

THE QUARRY

Cameron Wood

Fidei Defensor

Stephen ran his hand through his bushy beard as he stared at the wooden chest. He knew what was inside but he could scarcely believe it. Slowly lifting the lid, he winced as he heard the creaking sound of the chest opening. He quickly shut it again and took a step back, feeling the crunch of the snow underfoot. *What have I done?* Placing his hands back on the trunk he threw the lid open and stared inside.

‘God be praised,’ he whispered as he bent over to touch the bible. A crashing sound could be heard as Stephen peered through the falling snow and saw the wool merchants throwing logs onto the fire.

‘Hans!’ Stephen called out to the monk who was standing in the clearing with the merchants. ‘Hans come here.’ Stephen watched as the monk began trudging through the snow.

‘It is all there?’ Hans called out.

Was it? Stephen turned over the cover of the bible and saw a message from Tyndale.

Yes.

Hans gazed into the chest and his blue eyes swelled with tears. He reached in and ran his rough hands over the wooden engravings on the cover.

‘Did you pay them?’ Stephen asked signalling with his eyes toward the merchants.

Hans could only manage a nod.

The translation and printing of the bible in English was an illegal offence. *I’ll get treason for this – they’ll have my head.* Turning away from the frail monk Stephen contemplated burning the bible and taking off. He knew he’d only have one chance. But before he could decide, he heard the sound of a trumpet behind him and the calls of men in the distance. *It’s Thomas.* Slamming the chest shut he clambered up the hill towards the road.

‘The Archbishop of Canterbury!’ called a knight.

Bowing as was customary, Stephen heard the hoofs of the horses stamping into the rock underfoot.

‘Stephen, my lad!’ Cranmer called out from atop of his regal black horse.

‘Master Cranmer.’

Stephen held out his arm to help his master dismount. Cranmer had unusually short legs and his gray beard, which hung down to his waist, made his legs look even shorter.

So Stephen tell me – how was it? Cranmer’s gaze was imploring. By that, he meant, *did you get the bible?*

‘Master, I have it.’

‘Ah my lad!’ Cranmer roared. ‘You continue to be a true source of joy for me. So then tell me, how was Saxony?’

Stephen smiled and led Cranmer down to the chest.

‘Tis well Your Grace. The Lutherans still roam free – but I fear for Tyndale.’

Cranmer stopped and looked up at Stephen.

‘Is he safe Stephen?’

Stephen listened as the wind howled darkening discontent through the oak trees in the distance. He nodded.

‘Have faith my boy, after all we thought they would get Luther.’ Cranmer then took off his soft, broad-brimmed hat and brushed the snow from it.

Stephen pointed out the chest to his master and went to open it, but Cranmer grabbed his hand. ‘Allow me, lad.

Oh my –’ Cranmer gasped. He dropped to his knees and Stephen watched as snow soaked into his beard and purple robe. Cranmer reached in and like a father to a baby he picked the bible up and held it in his hands. ‘Exquisite, isn’t it?’ He ran his gloved fingers over the wooden engravings as Hans had earlier. His fingers lingered over the engraving of Christ hanging on the cross. After Cranmer placed the book back down he got up and laughed at the water imprint on his robe.

‘Looks like even the archbishop couldn’t hide his joy,’ he winked at Stephen. ‘Well my lad, it’s time for you to be shaved, for tomorrow you are to meet her Majesty.’

Stephen looked past his master to a bird which was jumping from branch to branch in the distance. *I wonder if I should envy you?*

Stephen scurried down the candlelit hall. Under his arm was the bible wrapped in the archbishop's red cloth. He did not take his eyes off the book even when Queen Anne's maids passed by. Stephen let out a soft chuckle as he thought about what a Count in court had named the maids, *The beset blondes*.

When he came to the door he felt his heart quicken and his palms moisten.

‘Enter,’ came the confident call of Cranmer.

Turning the handle he instantly smelt the lavender petals which decorated the table Cranmer and the Queen sat at. Cranmer spoke with great enthusiasm to Queen Anne, who was dressed in an elegant French gown and corset, which accentuated the auburn in her hair.

‘Speak of the devil!’ roared Cranmer.

The Queen turned her head slowly to greet Stephen.

‘This must be him then?’ she spoke with a hint of an accent, harking back to her days in the French court.

Stephen bowed and felt his Adam’s apple rise in his throat.

‘Come sit my lad.’ Cranmer rose and pulled a seat out from the table.

Stephen placed the bible down on the table and sat.

‘Your Majesty,’ he whispered and then frowned. *A whisper? You meet the Queen of England and can only whisper?*

She briefly smiled at him and then focused her jade eyes on the bible. Taking a cue from Cranmer, Stephen slid the bible across the table towards Queen Anne.

‘It is from Tyndale – Your Majesty.’

He couldn’t tell if she ignored him or just did not reveal anything without first deliberating on the correct response.

‘He’s well then?’ she finally responded after opening the bible.

‘Yes Your Majesty,’ Stephen replied. He looked watchfully at his master’s face. *Give me something to say Thomas, please.*

‘May I speak freely?’ he heard himself ask the Queen.

She nodded and tapped her long nails against the table.

‘I’m not sure he’s, ah, safe. He is around Englishmen but I fear they will have him hunted.’

‘I see.’

There was a moment of silence. It lingered until it was snatched by the Queen, ‘Thomas, what do you think we should do?’

‘Well your Majesty, I propose that Stephen and I go immediately to his Majesty.’ Thomas leant back in his chair, relaxed his chest and looked at the young man who had been his pupil for the past five years.

‘Master Cranmer?’ Stephen asked, feeling his lips quiver with fright.

Thomas fixed his eyes on him and Stephen knew what would come from Cranmer’s mouth; *fear not man, Stephen.*

‘Well if I may interject gentlemen?’ the Queen interrupted. Stephen watched the corners of her eyebrows rise, forming a delicate triangle on her forehead. ‘I may only be a woman but surely a wife knows her husband best... and this I know’ Anne paused and looked at both men carefully. ‘He has never spared a woman in his lust, nor a man who has attracted his anger. Therefore, you will need to wait until the morning. I will dine with Henry tonight and persuade him of your necessary audience with him.’

She opened to the inscription on the first page.

May your Majesty bestow upon the English people what is rightfully theirs by your Majesty.

Your humble servant,

W. Tyndale.

‘Lovely,’ the Queen hummed. ‘I think that I should like Tyndale to return home as soon as possible.’

‘Yes, your Majesty.’ Cranmer responded, before nodding to Stephen, prompting his exit.

Stephen bowed to the Queen again and quickly rose to leave.

‘Take the bible with you,’ Cranmer ordered.

Stephen lowered his head to hide his rosy cheeks. He wrapped the bible hurriedly and left.

Times were easier than this back home... before Father agreed to help Tyndale. This shall be it, I'll finish this and then beseech for leave. Thomas will be saddened, no doubt. And he will surely tell me, 'Don't be like young Jonah, Stephen, you must do the Lord's bidding.'

‘Excuse me young lad –’ the voice broke his train of thought.

‘Yes?’ Stephen turned and saw a man in a black robe with a distinguishable gold chain.

‘Might I ask who you are and your business?’

Stephen watched his dark eyes.

‘Stephen.’

He had black hair to match his eyes and it looked as if his hair had been trampled by a plough-horse.

The man smiled. ‘Stephen. Is it just Stephen then?’

He felt his fingers moisten again as he held the bible against his chest. *Just tell him you need to be on your way!*

‘Stephen Fitzroy. I work for the archbishop.’

‘Yes, of course. Glad to greet you Stephen. I am Sir Thomas More, Chancellor to his Majesty.’

Stephen courteously bowed and gazed down the hall, praying Cranmer and the Queen would emerge.

‘Tell me Stephen, do you know about your name sake?’ More asked casually as if he had nothing better to do.

‘My namesake? Well my family is from –’

‘No not your lineage – the apostle,’ he said.

Stephen felt a drop of sweat trickle down his forehead. He nodded slowly.

‘Pray then tell me what is it that we remember of the apostle Stephen?’

‘He was the first apostle to be martyred, Your Grace.’

More nodded slowly and grinned. ‘Very, very good. Now one more question, do you know the term his holiness the Pope gave to his majesty the king?’

Stephen paused. ‘Fidei Defensor.’

‘Quite. You have a knack for languages. *Fidei Defensor* - defender of the faith. It's a grand title, isn't it?’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’

More took a step closer and Stephen felt his warm breath. ‘As a servant of the *defender of the faith* I intend on defending the faith *entirely*. Do you, Stephen?’

Stephen nodded and took a step back. ‘I must be going the archbishop is waiting for me.’

More lowered his head before turning and striding back down the hall where the Queen and Cranmer were.

Hearing his shoes clank against the stairs played tricks on Stephen's mind. *Fear not man*, he told himself as he listened to hear if another set of footsteps were following. The wind howled up the staircase at him, sending shivers up his spine.

‘Caught!’

Stephen pivoted to find where the voice had come from.

‘Caught!’ crowed a black bird from the window next to Stephen. Putting the bible on the window ledge Stephen swatted at the bird and hissed at it. He pressed his hands over his ears and began muttering a Psalm to himself.

‘Caught!’ The crow was louder this time and Stephen watched as the bird seemed to turn its head and look at him, its blood stained beak glistening in the moonlight.

‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...’ he cried at the bird as if debating his right to live.

‘Stephen!’

Stephen spun to hear if this voice came from the top of the staircase. *Who? Are they footsteps?*

‘Caught!’

He grabbed the bible and took off down the dark staircase, unable to see the stairs beneath him. The chilly air of the night filled his lungs and his body begged him to stop. As he clambered further down the staircase he suddenly felt his frost bitten knees lock beneath him. The stone stairs crashed into his body and he felt a fiery sensation shoot up his spine.

Lord save me, he pleaded before everything went dark.

He heard a voice ring in his ears and felt the stench of rotting flesh crawl up his nostrils but Stephen couldn’t respond.

‘Alright then, throw the water.’

The cold water stung the wounds on his body.

‘Don’t make this any more unpleasant Stephen...’

‘Where?’ he whispered, tasting the thick blood in his mouth. He saw the man slip out of the moonlight, which trickled in through the barred windows. *Where am I? Am I hanging?*

‘Light the candles,’ the man grunted. ‘Hurry about it.’

Where am I? He tried to tilt his head back to see what he was tied to. His arms were tied to a rope which hung down from a scaffold above him.

‘What – do you ...’ Stephen groaned before being interrupted by the vomit which rose in his throat. The man approached and stood in the pool of blood and vomit unfazed. His dark

eyes haunted him, reminding him of those of the bird in the stairwell. *The bird... the stairwell... the bible...*

The flickering candlelight now gave him the ability to make out the gold chain around the man's neck.

'What I want, is for –'

'More?' Stephen muttered weakly interrupting the chancellor.

'Indeed. Now as I was saying, I want you to tell me where the bible is.'

The bible... the stairwell...

'I don't know,' he spluttered, more blood oozing out of his mouth.

'You don't *know*? Or you won't tell me?' More cried out, punching Stephen's swollen rib.

'It doesn't have to be like this Stephen. I don't know where you went astray, but I implore you, for the sake of your soul, to return to the faith.' More stalked around him and loosened the ropes.

Falling in a heap, Stephen felt the icy stone floor soothe the bruises and cuts on his body.

'I'll ask you once again,' Stephen listened to the footsteps. 'Where is the bible?'

'I don't know!' Stephen cried out in pain, his anguish causing More's young assistant to slink to the back of the dungeon.

Where? Where? The stairwell...

'I left it in the stairwell.'

'Liar!' More yelled as bits of saliva rained down on Stephen.

'Jonathan, you searched the stairs, did you not?'

'Y-y-yes,' the boy spoke through his chattering teeth.

'Then lift him up and take him to the chair.'

Stephen felt Jonathan's skinny arms wrap around his arm pits but the boy struggled to pull Stephen towards the chair.

'Leave him you useless peasant!' More shouted and then shoved the boy to the ground.

‘Cranmer,’ Stephen muttered nonsensically.

‘Your Cranmer can’t help you down here, Stephen.’

‘Now Stephen,’ More continued. ‘You are going to enjoy this chair, after all that time you’ve been hanging.’ He lifted Stephen to his feet and held him upright next to the chair.

Stephen looked down at the metal spikes which were evenly spread out across the chair. He whimpered and cried out for mercy. There were too many spikes to count, but the six large spikes on the base drew his attention. More slowly lowered Stephen into the chair, giving him time to anticipate the torture.

‘Argh! Please, Your Grace! Ah!’ Stephen yelled in agony as he felt the spikes of the chair pierce his skin. He tried with all his might to lean forward to avoid the spikes.

‘Where is the bible and who gave it to you?’

‘The stairwell! The stairwell!’ More bent over and wrapped his arms around Stephen’s back so that he could look Stephen in the eye.

‘Who wrote it?’

‘Lord have mercy!’

‘Tyndale?’ More asked. Stephen’s head dropped and all that could be heard was a groan.

‘It must have been him. Let me tell you about Mr. Tyndale, Stephen. Mr. Tyndale is a criminal of the foulest breed. He rejects Christ’s Holy Catholic Church. And for what?! A heretical belief fed from the devil himself! But Mr. Tyndale will pay the price.’ He lifted Stephen’s chin.

‘And you know what else Stephen? You will pay the price too.’ There was no response. More watched as Stephen’s eyes rolled to the back of his head. ‘Come now Stephen, you cannot die yet.’

Stephen stirred but could not speak.

‘Jonathan, fetch the knife.’

‘No –’ Stephen muttered and gasped for air. More kneeled next to him and whispered in his ear.

‘Ready to talk?’

‘I see now.’ Stephen lifted his head and his blood shot eyes looked up at the roof.

More gritted his teeth and struck Stephen’s face until it dropped again.

Stephen slowly lifted his head. ‘I see the Kingdom of Heaven.’

More snatched Stephen’s arm, which lay limp by his side, and shoved it through the metal clasp on the arm of the chair. He did the same with the other arm and then pulled the chest strap tight across Stephen’s chest. Whatever blood Stephen had left oozed out as the spikes sunk deeper into his flesh. His lifeless eyes remained fixed on the roof.

After a few minutes, Stephen’s eyes closed and his head dropped. Blood now flowed from the chair and covered the stone floor. More eventually placed his fingers on Stephen’s neck to check for a pulse.

‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them,’ Stephen whispered before he breathed his last.

Outside the castle walls a man could be seen roaming across the courtyard, his arms wrapped around a book. Above the man crowed a bird.