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THE MURDER OF THOMAS BECKET (1170)¹

From the late 1000s, a conflict arose in Western Europe between the papacy and the secular rulers. It was spearheaded by Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–85), who asserted the church's right to appoint high-ranking religious leaders. This did not please the secular authorities who had dominated such appointments and enjoyed big economic advantages from them. This started the Investiture Controversy. Gregory excommunicated Henry, then pardoned him, but Henry now gained the advantage.

Similar struggles also arose in other parts of Western Europe. One of these conflicts occurred in England between Henry II (1154–89) and Thomas Becket (c. 1118–70), an old friend whom he had appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. Despite their prior friendship, Becket strenuously opposed Henry's efforts to seize power from the Church. Becket was convicted of contempt and fled as a fugitive. He eventually returned in 1170 thanks to an agreement brokered by Pope Alexander III (r. 1159–81). Back in England, Becket excommunicated three supporters of Henry II who exclaimed in anger: "What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and promoted in my household, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born clerk!" Four of Henry's supporters took this as a veiled request for action, and they brutally assassinated Becket in the Canterbury Cathedral. Subsequently Becket was canonized by the church and widely venerated by Christians.

The following passage, written by an eye-witness, Thomas Grim, describes the assassination. The excerpt can be found [here](#).

When the monks had entered the church, already the four knights followed behind with rapid strides. With them was a certain subdeacon, armed with malice like their own, Hugh, fitly surnamed for his wickedness, Mauclerc, who showed no reverence for God or the saints, as the result showed. When the holy archbishop entered the church, the monks stopped vespers which they had begun and ran to him, glorifying God that they saw their father, whom they had heard was dead, alive and safe. They hastened, by bolting the doors of the church, to protect their shepherd from the slaughter. But the champion, turning to them, ordered the church doors to be thrown open, saying, "It is not meet to make a fortress of the house of prayer, the church of Christ: though it be not shut up it is able to protect its own; and we shall triumph over the enemy rather in suffering than in fighting, for we came to suffer, not to resist." And straightway they entered the house of peace and reconciliation with swords sacrilegiously drawn, causing horror to the beholders by their very looks and the clanging of their arms.

All who were present were in tumult and fright, for those who had been singing vespers now ran hither to the dreadful sight.

¹ Charles W. Colby, (ed.), *Selections From the Sources of History* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), 56–59.

Inspired by fury the knights called out, "Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the king and realm?" As he answered not they cried out the more furiously, "Where is the archbishop?" At this, intrepid and fearless, as it is written, "The just, like a bold lion, shall be without fear," he descended from the stair where he had been dragged by the monks in fear of the knights, and in a clear voice answered, "I am here, no traitor to the king, but a priest. Why do ye seek me?" And whereas he had already said that he feared them not, he added, "So I am ready to suffer in His name, Who redeemed me by His Blood: be it far from me to flee from your swords, or to depart from justice." Having thus said, he turned to the right, under a pillar, having on one side the altar of the blessed Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary, on the other that of S. Benedict the Confessor: by whose example and prayers, having crucified the world with its lusts, he bore all that the murderer could do with such constancy of soul as if he had been no longer in the flesh. The murderers followed him; "Absolve," they cried, "and restore to communion those whom you have excommunicated, and restore their powers to those whom you have suspended." He answered: "There has been no satisfaction, and I will not absolve them." "Then you shall die," they cried, "and receive what you deserve.": "I am ready," he replied, "to die for my Lord, that in my blood the Church may obtain liberty and peace. But in the name of Almighty God, I forbid you to hurt my people whether clerk or lay." Thus piously and thoughtfully, did the noble martyr provide that no one near him should be hurt or the innocent be brought to death, whereby his glory should be dimmed as he hastened to Christ. Thus did it become the martyr-knight to follow in the footsteps of his Captain and Saviour Who when the wicked sought Him said: "If ye seek Me, let these go their way." Then they laid sacrilegious hands on him, pulling and dragging him that they might kill him outside the Church, or carry him away a prisoner, as they afterwards confessed. But when he could not be forced away from the pillar, one of them pressed on him and clung to him more closely. Him he pushed off calling him pander," and saying, "Touch me not, Reginald; you owe me fealty and subjection, you and your accomplices act like madmen." The knight, fired with terrible rage at this severe repulse, waved his sword over the sacred head. "No faith," he cried, "nor subjection do I owe you against my fealty to my lord the king." Then the unconquered martyr seeing the hour at hand which should put an end to this miserable life and give him straightway the crown of immortality promised by the Lord, inclined his neck as one who prays, and joining his hands he lifted them up, and commended his cause and that of the Church to God, to S. Mary, and to the blessed martyr Denys. Scarce had he said the words than the wicked knight fearing lest he should be rescued by the people and escape alive, leapt upon him suddenly and wounded this lamb who was sacrificed to God, on the head, cutting off the top of the crown which the sacred unction of the chrism had dedicated to God; and by the same blow he wounded the arm of him who tells this. For he, when the others, both monks and clerks, fled, stuck close to the sainted archbishop and held him in his arms till the one he interposed was almost severed. Behold the simplicity of the dove, the wisdom of the serpent, in the martyr who opposed his body to those who struck that he might preserve his head, that is his soul and the Church, unharmed, nor would he use any forethought against those who destroyed the body whereby he might escape. O worthy shepherd, who gave himself so boldly to the wolves that his flock might not be torn. Because he had rejected the world, the world in wishing to crush him unknowingly exalted him. Then he received a second blow on the head but still stood firm. At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows, offering himself a living victim, and saying in a low voice, "For the name

of Jesus and the protection of the Church I am ready to embrace death.” Then the third knight inflicted a terrible wound as he lay, by which the sword was broken against the pavement, and the crown which was large was separated from the lead; so that the blood white with the brain and the brain red with blood, dyed the surface of the virgin mother Church with the life and death of the confessor and martyr in the colours of the lily and the rose. The fourth knight prevented any from interfering so that the others might freely perpetrate the murder. As to the fifth, no knight but that clerk who had entered with the knights, that a fifth blow might not be wanting to the martyr who was in other things like to Christ, he put his foot on the neck of the holy priest and precious martyr, and, horrible to say, scattered his brains and blood over the pavement, calling out to the others: “Let us away, knights; he will rise no more.”