

Book One



OF THE DISCUSSION WHICH
THE EXCEPTIONAL MAN
RAPHAEL HYTHLODAY HELD
CONCERNING THE BEST STATE
OF A COMMONWEALTH, BY
WAY OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS
MAN THOMAS MORE, CITIZEN
AND UNDERSHERIFF OF THE
GLORIOUS CITY OF LONDON
IN BRITAIN



HENRY VIII, THE unconquered King of England, a prince adorned with all the virtues that become a great monarch, having some differences of no small consequence with Charles the most serene Prince of Castile, sent me into Flanders, as his ambassador, for treating and composing matters between them.* I was colleague and companion to that incomparable man Cuthbert Tunstall,† whom the King, with such universal applause, lately made Master of the Rolls; but of whom I will say nothing; not because I fear that the testimony of a friend will be suspected, but rather because his learning and virtues are too great for me to do them justice, and so well known, that they need not my commendations, unless I would, according to the proverb, “Show the sun with a lantern.”

Cuthbert Tunstall

Adages

Those that were appointed by the Prince to treat with us, met us at Bruges, according to agreement; they were all worthy men. The Margrave of Bruges‡

* Henry VIII was crowned King of England in 1509; Prince Charles was the grandson of Emperor Maximilian I and, in 1519, became the Holy Roman Emperor himself. The “matters” More and his mission were entrusted with were commercial ones, likely involving tariffs.

† Cuthbert Tunstall was, like More, a well-educated Renaissance Humanist. He was friends with Erasmus and also godfather to Peter Giles’s daughter. The Master of the Rolls was, and still is, the penultimate judge of England, second only to the Lord Chief Justice.

‡ Bruges was an important Flemish city, and the Margrave its hereditary ruler.

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was their head, and the chief man among them; but he that was esteemed the wisest, and that spoke for the rest, was George Temse, the Provost of Casselsee:* both art and nature had concurred to make him eloquent: he was very learned in the law; and, as he had a great capacity, so, by a long practice in affairs, he was very dexterous at unraveling them. After we had several times met, without coming to an agreement, they went to Brussels for some days, to know the Prince's pleasure; and, since our business would admit it, I went to Antwerp.†

While I was there, among many that visited me, there was one that was more acceptable to me than any other, Peter Giles, born at Antwerp, who is a man of great honor, and of a good rank in his town, though less than he deserves; for I do not know if there be anywhere to be found a more learned and a better bred young man; for as he is both a very worthy and a very knowing person, so he is so civil to all men, so particularly kind to his friends, and so full of candor and affection, that there is not, perhaps, above one or two anywhere to be found, that is in all respects so perfect a friend: he is extraordinarily modest, there is no artifice

Peter Giles

* George Temse, Georgius a Tempseca, or de Theimsecke, as he was also known, was a doctor of laws and official of the Flemish town of Cassel.

† Antwerp, capital of Flanders in what is now modern Belgium, was a major center of international trade and arguably the richest city in Europe in the sixteenth century.

in him, and yet no man has more of a prudent simplicity. His conversation was so pleasant and so innocently cheerful, that his company in a great measure lessened any longings to go back to my country, and to my wife and children, which an absence of four months had quickened very much.

One day, as I was returning home from mass at St. Mary's,* which is the chief church, and the most frequented of any in Antwerp, I saw him, by accident, talking with a stranger, who seemed past the flower of his age; his face was tanned, he had a long beard, and his cloak was hanging carelessly about him, so that, by his looks and habit, I concluded he was a seaman. As soon as Peter saw me, he came and saluted me, and as I was returning his civility, he took me aside, and pointing to him with whom he had been discoursing, he said, "Do you see that man? I was just thinking to bring him to you."

I answered, "He should have been very welcome on your account."

"And on his own too," replied he, "if you knew the man, for there is none alive that can give so copious an account of unknown nations and countries as he can do, which I know you very much desire."

"Then," said I, "I did not guess amiss, for at first sight I took him for a seaman."

* St Mary's, more commonly known as Our Lady, is Antwerp's major cathedral.

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“But you are much mistaken,” said he, “for he has not sailed as a seaman, but as a traveler, or rather a philosopher.* This Raphael, who from his family carries the name of Hythloday, is not ignorant of the Latin tongue, but is eminently learned in the Greek, having applied himself more particularly to that than to the former, because he had given himself much to philosophy, in which he knew that the Romans have left us nothing that is valuable, except what is to be found in Seneca and Cicero. He is a Portuguese by birth, and was so desirous of seeing the world, that he divided his estate among his brothers, ran the same hazard as Americus Vesputius,† and bore a share in three of his four voyages that are now published; only he did not return with him in his last, but obtained leave of him, almost by force, that he might be one of those twenty-four who were left at the farthest place at which they touched in their last voyage to New Castile.‡ The leaving him thus did not a

* Other translations describe Hythloday’s travels more specifically as “not as the maryner Palynure, but as the experte and prudent prince Ulisses; yea, rather as the auncyent and sage Philosopher Plato.” (Robynson) Palinarus was the hapless sailor who fell asleep and fell overboard in Virgil’s *Aeneid*; Ulysses, a more successful mythic traveler—and teller of tall tales; and Plato, the philosopher who imagined the alternative society of *The Republic*.

† Americus Vesputius (1454–1512), or Amerigo Vespucci, was a famous explorer, cartographer, and chronicler of voyages to the New World. The Americas are named for him.

‡ Simply “the fort” in More’s original Latin. New Castile was the name given to the Spanish New World possession that is now Peru. But it was only named as such in 1528, a dozen years after *Utopia*

little gratify one that was more fond of traveling than of returning home to be buried in his own country; for he used often to say, ‘that the way to heaven was the same from all places,’ and ‘he that had no grave had the heavens still over him.’* Yet this disposition of mind had cost him dear, if God had not been very gracious to him; for after he, with five Castalians, had traveled over many countries, at last, by strange good fortune, he got to Ceylon, and from thence to Calicut, where he, very happily, found some Portuguese ships; and, beyond all men’s expectations, returned to his native country.”

An aphorism

When Peter had said this to me, I thanked him for his kindness in intending to give me the acquaintance of a man whose conversation he knew would be so acceptable; and upon that Raphael and I embraced each other. After those civilities were past which are usual with strangers upon their first meeting, we all went to my house, and entering into the garden, sat down on a green bank and entertained one another in discourse.

He told us that when Vesputius had sailed away, he, and his companions that stayed behind in New Castile, by degrees insinuated themselves into the affections of the people of the country, meeting often with them and treating them gently; and at last they not only lived

was written. Thus its use here is likely an anachronism of the translator’s.

* From, respectively, Lucan’s epic *Pharsalia*, VII, and Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, I, xliii.

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among them without danger, but conversed familiarly with them, and got so far into the heart of a prince, whose name and country I have forgot, that he both furnished them plentifully with all things necessary, and also with the conveniences of traveling, both boats when they went by water, and wagons when they traveled over land: he sent with them a very faithful guide, who was to introduce and recommend them to such other princes as they had a mind to see: and after many days' journey, they came to towns, and cities, and to commonwealths, that were both happily governed and well peopled.

Under the equator, and as far on both sides of it as the sun moves, there lay vast deserts that were parched with the perpetual heat of the sun; the soil was withered, all things looked dismally, and all places were either quite uninhabited, or abounded with wild beasts and serpents, and some few men, that were neither less wild nor less cruel than the beasts themselves. But, as they went farther, a new scene opened, all things grew milder, the air less burning, the soil more verdant, and even the beasts were less wild: and, at last, there were nations, towns, and cities, that had not only mutual commerce among themselves and with their neighbors, but traded, both by sea and land, to very remote countries. There they found the conveniences of seeing many countries on all hands, for no ship went any voyage into which he and his companions were not very welcome.

The first vessels that they saw were flat-bottomed, their sails were made of reeds and wicker, woven close together, only some were of leather; but afterwards, they found ships made with round keels and canvas sails, and in all respects like our ships, and the seamen understood both astronomy and navigation. He got wonderfully into their favor by showing them the use of the needle,* of which till then they were utterly ignorant. They sailed before with great caution, and only in summer time; but now they count all seasons alike, trusting wholly to the loadstone, in which they are, perhaps, more secure than safe; so that there is reason to fear that this discovery, which was thought would prove so much to their advantage, may, by their imprudence, become an occasion of much mischief to them.

But it were too long to dwell on all that he told us he had observed in every place, it would be too great a digression from our present purpose: whatever is necessary to be told concerning those wise and prudent institutions which he observed among civilized nations, may perhaps be related by us on a more proper occasion. We asked him many questions concerning all these things, to which he answered very willingly; we made no inquiries after monsters, than which nothing is more common; for everywhere one may hear of ravenous dogs and wolves, and cruel men-eaters, but it is not

* The magnetic needle of a compass.

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so easy to find states that are well and wisely governed.* As he told us of many things that were amiss in those new-discovered countries, so he reckoned up not a few things, from which patterns might be taken for correcting the errors of these nations among whom we live; of which an account may be given, as I have already promised, at some other time; for, at present, I intend only to relate those particulars that he told us, of the manners and laws of the Utopians: but I will begin with the occasion that led us to speak of that commonwealth.

After Raphael had discoursed with great judgment on the many errors that were both among us and these nations, had treated of the wise institutions both here and there, and had spoken as distinctly of the customs and government of every nation through which he had past, as if he had spent his whole life in it, Peter, being struck with admiration, said, “I wonder, Raphael, how it comes that you enter into no king’s service, for I am sure there are none to whom you would not be very acceptable; for your learning and knowledge, both of men and things, is such, that you would not only entertain them very pleasantly, but be of great use to them, by the examples you could set before them, and the advices you could give

* More is, of course, making a joke here. Popular tales of travel were stocked full of monsters like the six-headed Scylla, the half-bird, half-woman harpy Celeano, and the people-eating Laestrygonians of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, all mentioned by More in the original Latin text, though omitted in the present translation. Less colorful tales about foreign laws, customs, and states—that is, tales like the one More tells here—are not so easy to find.

them; and by this means you would both serve your own interest, and be of great use to all your friends.”*

“As for my friends,” answered he, “I need not be much concerned, having already done for them all that was incumbent on me; for when I was not only in good health, but fresh and young, I distributed that among my kindred and friends which other people do not part with till they are old and sick: when they then unwillingly give that which they can enjoy no longer themselves. I think my friends ought to rest contented with this, and not to expect that for their sakes I should enslave myself to any king whatsoever.”

“Soft and fair!” said Peter; “I do not mean that you should be a slave to any king, but only that you should assist them and be useful to them.”

“The change of the word,” said he, “does not alter the matter.”†

“But term it as you will,” replied Peter, “I do not see any other way in which you can be so useful, both in private to your friends and to the public, and by which you can make your own condition happier.”

“Happier?” answered Raphael, “is that to be achieved

* More was contemplating much the same situation at the time, having recently been asked by Henry VIII to enter his service as a counselor. After long consideration, More accepted and became a member of the King’s Privy Council in 1518.

† Another translation of this exchange makes for even better word-play: Peter: “I do not mean that you should be in servitude to any king, only in his service.” Raphael: “The difference is only one syllable.” (Adams/Logan)

in a way so abhorrent to my genius? Now I live as I will, to which I believe, few courtiers can pretend; and there are so many that court the favor of great men, that there will be no great loss if they are not troubled either with me or with others of my temper.”

Upon this, said I, “I perceive, Raphael, that you neither desire wealth nor greatness; and, indeed, I value and admire such a man much more than I do any of the great men in the world. Yet I think you would do what would well become so generous and philosophical a soul as yours is, if you would apply your time and thoughts to public affairs, even though you may happen to find it a little uneasy to yourself; and this you can never do with so much advantage as by being taken into the council of some great prince and putting him on noble and worthy actions, which I know you would do if you were in such a post; for the springs both of good and evil flow from the prince over a whole nation, as from a lasting fountain. So much learning as you have, even without practice in affairs, or so great a practice as you have had, without any other learning, would render you a very fit counselor to any king whatsoever.”

“You are doubly mistaken,” said he, “Mr. More, both in your opinion of me and in the judgment you make of things: for as I have not that capacity that you fancy I have, so if I had it, the public would not be one jot the better when I had sacrificed my quiet to it. For most princes apply themselves more to affairs of war

than to the useful arts of peace; and in these I neither have any knowledge, nor do I much desire it; they are generally more set on acquiring new kingdoms, right or wrong, than on governing well those they possess: and, among the ministers of princes, there are none that are not so wise as to need no assistance, or at least, that do not think themselves so wise that they imagine they need none; and if they court any, it is only those for whom the prince has much personal favor, whom by their fawning and flatteries they endeavor to fix to their own interests; and, indeed, nature has so made us, that we all love to be flattered and to please ourselves with our own notions: the old crow loves his young, and the ape her cubs. Now if in such a court, made up of persons who envy all others and only admire themselves, a person should but propose anything that he had either read in history or observed in his travels, the rest would think that the reputation of their wisdom would sink, and that their interests would be much depressed if they could not run it down: and, if all other things failed, then they would fly to this, that such or such things pleased our ancestors, and it were well for us if we could but match them. They would set up their rest on such an answer, as a sufficient confutation of all that could be said, as if it were a great misfortune that any should be found wiser than his ancestors. But though they willingly let go all the good things that were among those of former ages, yet, if better things

are proposed, they cover themselves obstinately with this excuse of reverence to past times. I have met with these proud, morose, and absurd judgments of things in many places, particularly once in England.”

“Were you ever there?” said I.

“Yes, I was,” answered he, “and stayed some months there, not long after the rebellion in the West was suppressed, with a great slaughter of the poor people that were engaged in it.* I was then much obliged to that reverend prelate, John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal, and Chancellor of England;† a man, Peter (for Mr. More knows well what he was), that was not less venerable for his wisdom and virtues than for the high character he bore: he was of a middle stature, not broken with age; his looks begot reverence rather than fear; his conversation was easy, but serious and grave; he sometimes took pleasure to try the force of those that came as suitors to him upon business by speaking sharply, though decently, to them, and by that he discovered their spirit and presence of mind; with which he was much delighted when it did not grow up to impudence, as bearing a

* Hythloday is referring to the Cornish Rebellion of 1497, in which the people of Cornwall, in the far south-west of Britain, rose up in protest against ruinous taxes and marched on London. The uprising failed, and the rebels were slaughtered by the King’s troops.

† John Morton (1420–1500), in addition to being Archbishop of Canterbury, Catholic Cardinal and Lord Chancellor of England, as Hythloday relates, was also a mentor to Thomas More, who had served as a page in Morton’s household as a young man.

great resemblance to his own temper, and he looked on such persons as the fittest men for affairs. He spoke both gracefully and weightily; he was eminently skilled in the law, had a vast understanding, and a prodigious memory; and those excellent talents with which nature had furnished him were improved by study and experience. When I was in England the King depended much on his counsels, and the Government seemed to be chiefly supported by him; for from his youth he had been all along practiced in affairs; and, having passed through many traverses of fortune, he had, with great cost, acquired a vast stock of wisdom, which is not soon lost when it is purchased so dear.

“One day, when I was dining with him, there happened to be at table one of the English lawyers, who took occasion to run out in a high commendation of the severe execution of justice upon thieves, ‘who,’ as he said, ‘were then hanged so fast that there were sometimes twenty on one gibbet!’ and, upon that, he said, ‘he could not wonder enough how it came to pass that, since so few escaped, there were yet so many thieves left, who were still robbing in all places.’

Laws barely fair

“Upon this, I (who took the boldness to speak freely before the Cardinal) said, ‘There was no reason to wonder at the matter, since this way of punishing thieves was neither just in itself nor good for the public; for, as the severity was too great, so the remedy was not

effectual; simple theft not being so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his life; no punishment, how severe soever, being able to restrain those from robbing who can find out no other way of livelihood. In this,' said I, 'not only you in England, but a great part of the world, imitate some ill masters, that are readier to chastise their scholars than to teach them. There are dreadful punishments enacted against thieves, but it were much better to make such good provisions by which every man might be put in a method how to live, and so be preserved from the fatal necessity of stealing and of dying for it.'

*A plan to reduce
the number of
thieves*

“‘There has been care enough taken for that,’ said he; ‘there are many handicrafts, and there is husbandry, by which they may make a shift to live, unless they have a greater mind to follow ill courses.’

“‘That will not serve your turn,’ said I, ‘for many lose their limbs in civil or foreign wars, as lately in the Cornish rebellion, and some time ago in your wars with France,* who, being thus mutilated in the service of their king and country, can no more follow their old trades, and are too old to learn new ones; but since wars are only accidental things, and have intervals, let us consider those things that fall out every day. There is a great number of noblemen among you that are

* England and France were perennially at war with one another: from the Norman Conquest of 1066, through the Hundred Years' War of 1337–1453, to the War of the League of Cambria, being fought as More composed *Utopia*.

themselves as idle as drones, that subsist on other men's labor, on the labor of their tenants, whom, to raise their revenues, they pare to the quick. This, indeed, is the only instance of their frugality, for in all other things they are prodigal, even to the begging of themselves; but, besides this, they carry about with them a great number of idle fellows, who never learned any art by which they may gain their living; and these, as soon as either their lord dies, or they themselves fall sick, are turned out of doors; for your lords are readier to feed idle people than to take care of the sick; and often the heir is not able to keep together so great a family as his predecessor did. Now, when the stomachs of those that are thus turned out of doors grow keen, they rob no less keenly; and what else can they do? For when, by wandering about, they have worn out both their health and their clothes, and are tattered, and look ghastly, men of quality will not entertain them, and poor men dare not do it, knowing that one who has been bred up in idleness and pleasure, and who was used to walk about with his sword and buckler, despising all the neighborhood with an insolent scorn as far below him, is not fit for the spade and mattock; nor will he serve a poor man for so small a hire and in so low a diet as he can afford to give him.'

"To this he answered, "This sort of men ought to be particularly cherished, for in them consists the force of the armies for which we have occasion; since their birth

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inspires them with a nobler sense of honor than is to be found among tradesmen or plowmen.’

“‘You may as well say,’ replied I, ‘that you must cherish thieves on the account of wars, for you will never want the one as long as you have the other; and as robbers prove sometimes gallant soldiers, so soldiers often prove brave robbers, so near an alliance there is between those two sorts of life. But this bad custom, so common among you, of keeping many servants, is not peculiar to this nation. In France there is yet a more pestiferous sort of people, for the whole country is full of soldiers, still kept up in time of peace (if such a state of a nation can be called a peace); and these are kept in pay upon the same account that you plead for those idle retainers about noblemen: this being a maxim of those pretended statesmen, that it is necessary for the public safety to have a good body of veteran soldiers ever in readiness. They think raw men are not to be depended on, and they sometimes seek occasions for making war, that they may train up their soldiers in the art of cutting throats, or, as Sallust observed, “for keeping their hands in use, that they may not grow dull by too long an intermission.”* But France has learned to its cost how dangerous it is to feed such beasts. The fate of the Romans, Carthaginians, and Syrians, and many other nations and cities, which were both overturned and

*A disaster which
a standing army
engenders*

* From Sallust’s *Catiline*, XVI.

quite ruined by those standing armies, should make others wiser;* and the folly of this maxim of the French appears plainly even from this, that their trained soldiers often find your raw men prove too hard for them, of which I will not say much, lest you may think I flatter the English. Every day's experience shows that the mechanics in the towns or the clowns in the country are not afraid of fighting with those idle gentlemen, if they are not disabled by some misfortune in their body or dispirited by extreme want; so that you need not fear that those well-shaped and strong men (for it is only such that noblemen love to keep about them till they spoil them), who now grow feeble with ease and are softened with their effeminate manner of life, would be less fit for action if they were well bred and well employed. And it seems very unreasonable that, for the prospect of a war, which you need never have but when you please, you should maintain so many idle men, as will always disturb you in time of peace, which is ever to be more considered than war. But I do not think that this necessity of stealing arises only from hence; there is another cause of it, more peculiar to England.'

“What is that?’ said the Cardinal.

“The increase of pasture,’ said I, ‘by which your sheep, which are naturally mild, and easily kept in

* Tales of antiquity are filled with the hazards of a standing army. In the aftermath of the First Punic War, for instance, mercenaries employed by Carthage rebelled when faced with disbandment.

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order, may be said now to devour men and unpeople, not only villages, but towns;* for wherever it is found that the sheep of any soil yield a softer and richer wool than ordinary, there the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots! not contented with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches, and enclose grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them. As if forests and parks had swallowed up too little of the land, those worthy countrymen turn the best inhabited places into solitudes; for when an insatiable wretch, who is a plague to his country, resolves to enclose many thousand acres of ground, the owners, as well as tenants, are turned out of their possessions by trick or by main force, or, being wearied out by ill usage, they are forced to sell them; by which means those miserable people, both men and women, married and unmarried, old and young, with their poor but numerous families (since country

* Here More is referring to the infamous enclosure of the commons. Beginning as early as the twelfth century and extending into the nineteenth, land that had been used by commoners was cleared and fenced to create grazing land for sheep to supply the burgeoning wool trade. The practice was profitable for the landholding gentry but devastating for the commoners, who had depended upon these common lands for their livelihood. Karl Marx links this historical process to the development of modern private property in vol. 1 of *Capital*, but criticism of the practice, as evidenced here, pre-dates him.

business requires many hands), are all forced to change their seats, not knowing whither to go; and they must sell, almost for nothing, their household stuff, which could not bring them much money, even though they might stay for a buyer. When that little money is at an end (for it will be soon spent), what is left for them to do but either to steal, and so to be hanged (God knows how justly!), or to go about and beg? And if they do this they are put in prison as idle vagabonds, while they would willingly work but can find none that will hire them; for there is no more occasion for country labor, to which they have been bred, when there is no arable ground left. One shepherd can look after a flock, which will stock an extent of ground that would require many hands if it were to be plowed and reaped.

“This, likewise, in many places raises the price of corn. The price of wool is also so risen that the poor people, who were wont to make cloth, are no more able to buy it; and this, likewise, makes many of them idle: for since the increase of pasture God has punished the avarice of the owners by a rot among the sheep, which has destroyed vast numbers of them—to us it might have seemed more just had it fell on the owners themselves. But, suppose the sheep should increase ever so much, their price is not likely to fall; since, though they cannot be called a monopoly, because they are not engrossed by one person, yet they are in so few hands, and these are so rich, that, as they are not pressed to sell

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them sooner than they have a mind to it, so they never do it till they have raised the price as high as possible.

“On the same account it is that the other kinds of cattle are so dear, because many villages being pulled down, and all country labor being much neglected, there are none who make it their business to breed them. The rich do not breed cattle as they do sheep, but buy them lean and at low prices; and, after they have fattened them on their grounds, sell them again at high rates. And I do not think that all the inconveniences this will produce are yet observed; for, as they sell the cattle dear, so, if they are consumed faster than the breeding countries from which they are brought can afford them, then the stock must decrease, and this must needs end in great scarcity; and by these means, this your island, which seemed as to this particular the happiest in the world, will suffer much by the cursed avarice of a few persons: besides this, the rising of corn makes all people lessen their families as much as they can; and what can those who are dismissed by them do but either beg or rob? And to this last a man of a great mind is much sooner drawn than to the former.

“Luxury likewise breaks in apace upon you to set forward your poverty and misery; there is an excessive vanity in apparel, and great cost in diet, and that not only in noblemen’s families, but even among tradesmen, among the farmers themselves, and among all ranks of persons. You have also many infamous houses,

and, besides those that are known,* the taverns and ale-houses are no better; add to these dice, cards, tables, football, tennis, and quoits, in which money runs fast away; and those that are initiated into them must, in the conclusion, betake themselves to robbing for a supply. Banish these plagues, and give orders that those who have dispeopled so much soil may either rebuild the villages they have pulled down or let out their grounds to such as will do it; restrain those engrossings of the rich, that are as bad almost as monopolies; leave fewer occasions to idleness; let agriculture be set up again, and the manufacture of the wool be regulated, that so there may be work found for those companies of idle people whom want forces to be thieves, or who now, being idle vagabonds or useless servants, will certainly grow thieves at last. If you do not find a remedy to these evils it is a vain thing to boast of your severity in punishing theft, which, though it may have the appearance of justice, yet in itself is neither just nor convenient; for if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this but that you first make thieves and then punish them?

* The “infamous houses . . . that are known,” as well as those who frequent them, are explicitly spelled out in other translations as “bawdes, qweynes [queens, or prostitutes], hoores, harlottes, strumpettes, brothelhouses, [and] stewes [bathhouses].” (Robynson)

“While I was talking thus, the lawyer, who was present, had prepared an answer, and had resolved to resume all I had said, according to the formality of a debate, in which things are generally repeated more faithfully than they are answered, as if the chief trial to be made were of men’s memories.

“‘You have talked prettily, for a stranger,’ said he, ‘having heard of many things among us which you have not been able to consider well; but I will make the whole matter plain to you, and will first repeat in order all that you have said; then I will show how much your ignorance of our affairs has misled you; and will, in the last place, answer all your arguments. And, that I may begin where I promised, there were four things —’

“‘Hold your peace!’ said the Cardinal; ‘this will take up too much time; therefore we will, at present, ease you of the trouble of answering, and reserve it to our next meeting, which shall be to-morrow, if Raphael’s affairs and yours can admit of it. But, Raphael,’ said he to me, ‘I would gladly know upon what reason it is that you think theft ought not to be punished by death: would you give way to it? or do you propose any other punishment that will be more useful to the public? for, since death does not restrain theft, if men thought their lives would be safe, what fear or force could restrain ill men? On the contrary, they would look on the mitigation of the punishment as an invitation to commit more crimes.’

*He describes
the Cardinal’s
familiar custom of
interrupting the
long-winded*

“I answered, ‘It seems to me a very unjust thing to take away a man’s life for a little money, for nothing in the world can be of equal value with a man’s life: and if it be said, “that it is not for the money that one suffers, but for his breaking the law,” I must say, extreme justice is an extreme injury:* for we ought not to approve of those terrible laws that make the smallest offenses capital,† nor of that opinion of the Stoics that makes all crimes equal;‡ as if there were no difference to be made between the killing a man and the taking his purse, between which, if we examine things impartially, there is no likeness nor proportion. God has commanded us not to kill, and shall we kill so easily for a little money? But if one shall say, that by that law we are only forbid to kill any except when the laws of the land allow of it, upon the same grounds, laws may be made, in some cases, to allow of adultery and perjury: for God having taken from us the right of disposing either of our own or of other people’s lives, if it is pretended that the

*Manlian discipline,
quoted from Livy*

* A paraphrase of the common Latin phrase from Cicero: *summum ius, summa iniuria* (“the extreme law is the greatest injustice”).

† The original text also makes brief mention of the edicts of the Roman consul Manlius who, as the Roman historian Livy describes, put his own son to death for a minor infraction, and the marginalia—“Manlian discipline, quoted from Livy”—highlight this passage. Though the meaning here remains intact, this translation, for reasons unclear, omits the specific reference and the marginal note. I have restored the latter.

‡ “All crimes are equal” was a tenet of Stoicism, a philosophical school begun in late Ancient Greece. The provocative pronouncement is described, and criticized, by Cicero and Horace.

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mutual consent of men in making laws can authorize man-slaughter in cases in which God has given us no example, that it frees people from the obligation of the divine law, and so makes murder a lawful action, what is this, but to give a preference to human laws before the divine? and, if this is once admitted, by the same rule men may, in all other things, put what restrictions they please upon the laws of God. If, by the Mosaical law, though it was rough and severe, as being a yoke laid on an obstinate and servile nation, men were only fined, and not put to death for theft, we cannot imagine, that in this new law of mercy, in which God treats us with the tenderness of a father, He has given us a greater license to cruelty than He did to the Jews.*

“Upon these reasons it is, that I think putting thieves to death is not lawful; and it is plain and obvious that it is absurd and of ill consequence to the commonwealth that a thief and a murderer should be equally punished; for if a robber sees that his danger is the same if he is convicted of theft as if he were guilty of murder, this will naturally incite him to kill the person whom otherwise he would only have robbed; since, if the punishment is the same, there is more security, and less danger of discovery, when he that can best make it is put out of the way; so that terrifying thieves too much provokes them to cruelty.

* The punishments for theft detailed by Moses in *Exodus* 22 are many, but do not include death.

“But as to the question, ‘What more convenient way of punishment can be found?’ I think it much easier to find out that than to invent anything that is worse; why should we doubt but the way that was so long in use among the old Romans, who understood so well the arts of government, was very proper for their punishment? They condemned such as they found guilty of great crimes to work their whole lives in quarries, or to dig in mines with chains about them. But the method that I liked best was that which I observed in my travels in Persia, among the Polylerits,* who are a considerable and well-governed people: they pay a yearly tribute to the King of Persia, but in all other respects they are a free nation, and governed by their own laws: they lie far from the sea, and are environed with hills; and, being contented with the productions of their own country, which is very fruitful, they have little commerce with any other nation; and as they, according to the genius of their country, have no inclination to enlarge their borders, so their mountains and the pension they pay to the Persian, secure them from all invasions. Thus they have no wars among them; they live rather conveniently than with splendor, and may be rather called a happy nation than either eminent or famous; for I do not think that they are known, so much as by name, to any but their next neighbors.

The Commonwealth of the Polylerits in the land of Persia

* “Polylerits” is another fabrication of More’s, assembled from Greek, meaning “people of (or from) much nonsense.”

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*We who do
otherwise ought to
make note of this*

“Those that are found guilty of theft among them are bound to make restitution to the owner, and not, as it is in other places, to the prince, for they reckon that the prince has no more right to the stolen goods than the thief; but if that which was stolen is no more in being, then the goods of the thieves are estimated, and restitution being made out of them, the remainder is given to their wives and children. The thieves are condemned to serve in the public works, but are neither imprisoned nor chained, unless there happens to be some extraordinary circumstance in their crimes. They go about loose and free, working for the public: if they are idle or backward to work they are whipped, but if they work hard they are well used and treated without any mark of reproach; only the lists of them are called always at night, and then they are shut up. They suffer no other uneasiness but this of constant labor; for, as they work for the public, so they are well entertained out of the public stock, which is done differently in different places: in some places whatever is bestowed on them is raised by a charitable contribution; and, though this way may seem uncertain, yet so merciful are the inclinations of that people, that they are plentifully supplied by it; but in other places public revenues are set aside for them, or there is a constant tax or poll-money raised for their maintenance. In some places they are set to no public work, but every private man that has occasion to hire workmen goes to the market-places and hires them

of the public, a little lower than he would do a freeman. If they go lazily about their task he may quicken them with the whip. By this means there is always some piece of work or other to be done by them; and, besides their livelihood, they earn somewhat still to the public.

“They all wear a peculiar habit, of one certain color, and their hair is cropped a little above their ears, and a piece of one of their ears is cut off. Their friends are allowed to give them either meat, drink, or clothes, so long as they are of their proper color; but it is death, both to the giver and taker, if they give them money; nor is it less penal for any freeman to take money from them upon any account whatsoever: and it is also death for any of these slaves (so they are called) to handle arms. Those of every division of the country are distinguished by a peculiar mark, which it is capital for them to lay aside, to go out of their bounds, or to talk with a slave of another jurisdiction, and the very attempt of an escape is no less penal than an escape itself. It is death for any other slave to be accessory to it; and if a freeman engages in it he is condemned to slavery. Those that discover it are rewarded—if freemen, in money; and if slaves, with liberty, together with a pardon for being accessory to it; that so they might find their account rather in repenting of their engaging in such a design than in persisting in it.

“These are their laws and rules in relation to robbery, and it is obvious that they are as advantageous

*Yet nowadays
the attendants of
noblemen consider
this same haircut
fashionable*

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as they are mild and gentle; since vice is not only destroyed and men preserved, but they are treated in such a manner as to make them see the necessity of being honest and of employing the rest of their lives in repairing the injuries they had formerly done to society. Nor is there any hazard of their falling back to their old customs; and so little do travelers apprehend mischief from them that they generally make use of them for guides from one jurisdiction to another; for there is nothing left them by which they can rob or be the better for it, since, as they are disarmed, so the very having of money is a sufficient conviction: and as they are certainly punished if discovered, so they cannot hope to escape; for their habit being in all the parts of it different from what is commonly worn, they cannot fly away, unless they would go naked, and even then their cropped ear would betray them. The only danger to be feared from them is their conspiring against the government; but those of one division and neighborhood can do nothing to any purpose unless a general conspiracy were laid amongst all the slaves of the several jurisdictions, which cannot be done, since they cannot meet or talk together; nor will any venture on a design where the concealment would be so dangerous and the discovery so profitable. None are quite hopeless of recovering their freedom, since by their obedience and patience, and by giving good grounds to believe that they will change their manner of life

for the future, they may expect at last to obtain their liberty, and some are every year restored to it upon the good character that is given of them.

“When I had related all this, I added that I did not see why such a method might not be followed with more advantage than could ever be expected from that severe “justice” which the lawyer magnified so much. To this he answered, ‘That it could never take place in England without endangering the whole nation.’

“As he said this he shook his head, made some grimaces, and held his peace, while all the company seemed of his opinion, except the Cardinal, who said, ‘That it was not easy to form a judgment of its success, since it was a method that never yet had been tried; but if,’ said he, ‘when sentence of death were passed upon a thief, the prince would reprieve him for a while, and make the experiment upon him, denying him the privilege of a sanctuary; and then, if it had a good effect upon him, it might take place; and, if it did not succeed, the worst would be to execute the sentence on the condemned persons at last; and I do not see,’ added he, ‘why it would be either unjust, inconvenient, or at all dangerous to admit of such a delay; in my opinion the vagabonds ought to be treated in the same manner, against whom, though we have made many laws, yet we have not been able to gain our end.’

“When the Cardinal was done, they all commended the motion, though they had despised it when

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it came from me, but more particularly commended what related to the vagabonds, because it was his own observation.

“I do not know whether it be worth while to tell what followed, for it was very ridiculous; but I shall venture at it, for as it is not foreign to this matter, so some good use may be made of it. There was a Jester standing by, that counterfeited the fool so naturally that he seemed to be really one; the jests which he offered were so cold and dull that we laughed more at him than at them, yet sometimes he said, as it were by chance, things that were not unpleasant, so as to justify the old proverb, “That he who throws the dice often, will sometimes have a lucky hit.”

“One of the company then said that I had taken care of the thieves, and the Cardinal had taken care of the vagabonds, so that there remained nothing but that some public provision might be made for the poor whom sickness or old age had disabled from labor “Leave that to me,” said the Fool, “and I shall take care of them, for there is no sort of people whose sight I abhor more, having been so often vexed with them and with their sad complaints; but as dolefully soever as they have told their tale, they could never prevail so far as to draw one penny from me; for either I had no mind to give them anything, or, when I had a mind to do it, I had nothing to give them; and they now know me so well that they will not lose their labor, but let me pass without giving me

*A festive dialogue
between a Friar
and a Fool*

any trouble, because they hope for nothing—no more, in faith, than if I were a priest; but I would have a law made for sending all these beggars to monasteries, the men to the Benedictines, to be made lay-brothers, and the women to be nuns.”

*An adage regularly
tossed about among
beggars*

“The Cardinal smiled, and approved of it in jest, but the rest liked it in earnest. There was a Divine present, who, though he was a grave morose man, yet he was so pleased with this reflection that was made on the priests and the monks that he began to play with the Fool, and said to him, ‘This will not deliver you from all beggars, except you take care of us Friars.’ ‘That is done already,’ answered the Fool, ‘for the Cardinal has provided for you by what he proposed for restraining vagabonds and setting them to work, for I know no vagabonds like you.’

“This was well entertained by the whole company, who, looking at the Cardinal, perceived that he was not ill-pleased at it; only the Friar himself was vexed,* as may be easily imagined, and fell into such a passion that he could not forbear railing at the Fool, and calling him knave, slanderer, backbiter, and son of perdition, and then cited some dreadful threatenings out of the Scriptures against him. Now the Jester thought he was in his element, and laid about him freely. “Good Friar,” said he, “be not angry, for it is written, ‘In patience possess your soul.’”†

*A playful allusion
to that quip of
Horace’s: “Drenched
by Italian vinegar”*

* “Stung by the vinegar,” as another translation describes the Friar’s reaction to the Fool’s remarks. (Logan/Adams)

† *Luke 21:19.*

*O how he preserves
decorum in this
tale!*

*It appears that the
Friar, because of
his ignorance, has
misused zelus (zeal)
as if in the neuter
case, like hoc scelus
(this crime)*

“The Friar answered (for I shall give you his own words), ‘I am not angry, you hangman; at least, I do not sin in it, for the Psalmist says, “Be ye angry and sin not.”’* Upon this the Cardinal admonished him gently, and wished him to govern his passions. ‘No, my lord,’ said he, ‘I speak not but from a good zeal, which I ought to have, for holy men have had a good zeal, as it is said, “The zeal of thy house hath eaten me up;”† and we sing in our church that those who mocked Elisha as he went up to the house of God felt the effects of his zeal, which that mocker, that rogue, that scoundrel, will perhaps feel.’‡

“‘You do this, perhaps, with a good intention,’ said the Cardinal, ‘but, in my opinion, it were wiser in you, and perhaps better for you, not to engage in so ridiculous a contest with a Fool.’

“‘No, my lord,’ answered he, ‘that were not wisely done, for Solomon, the wisest of men, said, “Answer a Fool according to his folly,”§ which I now do, and show him the ditch into which he will fall, if he is not aware of it; for if the many mockers of Elisha, who was but one bald man, felt the effect of his zeal, what will become of the mocker of so many Friars, among whom there are

* *Psalms* 4:4.

† *Psalms* 69:9.

‡ The Friar is referring to a Medieval hymn based on the story of Elisha, who is mocked by children for his baldness in *2 Kings* 2:23–4.

§ *Proverbs* 26:5.

so many bald men? We have, likewise, a bull, by which all that jeer us are excommunicated.’

“When the Cardinal saw that there was no end of this matter he made a sign to the Fool to withdraw, turned the discourse another way, and soon after rose from the table, and, dismissing us, went to hear causes.

“Thus, Mr. More, I have run out into a tedious story, of the length of which I had been ashamed, if (as you earnestly begged it of me) I had not observed you to hearken to it as if you had no mind to lose any part of it. I might have contracted it, but I resolved to give it you at large, that you might observe how those that despised what I had proposed, no sooner perceived that the Cardinal did not dislike it but presently approved of it, fawned so on him and flattered him to such a degree, that they in good earnest applauded those things that he only liked in jest; and from hence you may gather how little courtiers would value either me or my counsels.”

To this I answered, “You have done me a great kindness in this relation; for as everything has been related by you both wisely and pleasantly, so you have made me imagine that I was in my own country and grown young again, by recalling that good Cardinal to my thoughts, in whose family I was bred from my childhood;* and though you are, upon other accounts, very dear to me, yet you are the dearer because you honor his memory

* As noted earlier, More served as a page in Morton’s household when he was a young man.

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so much; but, after all this, I cannot change my opinion, for I still think that if you could overcome that aversion which you have to the courts of princes, you might, by the advice which it is in your power to give, do a great deal of good to mankind, and this is the chief design that every good man ought to propose to himself in living; for your friend Plato thinks that nations will be happy when either philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers.* It is no wonder if we are so far from that happiness while philosophers will not think it their duty to assist kings with their counsels.”

“They are not so base-minded,” said he, “but that they would willingly do it; many of them have already done it by their books, if those that are in power would but hearken to their good advice. But Plato judged right, that except kings themselves became philosophers, they who from their childhood are corrupted with false notions would never fall in entirely with the counsels of philosophers, and this he himself found to be true in the person of Dionysius.†

“Do not you think that if I were about any king, proposing good laws to him, and endeavoring to root out all the cursed seeds of evil that I found in him, I should either be turned out of his court, or, at least,

* Plato, *The Republic*, V.

† Hythloday refers here to either Dionysius the Elder or his son, Dionysius the Younger, both rulers of Syracuse. Plato visited and offered advice to both, but reportedly had little influence with either.

be laughed at for my pains? For instance, what could I signify if I were about the King of France, and were called into his cabinet council, where several wise men, in his hearing, were proposing many expedients; as, by what arts and practices Milan may be kept, and Naples, that has so often slipped out of their hands, recovered; how the Venetians, and after them the rest of Italy, may be subdued; and then how Flanders, Brabant, and all Burgundy, and some other kingdoms which he has swallowed already in his designs, may be added to his empire? One proposes a league with the Venetians, to be kept as long as he finds his account in it, and that he ought to communicate counsels with them, and give them some share of the spoil till his success makes him need or fear them less, and then it will be easily taken out of their hands; another proposes the hiring the Germans and the securing the Switzers by pensions; another proposes the gaining the Emperor by money, which is omnipotent with him; another proposes a peace with the King of Arragon, and, in order to cement it, the yielding up the King of Navarre's pretensions; another thinks that the Prince of Castile is to be wrought on by the hope of an alliance, and that some of his courtiers are to be gained to the French faction by pensions. The hardest point of all is, what to do with England; a treaty of peace is to be set on foot, and, if their alliance is not to be depended on, yet it is to be made as firm as possible, and they are to be called friends, but suspected as

*Secretly he is
dissuading the
French from
plotting against
Italy*

Swiss mercenaries

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enemies: therefore the Scots are to be kept in readiness to be let loose upon England on every occasion; and some banished nobleman is to be supported underhand (for by the League it cannot be done avowedly) who has a pretension to the crown, by which means that suspected prince may be kept in awe.*

“Now when things are in so great a fermentation, and so many gallant men are joining counsels how to carry on the war, if so mean a man as I should stand up and wish them to change all their counsels—to let Italy alone and stay at home, since the kingdom of France was indeed greater than could be well governed by one man; that therefore he ought not to think of adding others to it; and if, after this, I should propose to them the resolutions of the Achorians,† a people that lie on the south-east of Utopia, who long ago engaged in war in order to add to the dominions of their prince another kingdom, to which he had some pretensions by an ancient alliance: this they conquered, but found that the trouble of keeping it was equal to that by which it was gained; that the conquered people were always either in rebellion or exposed to foreign invasions, while

*A noteworthy
example*

* More, through Hythloday, is sketching out in shorthand political machinations common in his day: bribing sovereigns, hiring mercenaries, undermining treaties by supporting competing powers, cementing political alliances through marriage, and so on. Excepting, perhaps, political marriages, the list of practices is depressingly contemporary.

† Another neologism coined by More, assembled from Greek and meaning “people without a place.”

they were obliged to be incessantly at war, either for or against them, and consequently could never disband their army; that in the meantime they were oppressed with taxes, their money went out of the kingdom, their blood was spilt for the glory of their king without procuring the least advantage to the people, who received not the smallest benefit from it even in time of peace; and that, their manners being corrupted by a long war, robbery and murders everywhere abounded, and their laws fell into contempt; while their king, distracted with the care of two kingdoms, was the less able to apply his mind to the interest of either. When they saw this, and that there would be no end to these evils, they by joint counsels made an humble address to their king, desiring him to choose which of the two kingdoms he had the greatest mind to keep, since he could not hold both; for they were too great a people to be governed by a divided king, since no man would willingly have a groom that should be in common between him and another. Upon which the good prince was forced to quit his new kingdom to one of his friends (who was not long after dethroned), and to be contented with his old one. To this I would add that after all those warlike attempts, the vast confusions, and the consumption both of treasure and of people that must follow them, perhaps upon some misfortune they might be forced to throw up all at last; therefore it seemed much more eligible that the king should improve his ancient

kingdom all he could, and make it flourish as much as possible; that he should love his people, and be beloved of them; that he should live among them, govern them gently and let other kingdoms alone, since that which had fallen to his share was big enough, if not too big, for him:—pray, how do you think would such a speech as this be heard?”

“I confess,” said I, “I think not very well.”

“But what,” said he, “if I should sort with another kind of ministers, whose chief contrivances and consultations were by what art the prince’s treasures might be increased? Where one proposes raising the value of specie when the king’s debts are large, and lowering it when his revenues were to come in, that so he might both pay much with a little, and in a little receive a great deal. Another proposes a pretense of a war, that money might be raised in order to carry it on, and that a peace be concluded as soon as that was done; and this with such appearances of religion as might work on the people, and make them impute it to the piety of their prince, and to his tenderness for the lives of his subjects. A third offers some old musty laws that have been antiquated by a long disuse (and which, as they had been forgotten by all the subjects, so they had also been broken by them), and proposes the levying the penalties of these laws, that, as it would bring in a vast treasure, so there might be a very good pretense for it, since it would look like the executing a law and the doing of justice. A fourth proposes the

prohibiting of many things under severe penalties, especially such as were against the interest of the people, and then the dispensing with these prohibitions, upon great compositions, to those who might find their advantage in breaking them. This would serve two ends, both of them acceptable to many; for as those whose avarice led them to transgress would be severely fined, so the selling licenses dear would look as if a prince were tender of his people, and would not easily, or at low rates, dispense with anything that might be against the public good.

“Another proposes that the judges must be made sure, that they may declare always in favor of the prerogative; that they must be often sent for to court, that the king may hear them argue those points in which he is concerned; since, how unjust soever any of his pretensions may be, yet still some one or other of them, either out of contradiction to others, or the pride of singularity, or to make their court, would find out some pretense or other to give the king a fair color to carry the point. For if the judges but differ in opinion, the clearest thing in the world is made by that means disputable, and truth being once brought in question, the king may then take advantage to expound the law for his own profit; while the judges that stand out will be brought over, either through fear or modesty; and they being thus gained, all of them may be sent to the bench to give sentence boldly as the king would have it; for fair pretenses will never be wanting when sentence is to

be given in the prince's favor. It will either be said that equity lies of his side, or some words in the law will be found sounding that way, or some forced sense will be put on them; and, when all other things fail, the king's undoubted prerogative will be pretended, as that which is above all law, and to which a religious judge ought to have a special regard.

*A saying of the
wealthy Crassus*

“Thus all consent to that maxim of Crassus,* that a prince cannot have treasure enough, since he must maintain his armies out of it; that a king, even though he would, can do nothing unjustly; that all property is in him, not excepting the very persons of his subjects; and that no man has any other property but that which the king, out of his goodness, thinks fit to leave him. And they think it is the prince's interest that there be as little of this left as may be, as if it were his advantage that his people should have neither riches nor liberty, since these things make them less easy and willing to submit to a cruel and unjust government. Whereas necessity and poverty blunts them, makes them patient, beats them down, and breaks that height of spirit that might otherwise dispose them to rebel.

“Now what if, after all these propositions were made, I should rise up and assert that such counsels were both unbecoming a king and mischievous to him; and that

* Marcus Licinius Crassus was a Roman general and politician, considered the richest man in all of Rome; the maxim is likely drawn from Cicero's reflections on Crassus in his *On Moral Obligation*, I, viii.

not only his honor, but his safety, consisted more in his people's wealth than in his own; if I should show that they choose a king for their own sake, and not for his; that, by his care and endeavors, they may be both easy and safe; and that, therefore, a prince ought to take more care of his people's happiness than of his own, as a shepherd is to take more care of his flock than of himself?

“It is also certain that they are much mistaken that think the poverty of a nation is a mean of the public safety. Who quarrel more than beggars? Who does more earnestly long for a change than he that is uneasy in his present circumstances? And who run to create confusions with so desperate a boldness as those who, having nothing to lose, hope to gain by them? If a king should fall under such contempt or envy that he could not keep his subjects in their duty but by oppression and ill usage, and by rendering them poor and miserable, it were certainly better for him to quit his kingdom than to retain it by such methods as make him, while he keeps the name of authority, lose the majesty due to it. Nor is it so becoming the dignity of a king to reign over beggars as over rich and happy subjects.

“And therefore Fabricius,* a man of a noble and exalted temper, said ‘he would rather govern rich men than be rich himself; since for one man to abound in

* Gaius Fabricius Luscinus, a Roman commander and statesman, was lauded for his virtues. The saying attributed to him, however, is not his but that of another, equally virtuous, Roman politician named Manius Curius Dentatus.

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wealth and pleasure when all about him are mourning and groaning, is to be a jailer and not a king.’ He is an unskilful physician that cannot cure one disease without casting his patient into another. So he that can find no other way for correcting the errors of his people but by taking from them the conveniences of life, shows that he knows not what it is to govern a free nation. He himself ought rather to shake off his sloth, or to lay down his pride, for the contempt or hatred that his people have for him takes its rise from the vices in himself. Let him live upon what belongs to him without wronging others, and accommodate his expense to his revenue. Let him punish crimes, and, by his wise conduct, let him endeavor to prevent them, rather than be severe when he has suffered them to be too common. Let him not rashly revive laws that are abrogated by disuse, especially if they have been long forgotten and never wanted. And let him never take any penalty for the breach of them to which a judge would not give way in a private man, but would look on him as a crafty and unjust person for pretending to it.

“To these things I would add that law among the Macarians*—a people that live not far from Utopia—by which their king, on the day on which he began to reign, is tied by an oath, confirmed by solemn sacrifices, never to have at once above a thousand pounds of gold in his

*The remarkable law
of the Macarians*

* Another More-ism, meaning “of the blessed or the happy.”

treasures, or so much silver as is equal to that in value. This law, they tell us, was made by an excellent king who had more regard to the riches of his country than to his own wealth, and therefore provided against the heaping up of so much treasure as might impoverish the people. He thought that moderate sum might be sufficient for any accident, if either the king had occasion for it against the rebels, or the kingdom against the invasion of an enemy; but that it was not enough to encourage a prince to invade other men's rights—a circumstance that was the chief cause of his making that law. He also thought that it was a good provision for that free circulation of money so necessary for the course of commerce and exchange. And when a king must distribute all those extraordinary accessions that increase treasure beyond the due pitch, it makes him less disposed to oppress his subjects. Such a king as this will be the terror of ill men, and will be beloved by all the good. If, I say, I should talk of these or such-like things to men that had taken their bias another way, how deaf would they be to all I could say!"

An adage

"No doubt, very deaf," answered I; "and no wonder, for one is never to offer propositions or advice that we are certain will not be entertained. Discourses so much out of the road could not avail anything, nor have any effect on men whose minds were prepossessed with different sentiments. This philosophical way of speculation is not unpleasant among friends in a free conversation;

but there is no room for it in the courts of princes, where great affairs are carried on by authority.”

“That is what I was saying,” replied he, “that there is no room for philosophy in the courts of princes.”

An academic philosophy

“Yes, there is,” said I, “but not for this speculative philosophy, that makes everything to be alike fitting at all times; but there is another philosophy that is more pliable, that knows its proper scene, accommodates itself to it, and teaches a man with propriety and decency to act that part which has fallen to his share. If, when one of Plautus’ comedies is upon the stage, and a company of servants are acting their parts, you should come out in the garb of a philosopher, and repeat, out of Octavia, a discourse of Seneca’s to Nero, would it not be better for you to say nothing than by mixing things of such different natures to make an impertinent tragicomedy? For you spoil and corrupt the play that is in hand when you mix with it things of an opposite nature, even though they are much better. Therefore go through with the play that is acting the best you can, and do not confound it because another that is pleasanter comes into your thoughts.

A striking comparison

A silent role †

“It is even so in a commonwealth and in the councils of princes; if ill opinions cannot be quite rooted out,

* The Roman playwright Plautus was known for his low comedies, while the play *Octavia* (once attributed to the philosopher Seneca) is a serious-minded tragedy.

† This might also translate as “A foolish appearance.”

and you cannot cure some received vice according to your wishes, you must not, therefore, abandon the commonwealth, for the same reasons as you should not forsake the ship in a storm because you cannot command the winds. You are not obliged to assault people with discourses that are out of their road, when you see that their received notions must prevent your making an impression upon them: you ought rather to cast about and to manage things with all the dexterity in your power,* so that, if you are not able to make them go well, they may be as little ill as possible; for, except all men were good, everything cannot be right, and that is a blessing that I do not at present hope to see.”

“According to your argument,” answered he, “all that I could be able to do would be to preserve myself from being mad while I endeavored to cure the madness of others; for, if I speak with, I must repeat what I have said to you; and as for lying, whether a philosopher can do it or not I cannot tell: I am sure I cannot do it.”

“But though these discourses may be uneasy and ungrateful to them, I do not see why they should seem foolish or extravagant; indeed, if I should either propose such things as Plato has contrived in his ‘Commonwealth,’ or as the Utopians practice in theirs, though they might seem better, as certainly they are, yet they are so different from our establishment, which

*The institutions of
the Utopians*

* Other translations refer to this technique as “the indirect approach” (Surtz/Hexter).

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is founded on property (there being no such thing among them), that I could not expect that it would have any effect on them. But such discourses as mine, which only call past evils to mind and give warning of what may follow, leave nothing in them that is so absurd that they may not be used at any time, for they can only be unpleasant to those who are resolved to run headlong the contrary way; and if we must let alone everything as absurd or extravagant—which, by reason of the wicked lives of many, may seem uncouth—we must, even among Christians, give over pressing the greatest part of those things that Christ hath taught us, though He has commanded us not to conceal them, but to proclaim on the housetops that which He taught in secret.* The greatest parts of His precepts are more opposite to the lives of the men of this age than any part of my discourse has been, but the preachers seem to have learned that craft to which you advise me: for they, observing that the world would not willingly suit their lives to the rules that Christ has given, have fitted His doctrine, as if it had been a leaden rule,† to their lives, that so, some way or other, they might agree with one another.

* Hythlodai are referring to the Gospels of *Matthew* (10:27) and *Luke* (12:3), though it should be remembered that Jesus himself was a master at “casting about,” employing an “indirect approach” of persuasion through his use of parables.

† A ruler literally made of lead, and thus bendable. Aristotle uses the leaden rule as a metaphor for adaptable morality in his *Ethics*, V.

“But I see no other effect of this compliance except it be that men become more secure in their wickedness by it; and this is all the success that I can have in a court, for I must always differ from the rest, and then I shall signify nothing; or, if I agree with them, I shall then only help forward their madness. I do not comprehend what you mean by your ‘casting about,’ or by ‘the bending and handling things so dexterously that, if they go not well, they may go as little ill as may be;’ for in courts they will not bear with a man’s holding his peace or conniving at what others do: a man must barefacedly approve of the worst counsels and consent to the blackest designs, so that he would pass for a spy, or, possibly, for a traitor, that did but coldly approve of such wicked practices; and therefore when a man is engaged in such a society, he will be so far from being able to mend matters by his ‘casting about,’ as you call it, that he will find no occasions of doing any good—the ill company will sooner corrupt him than be the better for him; or if, notwithstanding all their ill company, he still remains steady and innocent, yet their follies and knavery will be imputed to him; and, by mixing counsels with them, he must bear his share of all the blame that belongs wholly to others.

“It was no ill simile by which Plato set forth the unreasonableness of a philosopher’s meddling with government. ‘If a man,’ says he, ‘were to see a great company run out every day into the rain and take delight in being

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wet—if he knew that it would be to no purpose for him to go and persuade them to return to their houses in order to avoid the storm, and that all that could be expected by his going to speak to them would be that he himself should be as wet as they, it would be best for him to keep within doors, and, since he had not influence enough to correct other people’s folly, to take care to preserve himself.’*

“Though, to speak plainly my real sentiments, I must freely own that as long as there is any property, and while money is the standard of all other things, I cannot think that a nation can be governed either justly or happily: not justly, because the best things will fall to the share of the worst men; nor happily, because all things will be divided among a few (and even these are not in all respects happy), the rest being left to be absolutely miserable.

“Therefore, when I reflect on the wise and good constitution of the Utopians, among whom all things are so well governed and with so few laws, where virtue hath its due reward, and yet there is such an equality that every man lives in plenty—when I compare with them so many other nations that are still making new laws, and yet can never bring their constitution to a right regulation; where, notwithstanding every one has his property, yet all the laws that they can invent have not the power either to obtain or preserve it, or even to enable men certainly to distinguish what is their own

* Plato, *Republic*, VI.

from what is another's, of which the many lawsuits that every day break out, and are eternally depending, give too plain a demonstration—when, I say, I balance all these things in my thoughts, I grow more favorable to Plato,* and do not wonder that he resolved not to make any laws for such as would not submit to a community of all things; for so wise a man could not but foresee that the setting all upon a level was the only way to make a nation happy; which cannot be obtained so long as there is property, for when every man draws to himself all that he can encompass, by one title or another, it must needs follow that, how plentiful soever a nation may be, yet a few dividing the wealth of it among themselves, the rest must fall into indigence. So that there will be two sorts of people among them, who deserve that their fortunes should be interchanged—the former useless, but wicked and ravenous; and the latter, who by their constant industry serve the public more than themselves, sincere and modest men.

“From whence I am persuaded that till property is taken away, there can be no equitable or just distribution of things, nor can the world be happily governed; for as long as that is maintained, the greatest and the far best part of mankind, will be still oppressed with a load of cares and anxieties. I confess, without taking it quite away, those pressures that lie on a great part of

* Plato counseled communism for his Guardian elite in *The Republic*—and later, in *Laws* VI, communism amongst all.

mankind may be made lighter, but they can never be quite removed; for if laws were made to determine at how great an extent in soil, and at how much money, every man must stop—to limit the prince, that he might not grow too great; and to restrain the people, that they might not become too insolent—and that none might factiously aspire to public employments, which ought neither to be sold nor made burdensome by a great expense, since otherwise those that serve in them would be tempted to reimburse themselves by cheats and violence, and it would become necessary to find out rich men for undergoing those employments, which ought rather to be trusted to the wise. These laws, I say, might have such effect as good diet and care might have on a sick man whose recovery is desperate; they might allay and mitigate the disease, but it could never be quite healed, nor the body politic be brought again to a good habit as long as property remains; and it will fall out, as in a complication of diseases, that by applying a remedy to one sore you will provoke another, and that which removes the one ill symptom produces others, while the strengthening one part of the body weakens the rest.”

“On the contrary,” answered I, “it seems to me that men cannot live conveniently where all things are common. How can there be any plenty where every man will excuse himself from labor? For as the hope of gain doth not excite him, so the confidence that he has in other men’s industry may make him slothful. If people come to

be pinched with want, and yet cannot dispose of anything as their own, what can follow upon this but perpetual sedition and bloodshed, especially when the reverence and authority due to magistrates falls to the ground? for I cannot imagine how that can be kept up among those that are in all things equal to one another.”

“I do not wonder,” said he, “that it appears so to you, since you have no notion, or at least no right one, of such a constitution; but if you had been in Utopia with me, and had seen their laws and rules, as I did, for the space of five years, in which I lived among them, and during which time I was so delighted with them that indeed I should never have left them if it had not been to make the discovery of that new world to the Europeans, you would then confess that you had never seen a people so well constituted as they.”

“You will not easily persuade me,” said Peter, “that any nation in that new world is better governed than those among us; for as our understandings are not worse than theirs, so our government (if I mistake not) being more ancient, a long practice has helped us to find out many conveniences of life, and some happy chances have discovered other things to us which no man’s understanding could ever have invented.”

“As for the antiquity either of their government or of ours,” said he, “you cannot pass a true judgment of it unless you had read their histories; for, if they are to be believed, they had towns among them before these parts

were so much as inhabited; and as for those discoveries that have been either hit on by chance or made by ingenious men, these might have happened there as well as here. I do not deny but we are more ingenious than they are, but they exceed us much in industry and application. They knew little concerning us before our arrival among them. They call us all by a general name of ‘The nations that lie beyond the equinoctial line;’ for their chronicle mentions a shipwreck that was made on their coast twelve hundred years ago, and that some Romans and Egyptians that were in the ship, getting safe ashore, spent the rest of their days amongst them; and such was their ingenuity that from this single opportunity they drew the advantage of learning from those unlooked-for guests, and acquired all the useful arts that were then among the Romans, and which were known to these shipwrecked men; and by the hints that they gave them they themselves found out even some of those arts which they could not fully explain, so happily did they improve that accident of having some of our people cast upon their shore. But if such an accident has at any time brought any from thence into Europe, we have been so far from improving it that we do not so much as remember it, as, in after times perhaps, it will be forgot by our people that I was ever there; for though they, from one such accident, made themselves masters of all the good inventions that were among us, yet I believe it would be long before we should learn or put in practice any of

the good institutions that are among them. And this is the true cause of their being better governed and living happier than we, though we come not short of them in point of understanding or outward advantages.”

Upon this I said to him, “I earnestly beg you would describe that island very particularly to us; be not too short, but set out in order all things relating to their soil, their rivers, their towns, their people, their manners, constitution, laws, and, in a word, all that you imagine we desire to know; and you may well imagine that we desire to know everything concerning them of which we are hitherto ignorant.”

“I will do it very willingly,” said he, “for I have digested the whole matter carefully, but it will take up some time.”

“Let us go, then,” said I, “first and dine, and then we shall have leisure enough.” He consented; we went in and dined, and after dinner came back and sat down in the same place. I ordered my servants to take care that none might come and interrupt us, and both Peter and I desired Raphael to be as good as his word. When he saw that we were very intent upon it he paused a little to recollect himself, and began in this manner:

THE END OF BOOK ONE



BOOK TWO FOLLOWS