The Life & Legacy of Sir Thomas More

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(1478-1510)

"I LOOKED to find a preacher, I find a man."

No sooner do we become the least intimate with one of the beatified whom the Church appoints for our veneration than we reach a similar conclusion. "I looked to find a saint, one of those vague and fabulous beings, that is, whose every word is an oracle and their every act a marvel. I find a man."

We need not point out to the readers that there is nothing more consoling or more edifying than such a discovery. We never imagined that our patron and model was so accessible, and great is our delight at finding that his nearness to ourselves is no obstacle to his being also very near to God. Sometimes, however, our surprise is almost too great. There is a danger that our first vivid glimpse of the holy man or woman in the simple reality of their lives, and stripped of the veneer of convention under which most hagiographers used at one time to stifle the originality of their subjects, may disconcert our devotional habit. In all loyalty I must admit that Thomas More is of that number. His life, indeed, is spotless, and his biographer can relate it without paraphrase or reticence; but in such a life as his, it is possible, if I may so express it, that a period of sin would be less of a stumbling-block than a certain way of speaking

and acting which agrees but ill with current ideas of saintliness. We know very well that saintliness is never pompous and willingly leaves grand airs to less genuine virtue. The most austere of the saints could smile. There is no rule of perfection to forbid their seeing the amusing side of things, and their souls, less heavily weighted than our own, often attract by a witty mixture of kindliness and a touch of malice. And yet the lightest of their jests finds a natural setting in a chapel or a cloister, and every flower they gather takes in their hands the scent of incense. This could not be said of Thomas More. At first sight he is entirely profane. If to be worldly is to look upon this world as a curious spectacle rather than to see life as the great stake on which eternity depends, then he was worldly. Not that he espoused folly; but his method of despising it was rather that of the dilettante than the Christian. Or rather, it would be truer to say that he was interested and amused by everything. He will close the City oj God to open the Dialogues of Lucian. He lays by Colet's sermons, to engage in a contest of wit with his friends. " All the things of this world amuse him, even the most serious. With men of learning he is ravished by their wisdom; with fools, he is delighted at their folly. . . . You would take him for a new Democritus, or a Pythagorean walking, with unprejudiced mind, about the market-place to contemplate the tumult of buyers and sellers." So says Erasmus, who knew him better than any one. But that name, the name of Erasmus, enables us to shorten our comments. At first sight, no doubt, if only at first sight, their contemporaries saw no difference between Erasmus and More. They were taken for twins, and

the idea delighted them both. I even imagine that in conversation More had more spirit and more wit than Erasmus. "From childhood," writes Erasmus, "he had such a love for witty jests that he seemed to have been sent into the world for the sole purpose of making them; though he never descends to buffoonery, neither gravity nor dignity seem made for him. He is amiable -and always good-tempered, and puts every one who meets him in a happy frame of mind." Another intimate friend, Richard Pace, says the same thing less gracefully. "He speaks with the same facility in Latin as in his own language. His sense of fun is joined with perfect refinement—you may call humour his father and wit his mother. When the matter requires it, he can imitate a good cook and serve up the meat in sharp sauce. . . . From every philosophic sect he culled the best they had to offer; but at last, as men will, he inscribed himself a member of a school, the school of Democritus, the philosopher, as I understand, who laughed at all human affairs. But he contrived to go further than his master, *nam, ut ille humana omnia ridenda censuit, ita hic deridenda*."

That was how his intimate friends spoke of him, and no doubt this rough sketch was strictly accurate. That, beyond question, was the impression More left on the London of his time and the Court of Henry VIII. Such a sketch as that, of a lively, airy, witty, irresponsible person, would certainly never have inspired Flandrin with the wish to add a new character to the lifeless and majestic procession which even now still embodies the common idea of a saint.

That view of him is a perfectly true one, even truer than I can express. But there was another and still truer Thomas

More. The perpetual jester is the sweetest-natured of men; the worldling has death constantly in his thoughts; the Democritus has the soul of a Carthusian. His intimate friend Erasmus knew him well, and his memorable letter to Ulrich von Hutten, which gives the final portrait of Thomas More, comes to a close in the long perspective of these two lines: *cum aniicis sic fabulatur de vita futuri saeculi, ut agnoscar ilium ex animo loqui, neque sine optima spe*. With his friends he so speaks of the life of the world to come that you know him to be speaking from his heart and not without the best of hope.

Before plunging into the depths of that inner life of his, let us take a glance at him, not in his oratory, but in the very midst of one of his profane conversations, and we shall soon understand how necessary it is, in the face of so complex a physiognomy, to distrust all hasty conclusions and misleading evidence.

Take his portrait by Holbein. Standing for the first time before this wonderful likeness, one cannot fail to be struck by an impression of half-sadness. More intimate acquaintance soon shows that the word "sadness" does not quite hit the note. Melancholy, in the romantic sense of the word, would be falser still. His mind is too healthy, his sense of humour too quick, and his Christian faith too serene. But neither good sense nor internal peace are, properly speaking, joy. There is plenty of kindness and some shrewdness, but no lively gaiety in his veiled and distant look, his small, grey, short-sighted eyes, which, according to a contemporary, "were not great, nor yet glittering, yet much pleasing." He lacked a kind of expansion and taste for

life. He was rarely in high spirits. No doubt he was the pleasantest of companions; the gravest unbent when he was by. Some unexpected jest was always hovering on the delicate lips whose smile has been subtly fixed by Holbein; but he scarcely ever laughed himself. Affectionate and faithful, he was slow to give his friendship, and then never gave it without reserve. Possibly his friends loved him more than he loved them, and I am tempted to wonder whether his humour did not conceal an invincible reserve or some timidity of sentiment. The strange and touching story of his two marriages will be found to confirm the first conclusion.

There is nothing surprising in it, when we call to mind the dry and incomplete education More received, one which would have stifled for ever a less happy disposition. Later in life he delighted to repeat his father's unpolished jests, but of his mother he remembered nothing. From her, no doubt, he inherited the charm, the indefinable attractiveness celebrated by his contemporaries (at any rate, if we may trust the portrait by Holbein, there can have been nothing whatever of the judge in the delicacy and grace that radiated from him so discreetly); but it seems that there was no attempt to find the orphan any feminine tenderness in place of the care of his dead mother. The habitual companions of his boyhood were men of mature age, priests and scholars; and, indeed, the marvel is that Thomas More, whose childhood was too brief and who became serious all too soon, should ever have been able to hold out against such an atmosphere, and preserve throughout his life, if not the "long hopes," at any rate the spirits, the freshness and the generosity of youth.

II

Almost from his cradle More was entered of a good school of wit. As we shall see, his father, the judge, had but a poor opinion of things literary. To him, perhaps, Erasmus was nothing but a kind of idler, and in any case he was determined that his son should be a man of affairs like himself. For my own part, I consider that the event proved him right. His early connection with practical life though it may have made More less learned than a pure humanist, resulted at any rate in his intellect being less bookish, more human. His father, moreover, was a judge of the first order. Holbein shows him us, at over sixty, with his eyes still sparkling with lucid intelligence. "Courteous, affable, innocent, gentle, merciful, just and uncorrupted"—we are quoting his son—he was both loved and feared in the little world of the palace for his keen wit. The fact is worth noting, since Thomas More, even in boyhood, must have sharpened his wit on the paternal sallies. He himself has piously saved from shipwreck some of the good things which his own were soon to eclipse. The judge's pronouncements showed no tenderness to women; "for when he heareth folk blame wives, and say that there be so many of them shrews, he said that they defame them falsely. For he saith plainly that there is but one shrew-wife in the world, but he saith indeed that every man weeneth he hath her, and that one is his own." Another saying of his was that nothing was so much a matter of luck as marriage. "If ye should put your hand into a blind bag full of snakes and eels together, ye would, I ween, reckon it a perilous chance to take up one at adventure." Whereupon Father Bridgett, with that bland

curiosity of his, remarks that, "as Sir John More was three times married, it would be interesting to know the date of these sayings, and whether they embody the fruits of his experience, or were a kind of humorous philosophy. And he recalls an epigram of Thomas More's against the lovers of witticisms of this kind: —

> "Hoc quisque dicit; dicit at ducit tamen,
> Quin sex sepultis, septimam ducit tamen."

The date of Thomas More's birth seems now to be settled beyond question. He was born in the city of London on the 7th February 1478, in the seventeenth year of the reign of Edward IV. The civil war was then in full swing, and More could recall later how, when he was five years old, he heard a neighbour predict the coming triumph of the Duke of York, who was soon to be known as Richard III. At the first school he was sent to he had an excellent Latin master, Nicholas Holt, who had already taught Latimer and Colet, and was the author of a Latin grammar with the alluring title of *Lac puerorum*. The boy was then taken into the household of Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of England.

The great ecclesiastical dignitaries of those days had a certain number of pages in their service, who finished their education in this manner. So varied and picturesque an existence must have brought both pleasure and profit to a boy with the keenness and universal interest of Thomas More. It was one of the pleasantest recollections and most fruitful periods of his life.

Nothing tends more to form and elevate a boy's mind than the enthusiastic devotion youth can pay to a man of worth in the daily contact of the home circle. The Cardinal made a profound impression on Thomas More. He stood in the boy's eyes for an incarnation of the Church and of devotion to the great interests of his country. Long afterwards, More was to speak of him in Utopia with a wealth of admiration that was rare with him, and a fresh and lively gratitude.

"He was of a mean stature, and though stricken in age, yet bare he his body upright. In his face did shine such an amiable reverence, as was pleasant to behold, gentle in communication, yet earnest and sage."

What follows admits us more directly into their familiar relations, and reveals the sign by which the Cardinal had recognised the most confident and witty of his protégés.

"He had great delight many times with rough speech to his suitors, to prove, but without harm, what prompt wit and what bold spirit were in every man. In the which, as in a virtue much agreeing with his nature, so that therewith were not joined impudence, he took great delectation." The future Chancellor of Henry VIII. was to have occasion later to make use of this kind of excellence, but no longer with the same commendation. More continues: "In his speech he was fine, eloquent, and pithy. In the law he had profound knowledge, in wit he was incomparable, and in memory wonderful excellent."

His example in ail these matters, the last among them, was destined to bear fruit.

III

"Infinitum, mi Dorpi, fuerit explicare, quam multa desunt ei cui Græca desunt" ("'Twould be an infinite task, dear Dorpius, to explain how much he lacks who lacks Greek"). That statement shows the ambition with which the boy More, then aged fourteen, set out for Oxford. The Cardinal had had no difficulty in finding his page a place there, and Sir John More had consented to the step, though with certain conditions. The Oxford of 1492, the Oxford of Grocyn and Linacre, was to every Englishman the city of Greek. On his return from Bologna, where he had been admitted Doctor, a monk of Canterbury, named Sellyng, had opened a Greek class near the abbey; then, taking his best pupil, Thomas Linacre, with him, he had returned to Italy and left him in the hands of Politian. Linacre was Thomas More's tutor; and thus we have a clear view of the torch of the Renaissance passing from hand to hand, from the master of Giovanni de Medici to the master of Thomas More.

But it was a far cry from the gardens of Lorenzo the Magnificent to the poor chambers of Oxford. The ardour of study was the same; but at Oxford life remained grave, all but monastic. The coming of the Renaissance in England was marked by no frivolity, no revival of paganism. Moreover, Sir John More had taken precautions against his son's indulging in any pleasures beyond the study of Aristotle. He had no pocket-money. For the most insignificant and most necessary expenses he must write to London. "It was thus," he would say, "that I indulged in no vice or pleasure, and spent my time in no vain or hurtful amusements; I did not know what luxury meant, and never learnt to use money badly; in a word, I loved and thought of

nothing but my studies." That is all the exact information we have on our hero's university career. A reference by Richard Pace, his contemporary, and himself a brilliant humanist, gives us some idea of his method of work. "Here I will remark that no one ever lived who did not first ascertain the meaning of words, and from them gather the meaning of the sentences which they compose—no one, I say, with one single exception, and that is our own Thomas More. For he is wont to gather the force of the words from the sentences in which they occur, especially in his study and translation of Greek. This is not contrary to grammar, but above it, and an instinct of genius." It is also, we may add, characteristic of an amateur. In fact. More never had the time to become a professional scholar. He appears, moreover, to have had more aptitude for Greek than for Latin. According to Erasmus, he owed the supple elegance we admire in his writings to nothing but dogged application. He spoke Latin, of course, as fluently as his mother-tongue. He knew also "French, arithmetic, and geometry," devoured all the books on history that came into his hands, and played becomingly on the flute and viol.

At the end of two years his father summoned him back to London. The judge was afraid the love of Greek might turn the young man from the career he had chosen for him. More obeyed the summons. In February 1496, he was admitted of Lincoln's Inn as a student of law. He was then eighteen. Here again he soon distinguished himself. He was called to the bar in 1501, and was shortly afterwards appointed three years in succession as lecturer to the students and minor persons of the Palace, a mark of esteem which led to his

being selected later to interpret the law before his colleagues of the bar and before the judges themselves (1511). In 1504 he entered Parliament.

IV

There is no need to linger in the courts of justice. The real More is not to be found there. Like many others, he devoted the best of his time to work he did not care for; but, thorough Englishman that he was, he was always able to withdraw at a given moment from his professional career and return to himself. We will rejoin him in his real life with all the speed we may.

No better moment could be found, for it was now that the young man, whose only duty it had been so far to let himself be led, began to enjoy the full liberty of choosing his own course. His first proceeding was to look for a room close to the Charter House in London, where he might live in meditation and prayer. So far as he could he followed the offices of his neighbours. The rest of his leisure was spent in study. The very few friends he had made were no distraction from work and from thought on God. We know their names: Colet, the Dean of St Paul's, whom he had taken for his confessor; the Hellenist, Grocyn, rector of St Lawrence Jewry; the other great Hellenist of the day, Linacre, More's old tutor, who had also returned to the capital; and finally, and in the absence of Erasmus, who was the dearest of all, William Lilly, the young and attractive scholar, who, after his Oxford years, had gone to perfect his Greek in the Isle of Rhodes. Lilly was living actually in the Charter House, and thus, being next door to each other, they met frequently. For

practice, as they said, the two friends amused themselves by translating epigrams from the *Anthologia* into Latin verse; and their respective versions were published together in the same book, with the charming title of *Progymnasmata Thomae Mori et Gulielmi Lilii sodalium*.

But the *Anthologia* was not Thomas More's usual reading. The Fathers of the Church, and especially St Augustine, interested him more, and he even gave a course of lectures on the *de Civitate Dei* in the church of St Lawrence, which Grocyn had placed at his disposal.

The ardent and rigid figure of Dean Colet is worth lingering over. As with nearly all the great Catholic reformers, attempts have been made to rob us of him, and Mr Seebohm has employed for the purpose an audacity of conjecture which is no part of a historian's equipment. But it has yet to be demonstrated that because a man admits that abuses have crept into the life of the Churchy because he deplores them and combats them, he is therefore of necessity a Lutheran. For all his somewhat anxious temperament and slightly obstinate mind, the Dean of St Paul's was a priest of great sanctity, who never either did or wrote a single thing that could justify a doubt of the perfect orthodoxy of his faith. If some of his brethren attacked him fiercely as an innovator, there were others, as many in number and of indisputable authority, who remained faithful to him throughout; and More himself proves that Colet's name was not, in fact, that of a suspect, when, in his letter to a monk who was strongly opposed to the new ideas, he praises Longland by simply calling him another Colet: "*Alter, ut eius laudes uno verbo complectar, Coletus*."

In other respects the natural affinities between Colet and Thomas More were but distant. They were united by the same Christian ideas and the same taste for letters. Colet was one of the few preachers More could endure; and, last but not least, the young barrister, who was then passing through a critical period, was indebted to his confessor for much kindness, wisdom, and decision. More was at that time considering whether he ought not to renounce the world entirely, and it was probably on Colet's advice that he gave up all idea of a religious vocation.

It was Erasmus who, in summing up in one word the history of that crisis, let loose, in all innocence, the imagination of Thomas More's biographers. Obviously, I do not include Father Bridgett and Mr Hutton, but the sober Nisard has been caught out in a solemn blunder. "At twenty years of age," he writes, "the voice of the senses begins to be heard. In spite of his habitual austerity, his poverty, and his ardour for work, the Oxford scholar (*he had left Oxford two years before*) was disturbed by unknown desires." He continues complacently in that strain till he reaches this exquisitely tasteful conclusion: "The young man, however, had defeat in prospect. Two means of escaping it were always open to him —a monastery and marriage. His conscience was offended at the thought of a monastery; within its walls he would have been disgusted, or perhaps tempted by evil example. Marriage attracted him, in spite of the epigrams he had made on women; and he took refuge from profligacy in a holy union."

And now to return to Erasmus. The brusque simplicity of his statement tastes better than this mixture of vulgarity

and sickliness. What the recipient of Thomas More's confidence says is: "*Maluit igitur maritus esse castus quam sacerdos impurus*." The first impression these words convey is that More, being uncertain of his strength, and also not feeling himself clearly called to a more perfect life, decided to live as a Christian in a state of wedlock rather than make a bad priest. And that, in fact, is the truth of his story. For some time he thought seriously of becoming a Franciscan; then he gave up the idea for the simple reason that I have just stated. It is really a puerile proceeding to build up all this romance of "unknown desires" on such a foundation; and we reach the acme of nonsense with M. Nisard when he asks us to see in Thomas More a "Christian who found the cloister too mild to confine his rebellious youth."

Others, still starting from the words of Erasmus, have gone further than Nisard, or at least have expatiated at greater length on the monastic corruption which they suppose to have compelled More to resign himself, as a last resource, to marriage. I am content to confine my answer to the words of an Anglican historian: "It is absurd to assert that More was disgusted with monastic corruption—that he 'loathed monks as a disgrace to the Church.' He was throughout his life a warm friend of the religious orders, and a devoted admirer of the monastic ideal. He condemned the vices of individuals; he said, as his great-grandson says, 'that at that time religious men in England had somewhat degenerated from their ancient strictness and fervour of spirit'; but there is not the slightest sign that his decision to decline the monastic life was due in the smallest degree to

a distrust of the system or a distaste for the theology of the Church."

Briefly, in the spring of 1505 Thomas More married. He certainly never dreamed when he did so that so natural a step would one day let loose such a flood of sour ink. I shall come soon to the delightful story of his betrothal to Jane Colt; but before closing this chapter on the youth of Thomas More, we must pause for a moment on a work to which he devoted himself during the first year of his married life, and in which he seems to have wished to sum up for his own use the best lessons of the Renaissance.

V

The work I mean is a little book that appeared in 1510, with the following old-world title: *The life of John Picus Erie of Myrandula, a great Lorde of Italy, an excellent connyng man in all sciences, and vertuous of lining: with diuers epistles and other workes of ye sayd John Picus, full of greate science, vertue, and wisedome: whose life and woorkes bene worthy and digne to be read, and often to be had in memory. Translated out of latin into Englishe by maister Thomas More.*

I am quite aware that the name of Pico della Mirandola stands to most people for that of a swash-buckler of dogmatism, and that the young scholar has paid heavily with us for the swaggering titles of his theses. But our misprision is unjust. Looked at a little closer, Pico della Mirandola is still to-day what he was to his contemporaries, the hero, the Prince Charming of the Renaissance. When this pilgrim of universal knowledge, "not unlike," as Pater says,

"the archangel Raphael ... or Mercury, as he might have appeared in a painting by Sandro Botticelli," entered that famous chamber where a lamp burned day and night before the bust of Plato, Ficino, that old pagan, "seems to have thought there was something not wholly earthly about him; at least, he ever afterwards believed that it was not without the co-operation of the stars that the stranger had arrived on that day," Ficino was captured like every one else, and they fell at once into an intimate and serious conversation. Ficino himself has related, in a dedication to Lorenzo de Medici, the story of his fascination, and how the visit determined him to undertake the translation of Plotinus. Let it be remembered further that the cell of the prior of St Mark's saw just another such scene. Savonarola loved the young prince dearly. He would have liked to make him one of his monks; and though that joy was denied him he at least had the sweet and mournful honour of burying his disciple's body in the hood and white frock of the Dominican order.

This double friendship supplies a happy symbol of the philosophy of Pico and Thomas More. Ficino and Savonarola, the Christian asceticism that could go courageously even to the "folly of the Cross," and a kind of exaltation of humanity that threatened a return to paganism—these two extreme tendencies meet in Christian humanism and mingle into harmony. More had not the leisure to set forth in didactic form this reconciliation of Plato and the Gospels, and if he had set hand to the work, he would never, solid Englishman that he was, have brought nearer to earth the adventurous and sometimes *bizarre* mysticism of Pico della Mirandola;

but the kinship between the two minds, the two souls, is plain. "Like the Italian humanist," says Mr Hutton, "More was penetrated with the sense of the beauty and the mystery of life. Rich colours and the strange recesses of occult investigation, the quaintness of old-world learning, and the pure human beauty of classic ideals of literature and art, the thrilling chords of music and the simple innocence of animal life, the triumph of self-sacrifice, the joys of friendship and of love, the thoughts of Plato and the divine mysteries of the Christian religion, appealed each in their turn to his sensitive consciousness, and ascetic though he was his inner contemplation never blinded him to the loveliness of human life. Pico was as far removed from the ignorant bigotry satirized in the Letters of obscure men as from the scarce veiled Paganism of many disciples of the New Learning. To him it did not seem that Christianity was less true because Paganism was so beautiful, and the same thought was never absent from the mind of More."

I must crave the reader's indulgence if he finds that this first chapter leaves him still in the clouds. Greek and legal procedure, Erasmus and Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and Savonarola, the Renaissance and Catholic reform, all these suggestions packed into twenty pages cannot fail to give more smoke than light. The writer, no doubt, is to blame; but the fault lies to some extent in the subject too. If it is impossible to define the simplest of living souls exactly, how can we hope to understand so rich and diverse a nature so early in its career, when it is but just emerging from the confusion of youthful years? And there is more; the most perplexing of the antinomies we have propounded,

antinomies which still weigh on us after a lapse of four centuries, are not those that can be resolved into clear formulas. *Solvitur ambulando*. By contemplating Thomas More as he lived, we shall the better understand how a Christian can renounce nothing of what is nobly "human," and still remain faithful to the "hard words" of the Gospel.

Chapter II
Erasmus and Thomas More

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I HAVE already mentioned that the contemporaries of Thomas More's youth liked to associate his name with that of Erasmus. At this distance of time such a conjunction is a constant surprise and source of anxiety. If there had been nothing between these two humanists but a close bond of friendship, Greek, strictly speaking, might explain everything. But that loophole is closed to us. On both sides the sympathy was full and entire. No amount of searching will reveal one single line of More that could be construed as containing the slightest disavowal of the work and thought of Erasmus. On the contrary, there are many passages, and those decisive, in which the future martyr adopts all his friend's thoughts and defends them out and out. What course are we to take? Must we surrender the author of *The Praise of Folly* to the Protestants or the Freethinkers, and with him thirty years and more of the intellectual life of Thomas More? If the facts demand it, we will make the sacrifice, however heavy. Or, on the other hand, are we to join the early biographers of More in an attempt to establish a quarrel between the two friends on the earliest possible opportunity, and conjure up at all costs some means of separating them? We are prepared to do that too, on the understanding that justice and truth allow it. But in any case we must give them a hearing before we judge them. They have both taken us into their confidence, and if one of them

seems a little too elusive, the other, and the only one to interest us directly in this chapter, offers a transparent sincerity. I am aware, too, that an unauthoritative biographer would be ill-advised to attempt to conduct so delicate an interrogatory on his own account, and mean to confine myself to following step by step the proceedings of two masters whose knowledge and orthodoxy are unquestioned, Dom Gasquet, the Primate of the English Benedictines, and Father Bridgett, the official biographer of Blessed Thomas More.

II

Erasmus, as every one knows, spent several fairly long periods in England. His first visit took place in 1497, when More was beginning his second year of the law. Erasmus was some ten years older than the young student. They met probably at the house of William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, who had been a pupil of the already famous humanist's in Paris. Erasmus soon left London for Oxford, but from the tone of the letters he wrote at that time to More, it is clear that a firm and affectionate friendship was beginning between them. They could meet, too, from time to time. One day when Erasmus was resting at Lord Mountjoy's country house, More came to see him and proposed to take him to the next village. There they found the whole of Henry VII.'s family with the exception of prince Arthur. The king's children gave them audience in great state, Henry, aged nine, but already possessed with a sense of his own importance, two little princesses, and a child in the nurse's arms. "More," writes Erasmus, "... after saluting prince

Henry, presented him with I know not what writing. As I was entirely taken by surprise I had nothing to offer, and I was obliged to make a promise that I would write something to show my respect. I was somewhat vexed with More for not warning me, and especially so since the prince while we were dining sent me a note asking some fruit of my pen. I went home and in spite of the Muses, from whom I had long been separated, I finished my poem within three days."

Prince Henry we shall meet again. Meanwhile Erasmus, on his return to the Continent, praised his English friends to the skies: the kindness of Prior Charnock, his Oxford host, the learning of Colet, and the "suavity" of More.

Towards the end of 1505 he crossed the Channel again. This time he went straight to More's. More had been married for some months, and his house was assiduously frequented by an academy of Hellenists—Colet, Grocyn, Linacre, and Lilly. The delight of the band of scholars may easily be imagined. In their ardour for work, and with a view to tempering their "humour" anew at a good spring, the two friends made use of the interval to turn several dialogues of Lucian into Latin. More chose the most caustic, and, not to neglect his profession of barrister too completely, occupied himself in writing a declamation on tyrannicide in imitation of the same author. He wished Erasmus to follow his example. "If he bade me to dance on the tightrope," said Erasmus, "I should obey without a murmur." And he published his declamation with a preface in which More is not forgotten. "Unless my ardent love blinds me, nature never made any one so ready of wit, so keen-sighted, so shrewd. His intellect is equalled by his power of speech; and

his suavity is so great, his humour so keen yet so innocuous, that he has every quality of a perfect advocate." Coming down to detail, he adds the following lines, which we feel to be very just: "The style of his oratory approaches more the structure and dialectic subtlety of Isocrates than the limpid stream of Cicero, although in urbanity he is in no way inferior to Tully. He paid so much attention in his youth to writing poetry, that you may now discern the poet in his prose compositions."

We have now reached the critical moment, the year 1508, in which Erasmus returned once more to England, and again came to stay with Thomas More. Some weeks later, while he was riding in difficult country at the mercy of his mule, he was seized with an idea which struck him as a splendid find. He communicated it to his host. More was not the man to throw cold water on any project of the kind; he encouraged Erasmus, egged him on, prompted him with a few jests of his own, until at length, by the end of a few weeks, *The Praise of Folly* was finished. The very title of the famous little book, the *Encomium Moriae*, set a seal, so to speak, on the literary brotherhood of the two friends, and stood for a pleasant reminder that the work had been written under Thomas More's roof and in collaboration, of a kind, with the future author of *Utopia*.

Collaboration, we say; but More was not content with encouraging Erasmus and defending him. In the campaign of which *The Praise of Folly* is the most famous episode, he stood shoulder to shoulder with his friend and fired a shot himself. The pamphlet he composed has all the biting wit and the dashing attack of the *Moria* itself. In 1516, before

the outburst of Luther, he still declared that for his own part he could not have wished the suppression of a single line of Erasmus's epigrams against the monks, and about the same time he himself was indulging in a few piquant anecdotes on the same theme. Devout as he was and singularly attached to the Blessed Virgin, he was merciless in ridiculing certain devotions which he judged superstitious, though it may be noted that in all these matters his touch is more delicate and lighter than that of Erasmus.

Their friendship continued without a cloud. In 1517 More was languishing, a reluctant ambassador, at Calais. Erasmus and Peter Giles sent him their portraits, just finished by Quentin Matsys, from Antwerp. "Peter," wrote Erasmus, "pays one-half of the cost, and I the other. Either of us would gladly have paid the whole, but we wished the gift to be from both." More was delighted, and replied with an outburst of affection. "You cannot believe, my Erasmus, my darling Erasmus (the *erasmiotatos* is untranslatable), how this eagerness of yours to bind me still more closely to you, has heightened my love for you. . . . You know me so well that I need not labour to prove to you that, with all my faults, I am no great boaster. Yet, to tell the truth, there is one craving for glory I cannot shake off, and it is wonderful how sweetly I am elated when the thought occurs to me that I shall be commended to the most distant ages by the friendship, the letters, the books, the pictures of Erasmus." The year before. More had written his famous letter to Dorpius in defence of The Praise of Folly, In 1520 appeared his letter to a monk who had sent him certain vile slanders against Erasmus. But he was already absorbed by affairs of

State, and soon afterwards by the struggle against Protestantism. The two friends, however, did not lose sight of each other; they continued to correspond, and always in the same tone, and we shall see before long how, even in his struggle with the Lutherans, More remained sensitive to every attack on Erasmus's orthodoxy, and claimed that quality stoutly for his "dear darling."

III

In its main lines, the history of this famous friendship is known. It is both sad and amusing to see how usually serious and sincere biographers have fallen victims to the temptation to attenuate or amplify the facts, so as to fit them to their wishes. So legends are born. Stapleton, who was a staunch Catholic controversialist in the campaign against Protestantism, is unable to stomach the idea that More can have remained a friend of Erasmus. To him, as to nearly all his contemporaries, Erasmus is nothing but a forerunner of Luther, and therefore, by one of those unconscious sophisms of which we are all capable, he will have it that, sooner or later, his hero must have arrived at the same conclusion. "Their common devotion to letters," he writes, "was the cause of More's having a greater affection for Erasmus than for any one; and Erasmus justly returned it to the full. The friendship, however, was rather honourable to Erasmus than beneficial to More, and in proportion as the heresy hatched from the terrible egg laid by Erasmus grew bigger, More's affection diminished little by little and continued to cool." Every word of that is clearly cut to pattern—the pattern of legend. What says history? "In the

interests of truth," says Father Bridgett, "I must declare at the outset that I cannot find the very slightest foundation for the assertion of Stapleton, copied by Cresacre More and many others, that in the course of time their friendship cooled. Abundant proofs of the contrary will appear as we proceed." Stapleton insists on it. Vague rumour gives him ground for the statement that More implored his friend to publish a book of retractations, and that Erasmus, not content with neglecting his advice, took care to destroy the compromising letter. *Nec has Mori litteras superesse passus est*. The ingenuity of this rash conclusion is undeniable, but there is better still to follow. In a book he published towards the end of his life, at the height of the Protestant agitation. More expressed himself clearly on the subject of Erasmus. That, beyond question, is the place in which to look for his last word. Stapleton does not ignore it. He prints the passage in his book; but, in consequence of the involuntary blindness we have mentioned, he either did not see, or perhaps forgot, the last lines, which happen to be a decisive profession of affection and confidence.

"For had I found," writes More, "with Erasmus my darling the shrewd intent and purpose that I find in Tyndale, Erasmus my darling should be no more my darling."

Stapleton purposely stops at the conditional, which seems to open the door to conjecture. The phrase and the thought of More ended thus: —

"But I find in Erasmus my darling that he detesteth and abhorreth the errors and heresies that Tyndale plainly teacheth and abideth by, and therefore Erasmus my darling *shall be* my dear darling still." Cresacre More, too, takes

good care not to quote the whole passage. He even heightens it, and either—good-naturedly or acutely — changes the meaning of the phrase by changing the tenses of the verbs: "If my darling Erasmus *hath* translated ... he *shall be* no more my darling."

But these little liberties taken with the truth bring no advantage to their authors; Stapleton's clumsy apology all but succeeds in compromising his hero. To say that later in life More threw off his infatuation and broke with a dangerous friend is to insinuate, or at any rate to leave room for supposing, that their early relations had not been entirely free from imprudence. Nothing more was needed to let loose the imagination of another category of biographers.

Here we come upon the birth of a new legend, the legend of Thomas More, the doubting and dissatisfied Catholic whose faith was under suspicion, and no less than Erasmus, a forerunner of Protestantism. "The young ascetic," writes Nisard, "the Christian who had found the cloister too mild to confine his rebellious youth, the polemic writer who was going to defend the cause of Catholicism with such ardour, had experienced that slackening of the opinions, that failing of the spirit through which we all pass about that age" (a historian should not be in such haste to credit a Christian of 1510 with the sentiments through which "we pass" in the nineteenth century), "and which make us tolerant in matters of religion, intelligent and moderate in our judgment on all subjects, unimpassioned reformers, and as reserved in negation as in affirmation. In proclaiming liberty of religion in *Utopia*, Morus comes nearer to philosophic doubt than to