

The knights drew back, and then FitzUrse, who had cast aside his axe, advanced on the archbishop with uplifted sword. "You pander!" exclaimed Becket. "You are my man; you have done me fealty—how dare you touch me!" "I owe you no fealty contrary to my fealty to the king," retorted FitzUrse: "Strike! Strike!" and he knocked the cap from Becket's head. He covered his face with his hands, calling aloud on God and St Denis and St Alphege. Tracy aimed a more dangerous blow, which Grim partly warded off with his own arm, sustaining a wound; but Thomas's head and shoulder were cut, and somebody struck again, with the flat of his sword. Blood was running down the archbishop's face; he wiped it away, crying, "Into thy hands, Lord, I commend my spirit!" The next blow, again from Tracy, brought him to his knees, his hands still clasped as when one prays. Murmuring "I am willing to die for the name of Jesus and in defense of the Church," he fell forward on his face, so gently that his long cloak was not disarranged.

Then Richard le Breton struck Thomas's head with such ferocity that the scalp was severed and the sword left broken on the pavement. Hugh of Horsea, well called Mauclerc, a subdeacon who had joined the knights, put his foot on Thomas's neck and scattered the brains from the skull with his sword point: "Let us go," he said, "The traitor is dead and will rise no more." While, it is said, a great storm of rain and thunder broke overhead, the murderers rushed away, shouting "The king's men!", to ransack the archbishop's house, where they found two hairshirts among his clothes, which they cast contemptuously aside.

It was all over in a few minutes. The nave of the cathedral was now full of excited townsfolk, but the transept was still and empty save the body of Thomas Becket, lying close to the corner wall. For some time no one dared touch

or even go near it; but before morning he was being called martyr and saint, and cloths were dipped in his blood for relics.

A tremendous reaction of feeling followed this deed of blood. In an extraordinary brief space of time devotion to the martyred archbishop had spread all through Europe. The pope promulgated the bull of canonization, little more than two years after the martyrdom, 21 February, 1173. On 12 July, 1174, Henry II did public penance, and was scourged at the archbishop's tomb. An immense number of miracles were worked, and for the rest of the Middle Ages the shrine of St. Thomas of Canterbury was one of the wealthiest and most famous in Europe. The martyr's holy remains are believed to have been destroyed in September, 1538, when nearly all the other shrines in England were dismantled; but the matter is by no means clear, and, although the weight of learned opinion is adverse, there are still those who believe that a skeleton found in the crypt in January, 1888, is the body of St. Thomas.

References:

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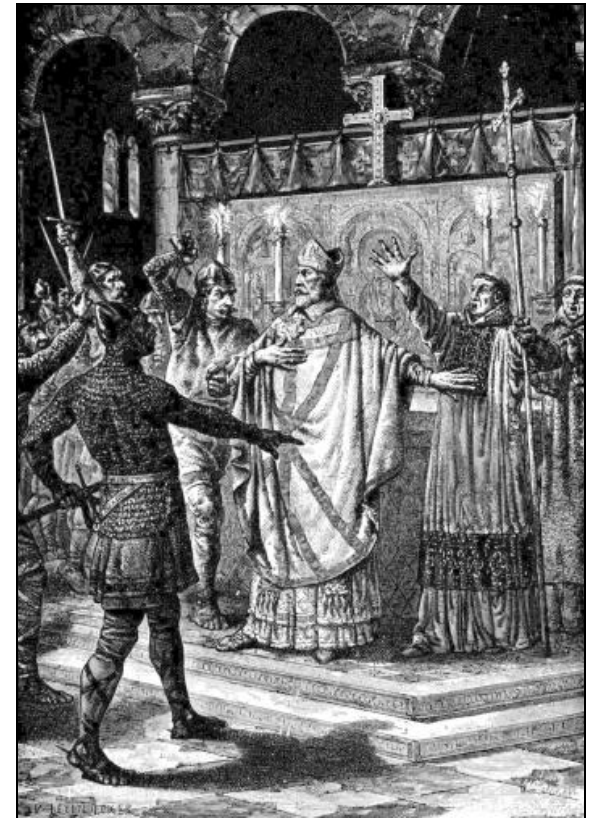
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Pamphlet 578

The Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury At Canterbury A.D. 1170



Born in London ca. 1118, Thomas Becket later became the chancellor to King Henry II. In 1162, Becket became the Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas went from being a follower of hounds to a shepherd of souls. His apostolic zeal put him at odds with his old friend and patron King Henry II who had issued the *Constitutions of Clarendon* as a means to tax the Church, make appointments, try the clergy, and undermine papal authority. Becket opposed

Henry II and was forced to seek refuge in France for six years. When he returned, he was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by agents of the Henry II.

The Martyrdom

After dinner in the mid-afternoon of Tuesday, 29 December 1170, Thomas Becket, then in his fifty-third year, was sitting in the bedroom of his house adjoining the monastery of Christ Church at Canterbury, talking with friends and members of his household. Word was brought that four of the king's knights were below, wishing to speak with the archbishop. They were brought up, and after a little uneasy sparring, they voiced the royal complaints about Thomas's behavior. He rejected them, appealed to his agreement with King Henry five months before, and in turn complained of insults offered to himself as archbishop. Hugh de Morville asked why he took the punishment of these upon himself, to which Thomas replied heatedly: "When the Church's rights are violated, I await no man's permission to vindicate them. I will give the king the things that are his, but to God the things that are God's. It is my business and only I shall see to it!" This defiance stung the knights to fury. "You threaten!" exclaimed FitzUrse. "Are you going to excommunicate us?" "You threaten me," retorted Thomas, "but to no purpose. All the swords in England will not frighten me from my obedience to God and to my lord the Pope. I gave way once—but not again. There is fealty between you and me, and I am astonished that you should threaten the archbishop in his own house."

FitzUrse called upon the bystanders who had crowded in not to let the archbishop escape; but they did not stir, and "I am not going to escape." Said Thomas. He implored the knights to come back as they left the room, uttering confused

threats, but they pressed on into the garden, shouting "To arms!" Their soldiers ran in at the main gateway, while outside in the streets the people gathered in the dusk of midwinter, a dusk made gloomier by the gathering storm.

Becket returned to his room and sat down on the bed, while his friend John of Salisbury gently rebuked him for his headstrongness. "I am ready to die," replied Thomas. But John continued to expostulate: "We are sinners, and no one of us is yet fit to die. I know nobody who wants to die without cause except you." But now there was a noise of shouting and breaking of doors, and Thomas was persuaded, very unwillingly, to go to the church, by way of a private door in his cloisters; his metropolitan's cross was borne before him. As he proceeded at a leisurely pace, his attendants hustled and hurried, even tried to carry him; he shook them off, time and again. Thus they passed along the north and east walls of the cloister, till they came to the door into the north transept of the church.

The cathedral of Canterbury is a very different and much bigger building now than what it was in 1170; but there is still a north-west transept on the Norman foundations, with a doorway into the south-east corner of the cloisters. Outside the predecessor of this door Thomas stopped, met by frightened monks who had interrupted the singing of Vespers when the alarm reached them. "Come in! Come in!" they implored. "Get back into choir," answered the archbishop. "I will not come in all the time you are standing there." They drew back a little from the door, and as he stepped in Thomas saw the crown in the transept. "What are all these people frightened of?" he asked. And voices came back. "Armed men! In the cloisters!" Thomas turned and saw them in the dim light, coming up the southern walk: the four knights with drawn swords, other knights, and an armed rabble;

FitzUrse had picked up a carpenter's axe outside, and was shouting, "This way, king's men."

The door was slammed to and barred, and in the confusion some monks were shut outside; these banged on the door. Thomas himself reopened it, crying to the others above the din, "Get away, you cowards! I order you by obedience not to shut this door—a church is not a castle!" Terror was now out of hand; the crown in the transept broke and fled, leaving only three men with the archbishop: his old master, Robert, prior of Merton, William FitzStephen, his chaplain, and an English cleric, Edward Grim. These hurried him to a flight of steps leading to the choir, and in that moment the pursuers burst in. There was a babble of voices: "Stop!"—"Where has that traitor gone?"—and from FitzUrse as he stumbled in the darkness, "Where is the archbishop?" Becket's voice replied from the steps: "Here I am Reginald. No traitor, but archbishop and priest of God. What do you want?" And he came down from the steps and stood between a central pillar and the altar of St. Benedict.

They shouted at him to absolve the bishops whom he had excommunicated four days before, on Christmas day. "I cannot do other than I have done," answered Thomas, and turning to FitzUrse, "Reginald, you have received many benefits from me. Why do you come into my church with arms in your hands?" FitzUrse's only reply was to threaten with his axe, exclaiming, "You shall die! I'll tear your heart out!" "I am ready to die for God and the Church," said Thomas, "but God's curse be upon you if you harm my people." Then they fell upon him and tried to drag him out of the church, but he resisted with all his strength, bracing himself against the pillar and shaking off his assailants.