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THE CONVERSION OF SIMON FISH.

BY JOHN KNIPE.

3. SIMON WRITES HIS BOOK.

HOW AN ORCHARD BECAME AN EDEN.

THE Widow Necton folded her hands comfortably as she sat on the garden seat at the top of the orchard and watched her little Margery where she stood under an apple-tree with her cousin Robert who had just shown her his fine new stone house built on a gentle rise above the banks of the Stour. That house, its fair gardens and goodly orchards, with lands and farms both grazing and corn lands—all were being offered to her maid, reflected the widow, smiling, sighing and nodding her head, for Cousin Robert's grave face was very earnest as he pleaded under the tree while Margery listened earnestly, her eyes downcast, so still a form that she scarce seemed to breathe.

That comfortable woman on the bench waited only to see the smooth brown head lifted, the gentle response obediently given, and the happy Robert lead her blushing daughter to desire humbly her mother's consent and blessing. That was how it had been when Margery's father courted her. "Only my dear mother—Our Lady rest her soul!—told me she'd beat me black and blue if I gainsaid my own father's will"—meditated the widow—"which was right and proper after the dowry he had gotten together with a deal o' pains, the kind heart! And if my Thomas had lived we might have done more for the child—but there, Master Monmouth has nor chick nor child, and he promised to make up her portion—though Robert says he wants none save the maid's goodwill."

Time slipped by—minutes grew into the hour—while Cousin Robert pleaded and Margery listened unresponsive—very silent, very still under the gnarled bough of the apple-tree—laden with green leaves and hard small green apples.

A shadow fell on the grass and made the mother look up.

"How, cousin? 'Tis wellnigh the supper-hour," said a deep voice—and the Sheriff of Norwich came and joined her on the bench—"So! Rob is wooing our little Madge, ha? And is the maid willing?"

"The wench is no fool!" snapped the widow, whose anxious eyes betrayed her doubting fears. "Margery would hear how much he cares for her. She's but a tender lass and she's a head stuffed with these new notions. But a good child, obedient and humble, a biddable maid, cousin Stephen."

"Biddable?" repeated the Sheriff dryly. "I count men biddable if they submit themselves to the King's justice in my court. But a soft slip of a lass wooed by a true man in an orchard, nay, 'tis not bidding nor chiding should bring her to the answer. 'Twas not thus my Kate spoke with me. Nor will Robert take

an unwilling 'Yea.' He'd liefer hear a plain 'Nay' and so rest her good cousin. I doubt that my brother is too grave a man for Madge. She's young and likes a frolic, she wants . . ."

"Tillyvally!" exclaimed the widow. "The child has more sense. I'll tell thee what she wants—a good man and a good home."

The Sheriff smiled under his beard. "A trifle more, I do guess. Ha! Robert comes hither—alone."

"Alone!" echoed the dismayed mother. The sunlight seemed to fade from the leaves and the grass and the bright river turned grey.

The Sheriff got up and his six feet of grave dignity towered over her. "Take it wisely," he counselled her kindly enough. "Thou dost seek thy maid's happiness, my cousin."

"She's still dreaming of yon runagate! Yon idle mocker Simon!" muttered the widow. "I'd liefer see my child in her grave than wed to yon wicked rebel! He's turned heretic to boot!"

The Sheriff shook his head at her and Robert joined them.

"She says that she thanks me kindly, esteems me much, but she could never be my wife," he said quietly.

"Did Madge give thee no further reason, brother?" asked the Sheriff, for the widow was dumb with chagrin.

"She loves me not," answered Robert simply.

"Holy Mary!" burst out the mother. "'Tis not like she could! What modest wench dare love until her mother bid her! Hast been over-hasty, Robert. Give her time and she'll come to love thee right well, a good kind true man who would make the foolish chit the best of husbands."

Robert Necton shook his head and looked sorrowful. "No. I was earnest with the Lord to give me this dear maid—I desired her greatly and besought her love with tears in my prayers. But she is denied me."

Madam Necton stared. "Art gone mad? Why shouldst thou pray for her *love*, cousin?" she asked bewildered. "I promised her to thee for thy true wife. Ye can win her love as her husband—the maid is wife-old, cousin."

"We who are of the Brethren take none to wedded wife but such as are willing," replied Robert Necton gravely, "since in all things we are bound to seek the Lord's Will. I know not why He has refused me this priceless boon, but He has refused it."

Margery's suitor spoke with a strange dignity and, saluting his cousin, he walked away with bowed head and a slow resolute tread like a man who was defeated in an honest battle.

Widow Necton turned to the other brother. "Holy Saints! What does Robert mean?" she exclaimed. "How can he or other Christian man think so? We're all perforce made buxom to the Lord God! But to seek out a wife by praying! Nay! It smacks of presumption to my mind. It smells of heresy!" She started. "The Brethren!" she repeated. "Does he mean those

secret heretics the priest warned me of! They call themselves 'The Christian Brethren.' Nay! If Robert be one I do refuse him for my child! He need seek no praying answer for't!"

"Chut! Thou foolish woman!" rebuked the Sheriff. "Dost blow hot and cold in a breath! Robert is a good and sober man who is a devout churchgoer and much respected here in Norwich. He has his notions and he believes in prayer more than most men."

"Then he'd be better as priest or monk," observed the widow; "such fancies are unsettling to an honest simple woman."

"A while ago thou wert all agog to see him wedded," retorted the Sheriff, laughing. "Nay! Cousin, come your ways! Robert is a staid man of years and Margery is——"

"Less than nineteen and he better than thirty-five," replied the mother. "I did always fear he might be over-old for the child," she added, musing. And she beckoned to her daughter, who came meekly to her with grave face and downcast eyes.

Widow Necton surveyed her shrewdly. "So! Hast no will to wed thy cousin?" she demanded.

"No, good mother, so please you," murmured the girl.

"Wherefore?"

"He is—he is—no more young," stammered the daughter. She looked up timidly and perceiving her mother's smile Margery flung herself into the open arms and burst into tears.

"So! So! My dove!" murmured Madam Necton, patting her gently. "Shalt not wed where thou art unhappy. Nay, nay, 'tis a good buxom child and she shall be free to choose where she loves—so the man has means," she added prudently.

Margery raised her head and looked over her mother's shoulder. Her fair soft skin flushed bright red and, leaving the shelter of the maternal embrace, she ran fleetfooted towards that same rejected Cousin Robert who now appeared at the orchard wicket accompanied by a slim youth booted and spurred and dusty from hard riding.

"Saints! Will the foolish child run to take back her Nay?" gasped the perplexed mother.

Then Margery's voice rang out in such rapture and passion as her mother had never heard it in her whole life—"Simon!"

And the widow jumping up from her comfortable seat in the sun saw a pair of arms—belonging to a travel-stained and dust-whitened youth—seize her daughter as the meek girl fairly rushed into them, submitting to be honestly and heartily kissed without any visible pause in the proceeding for a considerable time.

The Sheriff held back the indignant mother.

"Nay," he bade her, "we've known the like in our time, cousin. Youth goes to youth. Margery has chosen her own man."

"But yon Simon! Rebel, penniless scamp, vagabond!" She wept for rage.

"He looks none," said the good-humoured Stephen, eyeing the lovers. "Come, Jenny, dry thy eyes and observe the young man. He has a brave appearance under his dusty cloak."

The widow could not resist the impulse to look. She saw a very different Simon to the former self-willed eager youth whom she had disliked for her darling. Simon Fish advanced with an assured air and kept his arm round Margery's waist, but the handsome flashing witty young lawyer was now sobered into a determined man, and purpose and consideration marked his broad white brow. His dress was rich but of a sober fashion.

"Thou hast much changed, Simon," she admitted, staring at him.

"For the better, I hope, good mother," he said, a firmer ring in his pleasant voice. "If I may?" he added tactfully.

He kissed her quickly on both cheeks.

Taken aback the widow returned it and Simon said—"Margery knows the reason for my flight. The Lord Cardinal was pleased to count me his enemy. But all is mended. I owe my return not to his will but to the good pleasure of the King's Grace who himself deigned to command my Lord of York that he should send word there would be no further prosecution of those concerned in the Christmas Game at Gray's Inn. Thus I am not returned as a penniless rogue and vagabond, my good dame. Means are sufficient and I have employment. So I pray you right humbly to give us your willing consent to a speedy marriage."

"Well spoken!" approved Stephen Necton, smiling at them.

Robert Necton had followed and he said slowly: "Cousin Jane, I have heard of this young man Simon Fish, and I believe that he is worthy of our sweet kinswoman. He has been tried and proved faithful by Mynheer van Endhoven and other good men. In token of which trust, Master Fish," he added, turning to Simon, "I ask to be counted of your good acquaintance."

"Acquaintance, Master Robert Necton! Nay, friends rather!" cried Simon heartily. "Shalt dance at my wedding, then!" He wrung the offered hand and turned to the Sheriff: "Sir, I think that ye are the maid's next of kin after her mother. I am ready to discuss matters, for I desire to make a proper settlement on my wife-to-be." Simon smiled at her. "My father has given me fair rentals."

"So! I think, Cousin Jenny, that thou wilt be satisfied with such provision," Stephen Necton said, turning to the widow.

Jane Necton nodded. "I have done my duty as Margery's mother," she replied. "I have striven to care for the interests of my best beloved child, since her father is in Paradise. If I opposed thee before, Simon, it was for her good. But in truth, my dear lad, I have ever wished thee well in my heart, for thou art one to win hearts, and wild as thou didst seem I did ever love thee"—she gulped—"if I treated thee harshly, sweet daughter, it was from fear—I did ever dread thou might leave me to seek thy Simon in a strange land, for I knew that thou wouldst sooner beg thy bread than lose his love. . . . Take her, dear Simon, and take my blessing and forgive me."

The widow could not continue, for tears choked her words. All

listened in amazement that the hard grasping Jane Necton spoke so humbly and pleaded for forgiveness with the scorned and slandered Simon Fish. Once a slight smile touched Simon's lips as she assured him of her past feelings, but he could be generous in the triumph of a return which the King himself had been pleased to allow.

"It needs no forgiveness of mine, dear mother," Simon answered.

SIMON AS THE LONDON AGENT FOR CHRISTOPHER VAN ENDHOVEN.

The young couple settled down in a house near Whitefriars which, being in the neighbourhood of the Temple, gave Simon the colour of undertaking some legal work as a law-scrivener which he could do without suspicion. But he was readmitted to study at Gray's Inn when it became known that the King had shown him such singular favour and after he had submitted a Treatise through his friend Mr. Edward Hall. Simon received his Coif in the Hall where his Play had been given and he took his Call to the Bar even though as a married man he was no longer resident for the few weeks which remained to complete his Term. It was held by the Master and the Benchers that a forced exile did not invalidate so brilliant a student.

Neither did the lawyers cavil at Simon's occupation as the agent and representative of the wealthy Flemish printer, Endhoven. He set up his modest business—more office than shop—for supplying books printed in the Low Countries. And as he was prudent and thrifty as well as trustworthy, Simon drove a good trade and had his own connection. Secretly he was also an agent for the Christian Brethren and he supplied their people with the Testaments of William Tyndale, which were first brought over, well-concealed in merchandise, in the summer of 1526.

For some time all remained quiet and unsuspected. Margery was a happy wife and Simon a steady and respected London citizen. Robert Necton bought Tyndale's Testaments from Simon's store.

"I fear Cousin Rob is over-ready with his tongue," Margery said anxiously one late autumn evening when she was helping Simon to unpack the hampers in which the precious Testaments had been brought over concealed under coverings of flax and consigned as "*Clean Paper.*"

Simon, who was kneeling on the garret floor, paused to look up and smile at his wife as she sat by the lamp, carefully shaded from the window over the street.

"How, sweetheart?" he asked—half-absently counting the books.

"He is a good man, but he confides so readily," replied Margery, "and Rob is not brave like thou, dear Simon."

Her husband laughed. "I'm not brave, darling. But thou art and wise with it. So! How many of the First Two Gospels are writ in the secret manifest?"

"I will see. Hark! Someone knocks and 'tis late. Dark night! O Simon! If they take thee from me again! I should surely die!"

"Foolish little wife! 'Tis some reveller. Quick! We must pack these books again and hide them close in the recess! Aye! There is someone without. I hear Tim stirring. Hold the lamp, lower. So!" Simon swung open the secret panel and disclosed a space under the roof-gable where he rapidly transferred the prohibited books from overseas. "Go down first," he whispered. "Lie down on the bed and I will bring the lamp and make some clatter on the stairs. Then open thy door and call out to me as if just awakened by the noise."

Margery obeyed, though she much disliked the deception. But as Simon shrewdly told her how else could the Word be distributed without using some of the wisdom of serpents?

He himself went boldly down and demanded who knocked so late in the Water Lane. A familiar voice answered. Tim was rubbing his eyes and shivering as he waited to know if his master willed for the servant to open at that hour.

"Unbar the door and let him in quickly," bade Simon—who ran back and told his wife to fear nothing, for the visitant was a tried friend.

"Who is it?" whispered Margery.

"Master Monmouth," replied Simon quietly, and he kissed her white face as she clung to him.

"Godfather! O Simon! There must be some new terrible danger!" she panted.

But she went down with him and greeted Monmouth calmly with her usual affectionate kiss.

Humphrey Monmouth looked keenly at Simon as he stood in the tiny parlour under the light of the lamp which was set on the table.

"Simon, lad, I'm grieved for thee and Margery both. But 'tis true kindness to warn ye. Someone is thy enemy. I fear me 'tis the ancient vengeance of my Lord Cardinal which strikes a deadlier blow. However that may be, thy business here is known. Thou art suspect of heresy." Monmouth sighed and added: "Thy name has been sent to my Lord of London."

"Tunstal!" muttered Simon.

"Aye. And he preached last September against Sir William Tyndale and called his Testament 'naughtily translated'—in his Sermon at Paul's Cross. The bishops are all resolved to burn the book wherever it may be found, and cast into prison those who sell and those who buy them. So unless thou wilt recant?"

"No," answered Simon quietly and without hesitation.

"Then thou must fly the country for thy life." Monmouth sighed.

"'Tis the first time that I ever suspected or knew any evil of Master Tyndale. I held him for a good priest and more—a saint."

"He is both," answered Simon. "Well, sweet wife? Thou hast heard."

"I will go with thee, my husband," Margery said.

But Monmouth shook his head. "She cannot go—at least yet.

It would cause suspicion to fall on all of us. But for thee to take ship at dawn when the tide serves in the Pool with thy business known as agent for Endhoven—why, it may pass, lad. And maybe a few months hence the heresy-hunt will be less hot, for 'tis said that the King wearies of the Cardinal Wolsey and my Lady Anne Boleyn hates him. The King is much under her spell and 'tis reported that she favours the Gospellers and has no love for bishops. So this may be a brief parting, please the saints."

"Simon! Take me! I cannot bear it a second time!" sobbed Margery piteously.

Her husband shook his head. "Sweetheart, thy godfather is right. We must not bring suspicion on our friends. Thou wilt say that I was suddenly called back to Antwerp on urgent business and thou dost expect me back in a little while." Simon took her weeping in his arms. "Be brave, dear heart!"

"Must thou go—at once?" she whispered. "Then I will prepare speedily some clothes—and make a provision—food—pack thy small leather mail, dear. Give me another lamp."

Humphrey Monmouth looked at them. "Ye poor children!" he said.

"Margery knew when she married me that I have put my hand to the plough and may not look back" Simon said. But he followed her upstairs and they knelt hand and hand as he prayed for leave to return quickly, and for comfort and help for his wife.

Margery did not go back to her mother. She remained quietly at home and managed the secular part of his business until near her time, when Madam Necton came and stayed when Simon's child—a girl—was born, to be the best comfort for Margery's loneliness. But Simon in his exile burned with zeal and scorn for the persecuting bishops and he began to write the boldest book or pamphlet of the day. With keen witty eloquence he attacked the monks and friars, bishops and clergy who hated the Word of God and would burn all who read and loved it. His bold fiery book, *A Supplication of the Beggars*, was printed secretly by Endhoven and it reached England in 1528-9, the year before Wolsey's Fall and disgrace. And it may have been Humphrey Monmouth who showed a copy to certain London merchants who contrived to pass it into the hands of the Lady Anne Boleyn, Marchioness of Pembroke.

In a short time Mrs. Simon Fish was honoured by a visit from one of the Lady Marchioness's gentlemen who privately assured her of their Lady's goodwill and offered counsel to draw up a suit for Simon's return to be presented to the King by the Lady Anne. Amazed, Margery sent a grateful answer but preferred to make the suit through one of Simon's friends of Gray's Inn. And this suit was set aside since Wolsey, though losing favour, had not yet been deprived. But in October, 1529, the great Cardinal was disgraced and in danger of his own life.

Simon returned quickly and Margery had word as soon as Endhoven's ship was sighted from the Pool. She went to meet him boldly, her child in her arms, and Simon took the baby and went

home with her in great contentment. Only Monmouth sent his man to warn him to keep close, for Sir Thomas More was made Lord Chancellor in Wolsey's place and he much disliked the book called *A Supplication of the Beggars*.

Monmouth soon came to the little home in the Water Lane hard by Whitefriars and he told Simon a great thing. It seemed that the Lady Anne had spoken to the King of Simon's book and Henry had asked to see it, but my Lady of Pembroke said she had returned it since "she knew not," quoth she, cunningly, "whether his Grace would approve her act or no."

"Sly puss!" said Henry, pinching her smooth cheek—and he bade her summon those who had shown it her and willed to see them privately. And those London merchants came boldly to the court and read the book to the King in his Privy Closet at his own royal command.

Henry nodded and smiled as he listened. Then he said slowly: "*If a man should pull down an old stone wall and begin at the lower part, the upper part thereof might chance to fall down on his own head.*" And he took the book from the merchants and bade them keep still tongues and none should hurt them.

"What meant he?" asked Simon, playing with his baby's brown curls.

"I do think his Grace would say that the upper part of the wall was the Pope's Supremacy," replied Monmouth shrewdly: "The King had not then overthrown the Cardinal who was the Pope's Legate."

Simon meditated. "Where is his royal Grace?"

"At Windsor." Monmouth took his leave.

"Margery," said Simon that night, "to-morrow I shall go to Windsor and seek a meeting with the King and ask his help and protection, for I will not willingly be driven overseas again and parted from wife and child more."

"Well, dear heart, as thou wilt," she answered, "but I must go with thee, for thou art grown so dear that I cannot bear to be left at home."

The King was hunting in his Royal Chace at Windsor and it chanced that he first observed Madam Fish in the forest. Having an eye for a sweet smiling countenance, King Hal paused, drew rein and beckoned so that Margery came and, kneeling, begged him to protect her husband whom the Lord Cardinal had ever persecuted, assuring her sovereign of the devoted loyalty of Simon to his King.

"Ha!" said Henry, who was in high good humour after a successful chase, "Was not thy husband this same Simon Fish who acted in a merry Play against the traitor Wolsey? Aye! And he is the author of a certain book, sweet dame?" Henry chuckled. "How long has he been kept from ye? Ha! More than two years! By'r Lady! They have done ye bitter wrong who kept a loving pair apart so long! And where is he now, my fair dame?"

"Please it your Grace, he is not far from hence," she stammered. Her fair face flushed under the King's bold eyes.

"So! Fetch him, sweeting!" laughed the King.

Margery made her reverence and sped to find her Simon watching jealously from an oak-tree.

And Simon hastened to meet the King and offer his humble homage.

"Art a bold man," said Henry, smiling, "but we think a true loyal fellow at heart. Here! Take this ring! Show it to any who may vex ye, man. Aye! Were it Master Thomas More our Chancellor, for he loves not thy brave sharp wit! But thou mayst tell him and all the realm that henceforth Simon Fish has the protection of Henry his King—the Father of all his true loving lieges."

"My Lord the King!" stammered Simon as he gazed incredulously at the royal signet-ring which glittered on his palm. "Ye shall never find a truer loving subject in your kingdom than the poor law-clerk who kneels at your stirrup."

"Well said," answered Henry. "Use that sharp pen in our service, man, and thy King will know how to reward such keen wit."

And the King set spurs to his horse and rode off to his hunt, but Simon went to Margery and told her and they went back home together and thanked God that such bitter trials were happily ended by Henry's kindness and royal favour.

Dr. C. H. Irwin has provided students with a useful companion to Bible Study in his book, *The Bible, the Scholar and the Spade*, in which he gives "A Summary of the Results of Modern Excavation and Discovery" (Religious Tract Society, 7s. 6d. net). Some of the results of the most wonderful recent excavations are recorded and explained with Dr. Irwin's clear and delightful touch which leaves a vivid impression on the reader.

Dr. H. E. Fosdick's *As I See Religion* (Student Christian Mission Movement, 5s. net) adds another to the many books which have proved useful to those faced with difficulties in their religious beliefs. In this he meets the challenge of Humanism which has gained a stronger hold in America than in this country. His approach to the meaning of Christianity through the channel of personality is full of stimulating thought.

The Rev. E. F. E. Wigram wrote the C.M.S. story of the year 1931 in his usual fascinating style under the title *Silver and Gold* (1s. net). Tastefully produced, the writer plays effectively for his purpose of describing the various phases of the Society's work on the many passages in the Bible where silver and gold are mentioned. It is an inspiring record of work.