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Rope for Rythm

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CURIOSITIES OF THE LAW

ROPE FOR RYTHM

“Hung for a rhyme!”

No doubt there are many of our peaceful citizens who would welcome with open arms a precedent upon which to base their emotions when the nextdoor neighbor grows operetic on coming from a party in the “wee sma hours” or on arising early some crisp morning. And what a boon the reading of George Crabbe’s “The Borough” would be to the joke-smiths! They delight in adding to Coco’s (of Mikado fame) “little list of persons who won’t, —oh most certainly, won’t be missed”.

Before advancing with our story it must be said that the tradition of a man once being hung for composing a couplet or rhyme is of ancient lineage. But unlike the rolling stone the tale seems to have acquired a great deal in its travel through the pages of history. So much so, that it now seems most probable that, while the rhyme was written by a man afterwards beheaded, the real cause was not merely the poetic outburst of that unfortunate person. So while we must admit that we delight in telling the story, because it is an interesting sidelight of the study of the law, it must be understood that this is also meant to be a general denial.

In affirmance of the legend we have most prominently George Crabbe who lived between the years 1754 and 1832. It will be recalled that in writing his poem “The Borough” he dedicated the sixth letter to the barristers of his day in such a manner as to cause some vitrolitic editors of today to envy him. The names Eldon and Keynon are generally associated with that period but we can now see that there were conditions in the law at that time that deserved attack, whether as serious an attack as Crabbe gave or not we cannot say.

But to proceed with our story let us quote from this poem :

“Law shall I sing, or what to Law belongs?

Alas! there may be danger in such songs;

A foolish rhyme, 'tis said, a trifling thing,
The law found treason, sor it touch'd the King."

* * *

"Then let my numbers flow discreetly on
Warn'd by the fate of the luckless Coddington."

You will note that Crabbe refers to the man hanged for a rhyme. In so doing however he commits the error or mayhap be meant it as poetic ?????? in the giving of the name; for the one to whom he refers was William Collingbourne. At least it would appear that this is true after looking into "Mirroure for Magistrates". The story is there treated with at great length.

William Collingbourne, a former sheriff of Wiltshire, suffered under Richard III. The two lines that are blamed for his downfall were certainly written by Collingbourne and were hung upon the gate of Saint Pauls. They were:

"The Catte, the Ratte and Lovell our Dogge
Rulyth all England under a Hogge."

Most authentic of record show, however, that our hero was really arrested for paying or furnishing a man with eight pounds sterling to travel to Brittany to Henry Tudor in order to assist that worthy in his invasion of England. The date of the arrest, trial and execution was 1484 and the indictment has been preserved for us in Hollinshead. If this is true, and it seems to be so, there was an excellent case of treason against Collingbourne aside from the writing of the two lines in question.

So we may conclude that the story "hanged for a rhyme" is an interesting sage of the law, but only that.

Joseph P. McNamara.