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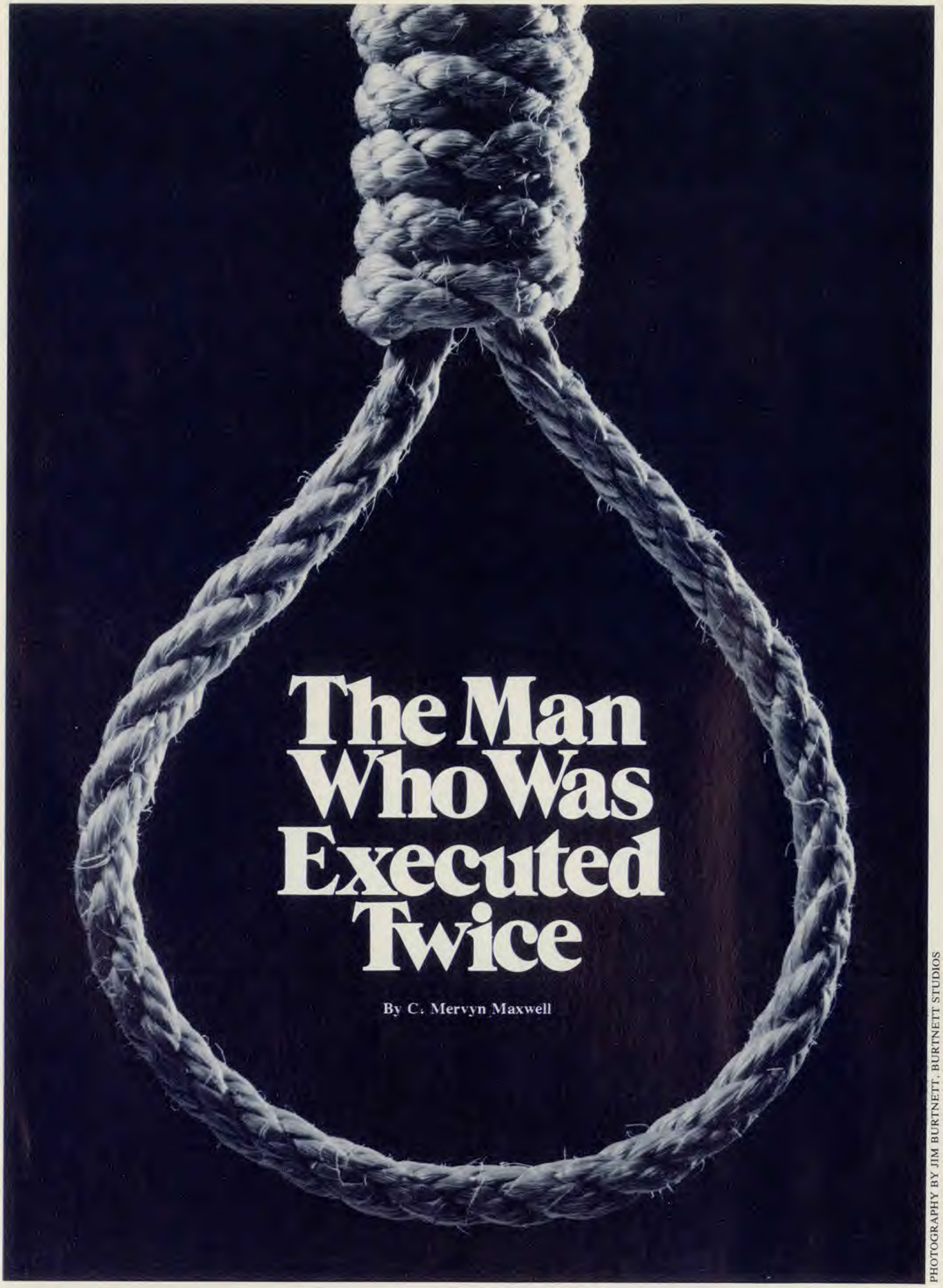
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The Man Who Was Executed Twice

By C. Mervyn Maxwell

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM BURTNETT, BURTNETT STUDIOS

The title is exaggerated. No one could be executed twice.

Andreas Fischer, however, came as close to it as anyone would ever wish to.

The first time he was sentenced to death, it appears that he actually got as far as feeling the noose tighten around his neck; but at the moment when he was supposed to turn slowly, slowly in the wind, the rope broke and he fell safely to the ground and escaped.

The second time, a decade later, he was not so lucky. . . .

When Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in the early 1500's, Fischer was a hard-working Catholic priest. Luther's tracts on abuses in the church made sense to him, as they did to thousands of other priests and laymen.

Whatever lofty motives may have conceived the practice of using pilgrimages and indulgences to atone for sins, traffic in them became so commercialized as to cause widespread concern. When Luther, who was a Catholic priest, living in a Catholic monastery, and teaching in a Catholic university, taught that God did not want self-punishment but repentance, and that anyone who was truly sorry would receive God's forgiveness freely, without penance, payment, or pilgrimage, Catholics all over Central Europe lined up behind him.

When the hierarchy in Rome wanted to know on what authority a German priest could defy Holy Church, Luther thundered, "The authority of plain Scripture!"

Persecution followed. Priests who taught Lutheran heresy were hanged, sometimes in batches.

Pondering Luther's stand, many of his followers continued their Bible study and began to notice Mark 16:16: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." They reasoned that if baptism were to be of any use, a person should receive it when he was old enough to understand it, and not when he was an infant, as the Catholics—and Luther—taught. They called on people to study the Bible for themselves, make a mature decision for the Lord, and then kneel and have water poured over their heads; and they called the procedure "believer's baptism."

The Catholics—and Luther—feared that if everyone were not automatically enrolled in a church at birth, society would collapse. Anabaptists, in consequence, were severely persecuted. Many were drowned, in mock imitation of believer's baptism. Some had holes burned through their cheeks. Others were burned at the stake or barbecued beside hot fires. Still others were laid on open coffins too small for them. Soldiers pounded them in with their hobnailed boots.

Kindly providence persuaded isolated princes in heavily forested areas of Moravia, Austria, and nearby lands to provide asylum for the Anabaptists, and the fortunate ones fled there.

Two Anabaptists were led by Bible study to a particularly perilous conclusion. Both were former Catholic priests who had sacrificed the priesthood to become Lutherans, and who had then gone on to become Anabaptists. One of these was Oswald Glait. The other was Andreas Fischer.

Around 1527 Glait and Fischer were astonished to read in the Bible that the weekly day God wanted men to keep holy was not Sunday, the first day of the week, but Saturday, the seventh day.

When they began to teach this, Luther sent theologians to persuade them to abandon what he called the "Jewish Sabbath."

Glait and Fischer replied that the Bible calls the seventh day "the sabbath of the Lord thy God" (Exodus 20:8-11), not the Jewish Sabbath. They showed from the Bible that the Sabbath was given at Creation to our first parents as a blessing for the entire human race (Genesis 2:1-3); they quoted Christ: "The sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27), not merely for Jews.

Luther's theologians contended that Jesus brought the Sabbath to an end, but in return Glait and Fischer quoted Christ again: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law. . . . Till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17, 18, R.S.V.).

When the Lutherans suggested that the apostles abolished the Sabbath after Christ's death, Glait and Fischer quoted the apostle James: "Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10); and the apostle Paul: By faith "we establish [not destroy] the law" (Romans 3:31); and the apostle John: Those who have "the faith of Jesus," "keep [not break] the commandments of God" (Revelation 14:12).

When the theologians asked Glait and Fischer to submit to Luther's judgment, they replied that their consciences were captive to the Word of God.

It was a dangerous stand. A person who took it could scarcely hope to live out his natural life. In 1529 Mr. and Mrs. Andreas Fischer, as Sabbatarian Anabaptists, were sentenced to death, she by drowning, he by hanging. Mrs. Fischer was drowned, but—as we saw above—while her husband was being hanged, he fell to the ground and escaped.

Not forever, unfortunately. After a dangerous decade of bravely traveling to share the Sabbath and fortify the faithful, Fischer was seized by the soldiers of some wretched robber knight, dragged into his castle, and executed—successfully this time—by being hurled from the top of a wall.

Oswald Glait, incidentally, survived many adventures in a similar ministry. In 1545, however, he was captured and imprisoned in Vienna. After a year and six weeks he was awakened at midnight by the clatter of soldiers in the hall outside his cell. The door burst open, and by the light of the soldiers' torches he read in their faces his impending fate. He was led through the silent city to the banks of the Danube and thrown in.

As the soldiers heard his splash, little did they realize that the Sabbath for which he gave his life would live on for centuries in Germany, burst into life in Great Britain, be transferred to the American colonies, and in the twentieth century capture the hearts of millions of people all around the world. □