

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

THE LIFE OF  
SIR THOMAS MORE

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William Roper

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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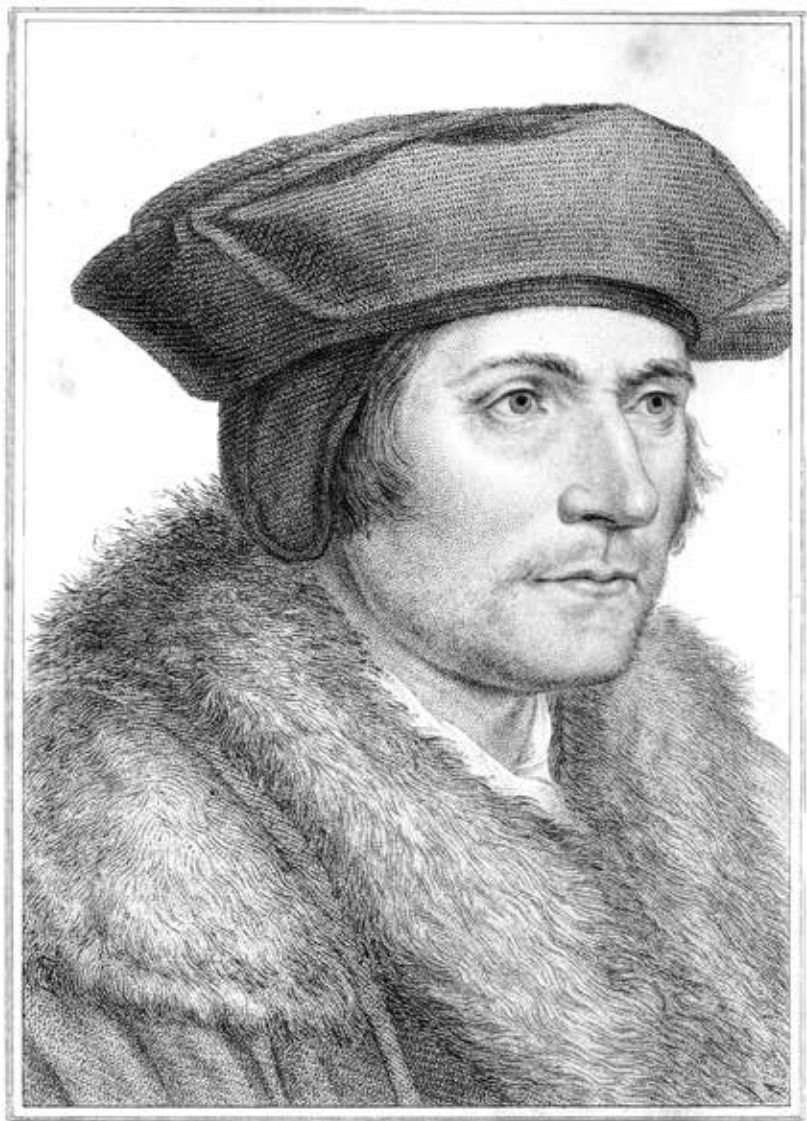
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# The Life of Sir Thomas More

*by*

WILLIAM ROPER





SIR THOMAS MORE

# Contents

Part I	3
Part II.	25
Part III.	43
Part IV.	59



**In hoc signo vinces.**

*“In this sign, you will conquer”*



# Part I





**F**orasmuch as Sir Thomas More, Knight sometime Lord Chancellor of England, a man of singular virtue and of a clear unspotted conscience, (as witnesseth Erasmus), more pure and white than the whitest snow, and of such an angelical wit, as England, he saith, never had the like before, nor never shall again, universally, as well in the laws of our Realm (a study in effect able to occupy the whole life of a man) as in all other sciences, right well studied, was in his days accounted a man worthy famous memory; I William Roper (though most unworthy) his son-in-law by marriage of his eldest daughter, knowing no one man that of him and of his doings understood so much as myself for that I was continually resident in his house by the space of sixteen years and more, thought it therefore my part to set forth such matters touching his life as I could at this present call to remembrance. Among which very many notable things not meet to have been forgotten, through negligence and long continuance of time, are slipped out of my mind. Yet to the intent the same shall not all utterly perish, I have at the desire of divers worshipful friends of mine, though very far from the grace and worthiness of

*them, nevertheless as far forth as my mean wit, memory and learning would serve me, declared so much thereof as in my poor judgment seemed worthy to be remembered.*

This Sir Thomas More after he had been brought up in the Latin tongue at St. Anthony's in London, he was, by his father's procurement received into the house of the right reverend, wise and learned prelate Cardinal Morton, where (though he was young of years, yet) would he at Christmastide suddenly sometimes step in among the players, and never studying for the matter, make a part of his own there presently among them, which made the lookers-on more sport than all the players beside. In whose wit and towardness the Cardinal much delighting, would often say of him unto the nobles that divers times dined with him, "This child here waiting at the table, whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man." Whereupon for his learning he placed him at Oxford, where when he was both in the Greek and Latin tongue sufficiently instructed, he was then for the study of the law of the Realm put to an Inn of the Chancery, called New Inn, where for his time, he very well prospered. And from thence was committed to Lincoln's Inn, with very small allowance, continuing there his study until he was made and accounted a worthy utter barrister. After this, to his great commendation, he read for a good space a public lecture of St. Augustine de Civitate Dei in the church of St. Laurence in the Old Jewry, whereunto there resorted Doctor Grocyn, an excellent cunning man, and all the chief learned of the city of London. Then was he made Reader of Furnival's Inn, so remaining by the space of three years and more. After which time he gave himself to devotion and prayer in the Charterhouse of London, religiously

living there without vow about four years, until he resorted to the house of one Mr. Colt, a gentleman of Essex that had oft invited him thither, having three daughters whose honest conversation and virtuous education provoked him there especially to set his affection. And albeit his mind most served him to the second daughter, for that he thought her the fairest and best favoured, yet when he considered that it would be both great grief and some shame also to the eldest to see her younger sister in marriage preferred before her, he then of a certain pity framed his fancy towards her, and soon after married her, nevertheless not discontinuing his study of the law at Lincoln's Inn, but applying still the same until he was called to the Bench, and had read twice, which is as often as any judge of the law doth read.

Before which time he had placed himself and his wife at Bucklesbury in London, where he had by her three daughters in virtue and learning brought up from their youth, whom he would often exhort to take virtue and learning for their meat, and play but for their sauce.

Who ere ever he had been reader in Court was in the latter time of King Henry the Seventh made a Burgess in the Parliament, wherein there were by the King demanded (as I have heard it reported) about three-fifteenths for the marriage of his eldest daughter, that then should be the Scottish Queen. At the last debating whereof he made such arguments and reasons there against, that the King's demands were thereby overthrown. So that one of the King's privy chamber, named Mr. Tyler, being present thereat, brought word to the King out of the Parliament house, that a beardless boy had disappointed all his purposes. Whereupon the King conceiving great indignation towards him could not be satisfied until he had some way revenged it. And foras-

much as he nothing having, nothing could lose, his grace devised a causeless quarrel against his Father, keeping him in the Tower until he had paid him an hundred pounds fine. Shortly hereupon it fortun'd that this Sir Thomas More coming in a suit to Dr. Fox, Bishop of Winchester, one of the King's privy council, they called him aside, and pretending great favour towards him, promised him that if he would be ruled by him, he would not fail but into the King's favour again to restore him, meaning, as it was after conjectured, to cause him thereby to confess his offence against the King, whereby his Highness might with better colour have occasion to revenge his displeasure against him. But when he came from the Bishop, he fell in communication with one Mr. Witford, his familiar friend, then chaplain to that Bishop and after a Father of Sion, and showed him what the Bishop had said unto him, desiring to have his advice therein, who for the passion of God prayed him in no wise to follow his counsel "for my Lord my Master (quoth he) to serve the King's turn will not stick to agree to his own father's death." So Sir Thomas More returned to the Bishop no more. And had not the King soon after died, he was determin'd to have gone over the sea, thinking that being in the King's indignation he could not live in England without great danger. After he was made one of the under-sheriffs of London, by which office and his learning together as I have heard him say, he gained without grief not so little as four hundred pounds by the year; since there was at that time in none of the Prince's courts of the laws of this realm any matter of importance in controversy wherein he was not with the one party of counsel. Of whom, for his learning, wisdom, and knowledge and experience, men had him in such estimation, that before he was come to the service of King Henry the Eighth,

at the suit and instance of the English Merchants, he was, by the King's consent, made twice Ambassador in certain great causes between them and the Merchants of the Stilliard, whose wise and discreet dealing therein to his high commendation, coming to the King's understanding, provoking his Highness to cause Cardinal Wolsey (then Lord Chancellor) to procure him to his service. And albeit the Cardinal according to the King's request earnestly travailed with him therefore, among many other his persuasions alleging unto him, how dear his service must needs be unto his Majesty, which could not of his honour with less than he should yearly lose thereby seem to recompense him, yet he, loath to change his estate, made such means to the King by the Cardinal to the contrary, that his Grace for that time was well satisfied. Now happened there after this a great ship of his that then was Pope to arrive at Southampton, which the King claiming for a forfeiture, the Pope's Ambassador by suit unto his Grace obtained, that he might for his Master the Pope have counsel learned in the Laws of this realm, and the matter in his own presence (being himself a singular civilian) in some public place to be openly heard and discussed. At which time there could none of our law be found so meet to be of counsel with this Ambassador as Sir Thomas More, who could report to the Ambassador in Latin all the reasons and arguments by the learned counsel on both sides alleged. Upon this the Councillors on either party in presence of the Lord Chancellor, and other the judges in the Star Chamber, had audience accordingly. Where Sir Thomas More not only declared to the Ambassador the whole effect of all their opinions, but also in defence on the Pope's side argued so learnedly himself, that both was the foresaid forfeiture to the Pope restored, and himself among all the

hearers, for his upright and commendable demeanour therein, so greatly renowned, that for no entreaty would the King from henceforth be induced any longer to forbear his service. At whose first entry thereunto he made him Master of the Requests, having then no better room void, and within a month after, knight and one of his Privy Council, and so from time to time was by the Prince advanced, continuing in his singular favour and trusty service twenty years and above, a good part whereof used the King upon holidays, when he had done his own devotions to send for him into his private room, and there some time in matters of Astronomy, Geometry, Divinity, and such other Faculties, and some time in his worldly affairs, to sit and confer with him, and other whiles would he in the night have him up into the leads, there to consider with him the diversities, courses, motions, and operations of the stars and planets. And because he was of a pleasant disposition, it pleased the King and Queen, after the Council had supped, at the time of their supper for their pleasure commonly to call for him, and to be merry with them. When he perceived so much in his talk to delight, that he could not once in a month get leave to go home to his wife and children (whose company he most desired) and to be absent from the Court two days together, but that he should be thither sent for again, he much misliking this restraint of liberty, began thereupon somewhat to dissemble his nature, and so by little and little from his former mirth to disuse himself, that he was of them from thenceforth no more so ordinarily sent for. Then died one Mr. Weston, Treasurer of the Exchequer, whose office after his death the King of his own offer, without any asking, freely gave unto Sir Thomas More. In the fourteenth year of his Grace's Reign was there a Parliament holden,

whereof Sir Thomas More was chosen Speaker, who being very loath to take that Room upon him, made an oration, not now extant, to the King's Highness for his discharge thereof. Whereunto when the King would not consent, he spake unto his Grace in form following: "Since I perceive (most redoubted sovereign) that it standeth not with your Highness' pleasure to reform this election, and cause it to be changed, but have, by the mouth of the Right Reverend Father in God the Legate your Highness' Chancellor, thereunto given your most royal consent, and have of your benignity determined, far above that I may bear, to enable me, and for this office to repute me meet, rather than ye should seem to impute unto your Commons that they had unmeetly chosen, I am therefore, and always shall be, ready obediently to conform myself to the accomplishment of your high commandment. In my most humble wise beseeching your most noble Majesty, that I may, with your Grace's favour, before I farther enter thereunto, make mine humble intercession unto your Highness for two lowly petitions, the one privately concerning myself, the other the whole assembly of your Common House. And for myself (Gracious Sovereign) that if it mishap me in anything hereafter, that is in the behalf of your Commons in your high presence to be declared, to mistake my message, and for lack of good utterance by me misrehearsed, to pervert or impair the prudent instructions, that it may then like your most noble Majesty of your abundant grace, with the eye of your accustomed pity, to pardon my simplicity, giving me leave again to repair to the Common House, and there to confer with them, and to take their substantial advice, what thing, and in what wise I shall on their behalf utter and speak before your noble Grace: to the intent their prudent advices and

affairs be not by my simpleness and folly hindered or impaired. Which thing if it should so hap, as it were well likely to mishap in me (if your Grace's benignity relieved not my oversight) it could not fail to be, during my life, a perpetual grudge and heaviness to my heart. The help and remedy whereof in manner aforesaid remembered, is (most Gracious Sovereign) my first lowly suit and humble petition unto your most noble Grace. Mine other humble request, most excellent Prince, is this. Forasmuch as there be of your Commons here, by your high commandment assembled for your Parliament, a great number which are after the accustomed manner appointed in the Common House to treat and advise of the common affairs among themselves apart: and albeit (my liege Lord) that, according to your prudent advice, by your honourable writs everywhere declared, there hath been as due diligence used in sending up to your Highness' Court of Parliament the most discreet persons out of every quarter, that men could esteem meet thereto, whereby it is not to be doubted but that there is a very substantial assembly of right wise and politic persons: yet (most victorious Prince) since among so many wise men, neither is every man wise alike, nor among so many men like well witted, every man like well spoken; and it often happeneth, that likewise as much folly is uttered with painted polished speeches, so many boisterous and rude in language see deep indeed, and give right substantial counsel: and since also in matters of great importance the mind is often so occupied in the matter, that a man rather studieth what to say, than how; by what reason whereof the wisest man and best spoken in a country fortuneth among, while his mind is fervent on the matter, somewhat to speak in such wise, as he would afterward wish to have been uttered otherwise,

and yet no worse will had when he spake it, than he hath when he would so gladly change it: Therefore (most Gracious Sovereign) considering that in all your high Courts of Parliament is nothing entreated but of matters of weight and importance concerning your Realm, and your own Royal estate, it could not fail to let and put to silence from the giving of their advice and counsel many of your discreet Commons [except they] were utterly discharged of all doubt and fear how anything that should happen them to speak, should happen of your Highness to be taken: and in this point your well-known benignity putteth every man in right good hope. Yet such is the weight of the matter, such is the reverend dread that the timorous hearts of your natural subjects conceive towards your high Majesty (our most redoubted King and undoubted Sovereign) that they cannot in this point find themselves satisfied, except your gracious bounty herein declared put away the scruple of their timorous minds, and animate and encourage them out of doubt. It may therefore like your most abundant Grace (our most gracious King) to give to all your Commons here assembled, your most gracious licence and pardon freely, without doubt of your dreadful displeasure, every man to discharge his conscience, and boldly in everything incident among, declare his advice, and whatsoever happeneth any man to say, it may like your noble Majesty of your inestimable goodness to take all in good part, interpreting every man's words, how uncunningly soever they be couched, to proceed yet of a good zeal towards the profit of your Realm and honour of your Royal person, the prosperous estate and preservation whereof (most excellent Sovereign) is the thing which we all your most humble loving subjects, according to the most bounden duty of our natural allegiance, most highly

desired and pray for." At this Parliament, Cardinal Wolsey found himself much grieved with the Burgesses thereof, for that nothing was so soon done or spoken therein, but that it was immediately blown abroad in every alehouse. It fortuned at that Parliament a very great subsidy to be demanded, which the Cardinal fearing it would not pass the Common House, determined for the furtherance thereof, to be there present himself; before whose coming after long debating there, whether it were better but with a few of his Lords (as the most opinion of the house was) or with a whole train royally to receive him there amongst them, "Masters," quoth Sir Thomas More, "forasmuch as my Lord Cardinal lately, you note well, laid to our charge the lightness of our tongues for things uttered out of this house, it shall not be amiss in my mind to receive him with all his pomp, with his maces, his pillars, his pollaxes, his crosses, his hat, and great seal too; to the intent that if he find the like fault with us hereafter, we may be the bolder from ourselves to lay the blame upon those that his Grace bringeth with him." Whereunto the House wholly agreeing, he was received accordingly. Where after he had in a solemn oration by many reasons proved how necessary it was the demands there moved to be granted, and further said that less would not serve the King's purpose; he seeing the company still silent, and thereunto nothing answering, and contrary to his expectation showing in themselves towards his requests no towardness of inclination, said unto them: "Masters, ye have many wise and learned men among you, and seeing I am from the King's own person sent hither unto you for the preservation of yourselves and all the Realm, I think it meet you give me a reasonable answer." Whereat every man holding his peace, then began he to speak to one Mr. Marney, who making

him no answer neither, he severally asked the same question of divers others accounted the wisest of the company. To whom when none of them all would give so much as one word, being before agreed, as the custom was, by their speaker to make answer: "Masters," quoth the Cardinal, "unless it be the manner of your house (as of likelihood it is) in such causes to utter your minds by the mouth of your speaker, whom ye have chosen for trusty and wise (as indeed he is) here is without doubt a marvellous obstinate silence;" and thereupon required the answer of Mr. Speaker, who reverently upon his knees excusing the silence of the house, abashed at the presence of so noble a personage, able to amaze the wisest and best learned in a realm, and after by many reasons proving, that for them to make answer was it neither expedient, nor agreeable with the ancient liberty of the House; in conclusion for himself showed, that though they had all with their voices trusted him, yet except every of them could put into his own head all their several wits, he alone in so weighty a matter was unmeet to make his Grace answer, whereupon the Cardinal displeased with Sir Thomas More, that had not in this Parliament in all things satisfied his desire, suddenly arose and departed: and after the Parliament ended, uttered unto him all his griefs, saying, "Would to God you had been at Rome, Mr. More, when I made you Speaker." "Your Grace not offended, so would I too, my Lord," quoth he, and to wind such quarrels out of the Cardinal's head, he began to talk of that gallery at Hampton Court, wherewith so wisely brake he off the Cardinal's displeasent talk, the Cardinal at that present, as it seemed, wist not what more to say to him, but for revengement of his displeasure counselled the King to send him Ambassador into Spain, commending unto his Highness his

wisdom, learning and meetness for that voyage, and the difficulty of the cause considered, none was there so well able, he said, to serve his Grace therein. Which when the King had broken to Sir Thomas More, and that he had declared unto his Grace, how unfit a journey it was for him, the nature of the country and disposition of his complexion so disagreeing together, that he should never be likely to do his Grace acceptable service therein, knowing right well that if his Grace sent him thither, he should send him to his grave; but showing himself nevertheless ready according to his duty, albeit with the loss of his life, to fulfil his Grace's pleasure therein, the King allowing well his answer, said unto him, "It is not our meaning, Mr. More, to do you hurt, but to do you good we would be glad. We therefore for this purpose will devise upon some other, and employ your service otherwise." And such entire favour did the King bear him, that he made him Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, upon the death of Sir Richard Winfield, who had that office before. And for the pleasure he took in his company, would his Grace suddenly sometimes come home to his house at Chelsea to be merry with him, whither on a time unlooked for he came to dinner, and after dinner in a fair garden of his walked with him by the space of an hour holding his arm about his neck. As soon as his Grace was gone, I rejoicing, told Sir Thomas More, how happy he was, whom the King had so familiarly entertained, as I had never seen him to do to any before, except Cardinal Wolsey, whom I saw his Grace once walk with arm in arm. "I thank our Lord, son," quoth he, "I find his Grace my very good lord indeed, and I do believe he doth as singularly favour me as any subject within this Realm. Howbeit (son Roper) I may tell thee, I have no cause to be proud thereof. For if my head

would win him a castle in France (for then there was wars between us) it should not fail to go.” This Sir Thomas More, among all other his virtues, was of such meekness, that if it had fortuned him with any learned man resorting to him from Oxford, Cambridge, or elsewhere, as there did divers, some for the desire of his acquaintance, some for the famous report of his learning and wisdom, and some for suits of the Universities, to have entered into argument, wherein few were comparable to him, and so far to have discoursed with them therein, that he might perceive they could not, without some inconvenience, hold out much further disputation against him: then, least he should discomfort them, as he that sought not his own glory, but rather would seem conquered than to discourage students in their studies, ever showing himself more desirous to learn than to teach, would he by some witty device courteously break off into some other matters and give over. Of whom for his wisdom and learning had the King such an opinion, that at such time as he attended upon his Highness, taking his progress either to Oxford or Cambridge, where he was received with every eloquent orations, his Grace would always assign him (as one that was most prompt, and ready therein) *ex tempore* to make answer thereunto; whose manner was, whensoever he had any occasion, either here or beyond the sea to be in any University, not only to be present at the reading and disputations there commonly used, but also learnedly to dispute among them himself. Who being Chancellor of the Duchy, was made ambassador twice; joined in commission with Cardinal Wolsey once to the Emperor Charles into Flanders, the other time to the French King into France. Not long after this the Water Bailiff of London (sometime his servant) hearing, where he had been at dinner, certain

merchants liberally to rail against his old master, waxed so discontented therewith, that he hastily came to him, and told him what he had heard: "and were I, Sir" (quoth he) "in such favour and authority with my Prince as you are, such men surely should not be suffered so villainously and falsely to mis-report and slander me. Wherefore I would wish you to call them before you, and, to their shame for their lewd malice to punish them." Who smiling upon him said, "Mr. Water Bailiff, would you have me punish them by whom I receive more benefit than by you all that be my friends? Let them a God's name speak as lewdly as they list of me, and shoot never so many arrows at me, so long as they do not hit me, what am I the worse? But if they should once hit me, then would it a little trouble me: howbeit, I trust, by God's help, there shall none of them all be able once to touch me. I have more cause, Mr. Water Bailiff (I assure thee) to pity them, than to be angry with them." Such fruitful communication had he oftentimes with his familiar friends. So on a time walking along the Thames side with me at Chelsea, in talking of other things, he said to me, "Now would to God, so Roper, upon condition three things were well established in Christendom I were put in a sack, and here presently cast into the Thames." "What great things be these, Sir," quoth I, "that should move you so to wish?" "Wouldest thou know, son Roper, what they be?" quoth he. "Yea marry, Sir, with a good will if it please you," quoth I. "I faith, they be these, son." quoth he. "The first is, that whereas the most part of Christian princes be at mortal wars, they were at universal peace. The second, that where the Church of Christ is at this present sore afflicted with many heresies and errors, it were well settled in an uniformity of religion. The third, that where the King's

matter of his marriage is now come into question, it were to the glory of God and quietness of all parties brought to a good conclusion:" whereby, as I could gather, he judged, that otherwise it would be a disturbance to a great part of Christendom. Thus did it by his doings throughout the whole course of his life appear, that all his travails and pains, without respect of earthly commodities, either to himself or any of his, were only upon the service of God, the Prince and the Realm, wholly bestowed and employed; whom in his latter time I heard to say, that he never asked of the King himself the value of one penny. As Sir Thomas More's custom was daily, if he were at home, besides his private prayers with his children, to say the seven psalms, litany, and suffrages following, was his guise nightly, before he went to bed, with his wife, children, and household to go to his chapel, and there upon his knees ordinarily to say certain psalms and collects with them: and because he was desirous for godly purposes some time to be solitary, and sequester himself from worldly company; a good distance from his mansion house builded he a place, called the new building, wherein was a chapel, a library, and a gallery, in which as his use was upon other days to occupy himself in prayer and study together, so on the Fridays there usually continued he from morning unto evening, spending his time duly in devout prayers, and spiritual exercises; and to provoke his wife and children to the desire of heavenly things, he would sometimes use these words unto them. "It is now no mastery for you children to go to heaven. For everybody giveth you good counsel, everybody giveth you good example. You see virtue rewarded, and vice punished, so that you are carried up to heaven even by the chins. But if you live in the time, that no man will give you good counsel, nor no man will