

# PRISONER IN SPAIN

Thomas Cely

to Elizabeth I (1533–1603), Queen of England (1558–1603)

*The officers of the Castilian Inquisition detained Thomas Cely, an English merchant. In the course of the interview, he struck the Secretary of the Inquisition, which resulted in a condemnation to serve seven years as a galley-slave. While serving his sentence, he acquired information he considered vital to England's interests.*

Puerto Santa María, Andalusia, 12 December 1579

My duty remembered, your poor obedient servant, Thomas Cely of Bristol, wishes Your Majesty health and prosperity to God's good will and pleasure, Amen. Since my bringing up has not been such to write dutifully unto Your Majesty, I crave pardon if my pen run astray, for I am where I cannot attain to counsel, neither will I that any man shall understand that I write, for I am sworn by the Inquisition of Spain neither to speak, neither yet to write nothing touching the secrets of the Inquisition or their house, where I was three years in close prison, for God's cause and yours, and all my goods taken from me most unjustly; for God I take to witness, I never did anything contrary to Spain in all the days of my life.

Notwithstanding these great injuries, they have condemned me to the galleys for four years. Three of them within 2 months be past. My friends have procured Your Majesty's favourable letters for me, but they do not avail. But I pray God I may be thankful for Your Highness' good will towards me.

There is in the galley where I am a woman, which woman is a courtesan and is daily in the company with the captains, where she does hear much. She is of Alexandria and is *amiga* to one of the captains of the infantry. This woman does talk with me very often, and I make fair weather with her, and for such talk as passes with the captains I am sure to understand. I am in one of the chambers in the galley where I do her pleasure to suffer her friends to talk with her, so she does what she can for me. I thought it good to move Your Majesty, for their communications have been such that perforce I must needs venture my life to write, for they touch Your Majesty and your country very much.

I do think it good to trouble my Lord Treasurer with these affairs, for I will not trouble your head with a long letter. My Lord Treasurer's wise and politic head will, with forty words, put into your head more in a quarter-of-an-hour than I shall with writing of ten sheets of paper.

I have written unto Your Majesty two letters touching other affairs; but I wrote in the last letter, which I sent by one Pease of Weymouth, that I would be worth £100.000 a year to your subjects and £40.000 a year to your coffers. I hear nothing from you. I fear you doubt I work for my liberty.

Truly liberty I desire, and one year I have to accomplish and 2 months, and have nothing but ill biscuit and water. But my trust is in God to attain to my country; and if I may be heard, I trust God will give me the grace to accomplish my word. If not, strike off my head as a traitor.

I am in a galley called the *ESTRELLA*, otherwise called the *ESPERA*, in misery. I thank God I am whole of my rackings. All my study in close prison has been for your commonwealths. Send me, for God's love, to pass this year to come, and bear with my rude and bold manners. I marvel you have not the fruitfulest island in the world. You may if you will put to your hands.

I would fain copy out this letter, for I doubt Your Majesty will be troubled with reading of it. Have patience, and take some pains with reading of it, for I dare not write any longer. This I omit, committing Your Majesty to God's good will and pleasure—amen—and all His elect wheresoever. My prayer daily you have and shall have, as my bounden duty. Peruse my Lord Treasurer's letter, and keep well the Queen of Scots, and sure. This

counsel I need not give, but my pen will not otherwise do. I beseech God give me the grace to see the court of England ere I die.

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## Thomas Cely

to William Cecil (1521–1598), **Baron Burghley**, Lord High Treasurer (1572–1598)

Puerto Santa María, Andalucía, 12 December 1579

Since I am where I cannot have time to write dutifully, for God's love bear with my hasty indicting if my pen run astray. Read the Queen's letter first, so Your Honour shall pick out some matter and the meaning of my good will towards my sovereign lady and mistress, and towards her honourable Council and her whole dominions.

First, to touch the great preparation for war with us now making ready in Spain, but whither or for what place God knows. Some says it is to conquer Portugal by sword; some says it is for Algiers in Barbary; others says it is for El Arisha and Tetuan in Barbary, two ports where the galliots do harbour. This woman has told me that she has heard the captains say it is only for Ireland or for Flanders. Further, they say that they shall have great aid out of Scotland and Ireland, and that there be some more of their friends in the north part of England. And a worse matter than all this she has heard them say—that there will be means made to set the navy on fire. God forbend! Disperse them, for God's love, in time, some in one place, and some in another. I need not to counsel Your Honours.

They be not ashamed to say that there be daily of the Council waiting upon the Queen that will be ready to help them. I pray God give them better grace. I trust the Queen will be careful of herself, and her honourable Council will, I doubt not, have great care of these affairs.

If the Queen's Majesty will do in England as they do now in Spain, I think she should do very well. All the Moriscos that they do mistrust in Spain, they do remove them a hundred leagues from their country, some to one place and some to another. So may the Queen enquire of suspected persons and remove them, and put others in their room; I say in the north part of England and Wales and Ireland and elsewhere.

Good my Lord, bear with me. The very zeal I bear unto my mistress and unto my country moves me to write. I well know there is careful heads of her Council; and I am sure there is a great grudge borne unto England, for Englishmen did the Spaniards great injury in Flanders, as they say.

There is great store of fireworks made, great store of scaling ladders, great provision of yokes to draw ordnance by mules and horses, and terrible cannons and many, with all other provision for wars. One thing there is provided which makes me to muse—four thousand ploughs for tillage, which is made ready in Cartagena. All other provision I have seen, but those I have not seen, but I have heard twenty soldiers talk of them, which be accounted of credit. They embargo in Italy all the great shipping and in Mallorca and in other parts of the Straits; and in Cadiz they have embargoed sixteen great ships of Genoa and of other parts.

Notwithstanding all this, there is no money for soldiers, and great scarcity of victual. A soldier is allowed twenty-four ounces of ill biscuit, which is sufficient if it were good. But for meat, they have but two ounces of peas and six ounces of Newfoundland fish, or six ounces of salt tunny or six ounces of bacon, which comes once in a month; and they should have ten ounces of fresh flesh every Sunday, but it is [seldom] that it comes. Wheat is here worth twenty-three reals a hanik. There comes hither much English wheat; I do believe your Honour do not know of it.

It were well done to give order to your officers and let them forcibly. If I had liberty I would do you to understand great things. I lack some trifling present to give my guard. If I had it, I should go ashore when I list, as others do of my countrymen. Great pity it is that a true subject, doing his prince's commandment, should lose all his goods and to be tormented and made a galley slave for seven years, three in close prison and four in the

galleys. I have lost little less than two thousand ducats, besides my cruel torments, and wife and children undone forever. God mend it when His good will and pleasure is.

My Lord, there is here great talk how that the King of France's brother is a suitor unto the Queen's Majesty. They doubt the making away of the King of France and then, say they, if France and England join together it will grow to a foul piece of work. The common people be afeared of their own shadow.

I beseech Your Honour bear with my rude and bold manners, and desire the Queen's Majesty to be good unto me. My duty and conscience have moved me to write these few lines, for that I am her servant and bear good will to my country. This I omit, committing Your Honour to God and to His Holy Word. Your Honour may always hear of me in this port, at the house of one Thomas Butlers, an Englishman and here a dweller.

Good my Lord, have patience with you in reading, for that it is ill-written. Consider where I am, in a miserable prison.

*Thomas Cely served his full seven years as a galley slave, then returned to England. He later served as captain of the MINION OF PLYMOUTH during Drake's 1586 raid on the Spanish Main and commanded the ELIZABETH DRAKE against the Spanish Armada.*

John Knox Laughton, ed. *State Papers Relating to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (London: 1895), II:343–347.