

Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Intrepid Joyce Lewes
By Deanna Smid

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Characters:

Mrs. Joyce Lewes
Mr. Thomas Lewes
Messenger

John Foxe
Agnes Foxe
Sheriff
Executioner
Mob 1
Mob 2
Mob 3

Setting: Mary, Queen of England, is seeking out Protestant believers, who are suffering greatly in prison, in fires, and in various other persecutions. One man, John Foxe, is gathering stories of such persecution, and is recording all sorts of horrors and injustices. One of his stories is of Joyce Lewes, a woman who converts to Protestantism, contrary to the wishes of her volatile husband. When a messenger from the local bishop tries to fine Mr. Lewes, he assaults the messenger and sends him on his way. His actions are of no avail, though, for a year later, Joyce Lewes is executed after months in prison. John Foxe and his wife, Agnes, witness the horrific burning.

Scene 1: The home of Joyce and Thomas Lewes. Joyce is sitting and knitting, and Thomas is standing.

Joyce: Husband, won't you sit down?

[*Thomas paces back and forth*]

Joyce: What is bothering you?

Thomas: You always used to be such a good wife. You went to church, you didn't complain, and you stayed silent.

Joyce: And may God forgive me.

Thomas: I never should have let you visit John Glover. He has filled your head with nonsense.

Joyce: Is it nonsense to read the Bible and understand it?

Thomas: You have gone to his house, alone. What will the neighbours think of such scandalous behavior?

Joyce: Mr. Glover is an honourable man, and I an honourable lady.

Thomas: You listen to him rather than listen to me.

Joyce: I listen to God!

Thomas: Then why do you forsake the holy water and the mass?

Joyce: Mr. Glover opened my eyes to what the Bible itself teaches about the mass, that accursed idolatry.

Thomas: Accursed idolatry! You will not utter those words in my house!

Joyce: You can drag me to church, but you can't make me participate in those so called "sacramentals." Where, husband, does the Bible teach the use of holy water? And where does it say that the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ is insufficient for our salvation?

Thomas: You know I have never read the Bible. And why should I? I go to church and do what the Bishop tells me to do. You have to be careful, Joyce. You know what happened to our neighbour, Mr. Saunders.

Joyce: I know. When I saw that pious man burned at the stake, I wondered if he might be right. And that's why I went in search of the truth of the gospel.

Thomas: Are you ready to die over transub...transubst...

Joyce: Transubstantiation? And yes, I would die.

Thomas: Well, you won't take me with you.

Messenger: [*entering on stage and calling out in a loud voice*] Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Lewes!

Thomas: Yes? What is it?

Messenger: I have been sent to deliver notice of a fine levied against you.

Thomas: A fine? For what charge?

Messenger: [*reading from the citation*] Because she despises the holy water and the sacraments of the church, Mrs. Joyce Lewes has been cited for contempt of Roman Catholic doctrine. Mr. Thomas Lewes is therefore charged a fine of one pound.

Thomas: One pound? I am not a rich man. Wife, you have ruined me.

Messenger: You must pay the fine at once, or you will both be imprisoned.

Thomas: At once, eh? I don't think so. [*he pulls out a dagger, rushes to the messenger, and holds the dagger at his throat*] You know what you can do with that citation? You can eat it!

Messenger: Help! Help!

Joyce: Husband, stop this!

Thomas: No one can hear you. Eat it!

Messenger: I beg you, have mercy.

Thomas: Eat!

[*The messenger eats the paper*]

Thomas: Ah, that looks like a dry mouthful. Wash it down with this water. [*He holds a goblet to the messenger's mouth and forces him to drink, making him choke on it*]

Thomas: And now go back to your masters and tell them that Mr. Lewes will not pay for the disobedience of his lady wife. [*The messenger runs away*]

Joyce: What has come over you, husband?

Thomas: [*still brandishing the dagger*] And you, wife, you will no longer cause me grief. You will go to church, you will anoint yourself with holy water, you will take the sacrament, you will honour the priests, and you will keep your mouth shut.

Joyce: If these things were in the Word of God, I would with all my heart receive, believe, and esteem them.

Thomas: If thou wilt believe no more than what is warranted by Scriptures, thou art in a state of damnation!

Joyce: Husband, your words are as impure as they are profane.

Thomas: [*striking her*] You will do as I command!

Messenger: [*looking fearful, returns*] Er, Mr. Lewes...

Thomas: What is it, you scoundrel?

Messenger: The...uh...Bishop has commanded that you and your wife appear before him at once.

Thomas: And the fine?

Messenger: The Bishop said nothing of a fine.

Thomas: That's better. We will accompany you at once. [*To Joyce*] Wife, come with me.

Joyce: I gladly obey. [*She moves towards her husband, but he rushes over to her, grabs her by the hair, and pulls her offstage at a quick pace*].

Exeunt

II

[*John Foxe and Agnes enter. Setting: the home of John and Agnes Foxe*]

[*John immediately sits and picks up a book, reading*]

Agnes: John, I must speak with you.

[*John continues reading*]

Agnes: John!

[*John continues reading*]

Agnes: John, would you look at me!

John: [*looks up, distractedly*] Hmmm?

Agnes: John, I'm worried about you.

John: There is no need, my love.

Agnes: But you aren't sleeping well, and when you do sleep, you twitch and cry out. I'm afraid that writing your book is making you unwell. And when you're not writing, you're reading. Always reading!

John: That might be so, but I must continue with my writing.

Agnes: But why?

John: Christians are being imprisoned, tortured, and killed, Agnes. Someone must record what is happening here.

Agnes: But what if Queen Mary finds out?

John: I cannot fear what she will do to me. It cannot be worse than what has been happening to those faithful English believers who refuse to bow to the tyranny of the papal mass.

Agnes: Tell me, John, are you doing this because you feel that God is calling you somehow? Because you were born in the same year that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door?

John: I've told you many times, Agnes, that that cannot be a coincidence. I must continue with my task. Luther himself suffered terribly from persecution. He was banished from his own country for years, and often lived in fear of his life. Luther said at the Diet of Worms, "I am tied by the Scriptures," and so am I.

Agnes: And what about the Roman Catholics who were killed under the reign of good King Edward?

John: [*vehemently*] The Popish church can write its own book!

Agnes: And the title...

John: Yes, *Acts and Monuments touching things done and practiced by the prelates of the Romish Church, especially in this realm of England and Scotland, from the year of our Lord a thousand unto the time now present. Wherein is lively declared the whole state of the Christian Church: with such persecutions, and horrible troubles, and have happened in these last and perilous days. Faithfully gathered and collected according to the true copies and writings certificatory, as well of them that suffered: as also of the others that were the doers and workers thereof.*

Agnes: If you're going to do all of this work, can't the title be a bit catchier: What about... Foxe's Book of Martyrs?

John: I cannot put my own name first. It would be unseemly.

Agnes: But John, you have been so distant recently. You ignore me and the children, more than you usually do with all of your bookishness. And I found this! [*She passes him a sheet of paper*].

John: Yes, what of it?

Agnes: It's a list of names. Of women! Why are you thinking about other women?

John: It's for the book, Agnes.

Agnes: [*snatching back the paper*] Prove it. Who is this... Helen Stark.

John: She was a Scottish woman drowned for not praying to the Virgin Mary. They took her suckling child from her breast, put Helen in a sack, and drowned her.

Agnes: And Anne Askew?

John: Burned at the stake when she refused to recant.

Agnes: Joan Waste?

John: Burned at the stake. She was only twenty-two, and blind from birth.

Agnes: Elizabeth Cooper?

John: Tortured and then burned at the stake. She screamed when she felt the flames, so the man burning beside her held her hand and comforted her as they both died.

Agnes: And Rose Allin?

John: Officers of the Popish church entered her parent's home at night. Because her mother was ill, Rose was holding a candle and a mug, preparing her some broth. One of the officers asked her if she would be willing to burn for her faith, and Rose said yes. He then held her by the wrist, put the candle under her hand, and burned a cross in the back of her hand. He didn't stop until the tendons of her hand divided from the flesh.

Agnes: John...such horrors are happening. Have you seen all of these tortures and executions?

John: Some are stories I have heard, and others I have witnessed.

Agnes: John, there is one more name on this list.

John: Yes, Joyce Lewes.

Agnes: What happened to her?

John: My love, she has been in prison for twelve months now. Last night two priests came to hear her confession, but she turned them away. This morning, she will be executed.

[They hear the sounds of a mob outside]

Agnes: Will you go to witness?

John: I must.

Agnes: Then I will accompany you.

John: Agnes, no, it will be too much.

Agnes: I will stay by your side. [*they exit*]

III

[*a crowd is gathered around a raised execution platform. Lewes, John, and Agnes join the crowd*]

Mob 1: Did you hear? Her husband delivered her to the Bishop.

Thomas: Serves her right!

Mob 2: Apparently, when she heard she was going to die, she said “As for death, I think but lightly of. When I know that I shall behold the amiable countenance of Christ my dear Saviour, the ugly face of death does not much trouble me.” [*John listens and scribbles on paper*]

Thomas: She always was a talker.

Mob 3: Did you know her, man?

Thomas: She is my wife, but not for much longer.

Mob 1: You brought her to the Bishop to be killed?

Thomas: No, no. In fact, I paid one hundred pounds to take her home for a month to try to convert her. When that didn’t work, then I sent her back to the Bishop.

Mob 2: And now look what has happened.

Mob 3: [*stage whisper to Mob 1 and 2*] Murderer.

[*Sheriff and Executioner lead Joyce on to the platform*]

Thomas: Shame!

Mob 1: Quiet, sir. They are giving her something to drink.

Mob 2: [*To Thomas*] Did you not try to defend her, perhaps send her out of the country?

Thomas: Why should I? She is a heretic! And, she was costing me money.

Mob 3: Surely the life of your lady wife is worth more than mere money.

Thomas: Not at all. Wives are replaceable, especially ones that betray the church.

Joyce: [*after she drinks*] I drink to all them that unfeignedly love the Gospel of Christ and wish for the abolition of popery.

Agnes: Hear, hear!

John: Quiet, Agnes. Even though this crowd seems friendly to our cause, we never know who is listening.

Sheriff: [*reading from paper*] Joyce Lewes, you stand condemned for rebellion against the church, for despising the sacraments, and for disobedience to the Bishop. I hereby command that you be burned at the stake until dead.

Joyce: May I speak?

Sheriff: Joyce, my friend, you know how unwilling I am to carry out this sentence. You may speak for as long as you like.

Joyce: [*addressing the mob*] I pray you all, good Christian people, to bear me witness, that I die a good Christian woman, and that I do look to be saved by no other mean, but only by the mercy of God in the blood of His only Son Jesus Christ: and I confess that when I did know the Word of God, I neglected the same, loved myself and the world, and therefore this plague and punishment is happily and worthily happened unto me for my sins; and yet I thank God, that of His goodness He hath thus given me a time and a respite to repent. And now, good people, while I am alive, I pray you assist me with your prayers.¹ [*To the sheriff*] May I sing?

Sheriff: Of course.

Executioner: [*angrily*] In Latin!

[*Joyce begins singing Psalm 51 from the Anglo-Genevan Psalter. The mob joins in, and John gestures the audience to join as well*]

O gracious God, be merciful to me,
And in your love, your infinite compassion,
Blot out my sins, remove all my transgressions.
O God, have mercy, Listen to my plea!
From every taint of evil wash me clean,
And from my guilt and misery relieve me.
For I am deeply conscious of my sin,
And all day long my misdeeds haunt and grieve me.

Create in me a pure, clean heart, I pray;
Renew a steadfast spirit deep within me.
Give me new life to strengthen and sustain me;

¹ Words of Jane Grey when she was executed, according to John Foxe.

God, from your presence cast me not away.
Show me your mercy. Do not take from me
Your Holy Spirit, but again, O Saviour,
Let me the joy of your salvation see,
And make me willing to obey you ever.

Sheriff: [*brokenly*] Executioner, prepare the fire.

[*Joyce stands in front of the stake and the executioner puts bundles of sticks around her feet. When he is done, he steps away and Joyce raises her hands heavenwards*]

Agnes: John, look at her! She is smiling!

John: Lord, into Thy hands I commend her spirit.

Agnes: I can't stand this! [*she begins to cry*]

John: Agnes, you must stop. Who knows who might see you?

Agnes: But John, look, even her husband is crying!

John: I know, Agnes, but we must be cautious. We have to get you home. [*in a voice loud enough for all those around him to hear*] Wife, you are covered in red spots! I hope it's not the plague again. [*The people around them recoil and clear a path so that John can lead Agnes away*].

Agnes: [*out of earshot of the crowd, to John*] John, you must write your book. And add pictures. Lots of pictures. Everyone needs to hear and see what has happened here, and they need to remember.

Exeunt.