universities. Stephen Gardiner and Edward Fox were in the service of King Henry VIII. And both men were at their wits end concerning the king’s ‘Great Matter’ – his divorce from his wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon.

‘You will have heard that the plague is back,’ Thomas remarked. ‘This time it is in Cambridge. Therefore, I am taking some time away from my college until it is safe to return.’

‘Very wise,’ said Stephen.

The conversation at the table was easy and at times jovial. When the meal was over, the Cressy family bade them all a goodnight and went off to bed. Once the door of the dining room closed behind them, the conversation between the three men continued with a more serious tone.

'I wasn't expecting to see you both here,' said Thomas.

'Well, after the fiasco at Blackfriars Abbey, the king has decided to go on a little tour of his realm to calm down,' said Stephen. 'I do not think he will stray too far from London. But he is restless and frustrated that it did not go his way at the hearing.'

'We have been farmed out to local gentry for food and board, while the king lodges at Waltham Abbey,' said Edward.

'Can you tell me what happened at Blackfriars Abbey?' Thomas asked.

Edward shifted in his seat and moved in closer to his colleagues. 'The pope appointed Cardinal Campeggio to oversee the king's appeal for an annulment of his marriage, at Blackfriars Abbey a couple of weeks ago. The king was putting pressure on the cardinal for a quick decision regarding his divorce,' said Edward.

'However,' interrupted Stephen, 'it turns out that Campeggio had secret orders from Rome to slow things down. Instead of deciding in the king's favour, and annulling the king's marriage to the queen, he stalled the proceedings by delaying the matter until October!'

'The king is livid,' said Edward, 'and so was Charles Brandon, the Duke of Suffolk. He thumped the table with his fist and yelled, "There never was a cardinal that did good for England!"'

'Yes, well, Suffolk and the king are good friends,' said Stephen.

‘Catherine has been demanding that the pope hears the case in Rome. She knows that he will never allow the marriage to be dissolved,’ said Edward.

‘Not to mention that Pope Clement is afraid of the Emperor, Charles,’ added Stephen. ‘It is common knowledge that the emperor is the nephew of Queen Catherine. The last thing the pope wants is to be on the wrong side of Charles’s displeasure.’

‘You can’t blame him for that,’ said Edward. ‘Being the King of Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor makes Charles a very powerful man.’

‘Yes, it does,’ said Stephen seriously.

‘The king is used to getting what he wants,’ retorted Thomas. ‘Did Cardinal Campeggio get out of Blackfriars with his head still attached to his shoulders?’ he asked jokily. ‘You remember what happened to the Duke of Buckinghamshire?’

‘Poor Edward Stafford,’ said Edward. ‘He was a close companion of the king too. I think it took the axeman three attempts. Just awful.’

‘I remember that day,’ said Stephen, ‘and I remember the sound, like chopping wood. Well, the king is not happy that the pope continues to refuse him.’

Thomas thought for a moment. The break in the conversation allowed the men to fill their goblets with some more wine. Dr Fox broke the silence.

‘Thomas, what do you think about the king’s Great Cause?’ he inquired. ‘The king has placed me in charge

of the matter. And to be frank, it's been going on for two years now. The king grows ever more restless with Pope Clement. We have tried everything to get the pope to pronounce a verdict on the king's divorce, but we are stonewalled at every turn.'

'I haven't thought about it too much,' Thomas began, 'but I believe that the king is going about this in the wrong way.'

'Don't let him hear you say that!' exclaimed Stephen.

'I like my head just where it is, so I promise you I won't,' said Thomas, smiling wryly. 'In my opinion, going to the church courts in Rome will simply prolong the matter,' said Thomas. 'You will waste a lot of time and energy trying to get the decision you want. The question of whether a man should marry his brother's wife must be decided by the Word of God. The Scriptures will show the truth about it. And in my view, there are none better to pronounce a verdict on the king's divorce than the theologians of the universities of England and Europe.'

Edward looked at Stephen and grinned. Then he turned to Thomas and exclaimed, 'Dr Cranmer, I do declare that you are a sage! May we let the king know of your counsel, perhaps he will go for it?' asked Edward.

'I doubt I have said anything that has not been thought of before,' said Thomas, 'but if you feel it will help, by all means tell the king.'

The two men were able to hide from Thomas just how desperate they were for a solution to the king's

problem. They were willing to entertain any suggestion that had a modicum of sense about it. They would pitch this idea to King Henry and make sure he knew it came from Dr Cranmer. If the king hated it, then he would rent his anger on Thomas. But if he liked it, Fox and Gardiner will have done well in bringing such a good suggestion to the ear of the king.

The next day, Edward and Stephen left for the king's procession, leaving Thomas at Waltham. It wasn't until the day after that, that they had an audience with King Henry. Gardiner and Fox told the king enthusiastically of Thomas Cranmer's suggestion to seek counsel from the king's theologians in England. All the while, they watched the monarch's reaction. Would he like the idea, or loathe it? It was hard to tell with the king. He usually got what he wanted. But when he did not get his own way, he could become irascible and unpredictable.

When the two scholars had finished relaying the gist of the dinner conversation to their sovereign, the king appeared elated with their news. 'Indeed,' he said to them, 'I will speak with Dr Cranmer immediately. I see that that man has the sow by the right ear,' meaning that as far as the king was concerned, Thomas understood his situation perfectly. Thomas didn't really want to get involved with the matter of the king's divorce. There were other men just as capable as he, working tirelessly for a solution. But no one in England refused their king, especially a lowly professor of divinity from a Cambridge university.

Thomas met King Henry in the autumn of 1529 at Greenwich Palace, an opulent bastion built on the bank of the River Thames that flows through London. The king gave him the responsibility of writing down his ideas. His work would be used to argue on behalf of the king in his bid to rid himself of his wife, Catherine of Aragon. The king arranged for Dr Cranmer to stay with Thomas Boleyn, the Earl of Wiltshire, in the palatial surroundings of Durham House. Thomas would be comfortable there. And he would get plenty of peace and quiet to get on with the work in hand.