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978-1-108-03662-7 - History of the United Netherlands: From the Death of William the Silent to the Twelve Years' Truce – 1609: Volume 1

John Lothrop Motley

Excerpt

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THE UNITED NETHERLANDS.

CHAPTER I.

Murder of Orange—Extension of Protestantism—Vast Power of Spain—Religious Origin of the Revolt—Disposal of the Sovereignty—Courage of the Estates of Holland—Children of William the Silent—Provisional Council of State—Firm attitude of Holland and Zeeland—Weakness of Flanders—Fall of Ghent—Adroitness of Alexander Farnese.

WILLIAM THE SILENT, Prince of Orange, had been murdered on the 10th July, 1584. It is difficult to imagine a more universal disaster than the one thus brought about by the hand of a single obscure fanatic. For nearly twenty years the character of the Prince had been expanding steadily as the difficulties of his situation increased. Habit, necessity, and the natural gifts of the man, had combined to invest him at last with an authority which seemed more than human. There was such general confidence in his sagacity, courage, and purity, that the nation had come to think with his brain and to act with his hand. It was natural that, for an instant, there should be a feeling as of absolute and helpless paralysis.

Whatever his technical attributes in the polity of the Netherlands—and it would be difficult to define them with perfect accuracy—there is no doubt that he stood there, the head of a commonwealth, in an attitude such as had been maintained by but few of the kings, or chiefs, or high priests of history. Assassination, a regular and almost indispensable portion of the working machinery of Philip's government, had produced, in this instance, after repeated disappointments, the result at last which had been so anxiously desired.

VOL. I.

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The ban of the Pope and the offered gold of the King had accomplished a victory greater than any yet achieved by the armies of Spain, brilliant as had been their triumphs on the blood-stained soil of the Netherlands.

Had that “exceeding proud, neat, and spruce”¹ Doctor of Laws, William Parry, who had been busying himself at about the same time with his memorable project against the Queen of England, proved as successful as Balthazar Gerard, the fate of Christendom would have been still darker. Fortunately, that member of parliament had made the discovery in time—not for himself, but for Elizabeth—that the “Lord was better pleased with adverbs than nouns;”² the well-known result being that the traitor was hanged and the Sovereign saved.

Yet such was the condition of Europe at that day. A small, dull, elderly, imperfectly-educated, patient, plodding invalid, with white hair and protruding under-jaw, and dreary visage, was sitting day after day, seldom speaking, never smiling, seven or eight hours out of every twenty-four, at a writing-table covered with heaps of interminable despatches, in a cabinet far away beyond the seas and mountains, in the very heart of Spain. A clerk or two, noiselessly opening and shutting the door, from time to time, fetching fresh bundles of letters and taking away others—all written and composed by secretaries or high functionaries—and all to be scrawled over in the margin by the diligent old man in a big school-boy’s hand and style—if ever schoolboy, even in the sixteenth century, could write so illegibly or express himself so awkwardly;³ couriers in the court-yard arriving from or departing for the uttermost parts of earth—Asia, Africa, America, Europe—to fetch and carry these interminable epistles which contained the irresponsible commands of this one individual, and were freighted with the doom and destiny of countless millions of the world’s inhabitants—such was the system of government against which the Netherlands had

¹ Camden’s ‘Elizabeth,’ ed. 1688, p. 305.

² Camden, p. 307.

³ See vol. ii. of this work for instances.

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MURDER OF THE PRINCE OF ORANGE.

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protested and revolted. It was a system under which their fields had been made desolate, their cities burned and pillaged, their men hanged, burned, drowned, or hacked to pieces; their women subjected to every outrage; and to put an end to which they had been devoting their treasure and their blood for nearly the length of one generation. It was a system, too, which, among other results, had just brought about the death of the foremost statesman of Europe, and had nearly effected simultaneously the murder of the most eminent sovereign in the world. The industrious Philip, safe and tranquil in the depths of the Escorial, saying his prayers three times a day with exemplary regularity, had just sent three bullets through the body of William the Silent at his dining-room door in Delft. "Had it only been done two years earlier," observed the patient old man, "much trouble might have been spared me; but 'tis better late than never." Sir Edward Stafford, English envoy in Paris, wrote to his government—so soon as the news of the murder reached him—that, according to his information out of the Spanish minister's own house, "the same practice that had been executed upon the Prince of Orange, there were practisers more than two or three about to execute upon her Majesty, and that within two months." Without vouching for the absolute accuracy of this intelligence, he implored the Queen to be more upon her guard than ever. "For there is no doubt," said the envoy, "that she is a chief mark to shoot at; and seeing that there were men cunning enough to enchant a man and to encourage him to kill the Prince of Orange in the midst of Holland, and that there was a knave found desperate enough to do it, we must think hereafter that anything may be done. Therefore God preserve her Majesty."¹

Invisible as the Grand Lama of Thibet, clothed with power

¹ Murdin's 'State Papers,' 412-415. William Herle, too, wrote from Holland, immediately after the murder, warning the Queen to be more than ever on her guard. The seminary at

Dieppe, placed "upon the brim of England," was constantly sending Scotch and English assassins into their own country. "'Tis known to me," he said, "that there are entered

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as extensive and absolute as had ever been wielded by the most imperial Cæsar, Philip the Prudent, as he grew older and feebler in mind and body seemed to become more gluttonous of work,¹ more ambitious to extend his sceptre over lands which he had never seen or dreamed of seeing, more fixed in his determination to annihilate that monster Protestantism, which it had been the business of his life to combat, more eager to put to death every human creature, whether anointed monarch or humble artizan, that defended heresy or opposed his progress to universal empire.

If this enormous power, this fabulous labour, had been wielded or performed with a beneficent intention; if the man who seriously regarded himself as the owner of a third of the globe, with the inhabitants thereof, had attempted to deal with these extensive estates inherited from his ancestors with the honest intention of a thrifty landlord, an intelligent slave-owner, it would have yet been possible for a little longer to smile at the delusion, and endure the practice.

But there was another old man, who lived in another palace in another remote land, who, in his capacity of representative of Saint Peter, claimed to dispose of all the kingdoms of the earth—and had been willing to bestow them upon the man who would go down and worship him. Philip stood enfeoffed, by divine decree, of all America, the East Indies, the whole Spanish Peninsula, the better portion of Italy, the seventeen Netherlands, and many other possessions far and near; and he contemplated annexing to this extensive property the

above seven score lurking Jesuits into the realm of late, and they do secretly repair more and more to sow infection and rebellion among your subjects, and to conspire against your royal person, whom God alway, for his mercy's sake, preserve." (Herle to the Queen, 22nd July, 1584, State-Paper Office MS.) Moreover, another secret agent of Walsingham, Stephen Le Sieur, wrote shortly afterwards from Antwerp, that the Prince of Orange had been warned by persons

resident in Cologne of the attempt about to be made upon his life, but had unfortunately not heeded the admonition. The same persons who had furnished that information now wrote to apprise Le Sieur that there was a similar plot on foot against the Queen. (Le Sieur to Walsingham, 7th September, 1584, State-Paper Office MS.)

¹ Longlée au Roi de France, apud Groen van Prinsterer, 'Archives et Correspondence de la Maison d'Orange Nassau, deuxième série,' tom. i. p. 29.

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EXTENSION OF PROTESTANTISM.

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kingdoms of France, of England, and Ireland. The Holy League, maintained by the sword of Guise, the pope's ban, Spanish ducats, Italian condottieri, and German mercenaries, was to exterminate heresy and establish the Spanish dominion in France. The same machinery, aided by the pistol or poniard of the assassin, was to substitute for English protestantism and England's queen the Roman Catholic religion and a foreign sovereign. "The holy league," said Duplessis-Mornay, one of the noblest characters of the age, "has destined us all to the same sacrifice. The ambition of the Spaniard, which has overleaped so many lands and seas, thinks nothing inaccessible."¹

The Netherland revolt had therefore assumed world-wide proportions. Had it been merely the rebellion of provinces against a sovereign, the importance of the struggle would have been more local and temporary. But the period was one in which the geographical land-marks of countries were almost removed. The dividing-line ran through every state, city, and almost every family. There was a country which believed in the absolute power of the church to dictate the relations between man and his Maker, and to utterly exterminate all who disputed that position. There was another country which protested against that doctrine, and claimed, theoretically or practically, a liberty of conscience. The territory of these countries was mapped out by no visible lines, but the inhabitants of each, whether resident in France, Germany, England, or Flanders, recognised a relationship which took its root in deeper differences than those of race or language. It was not entirely a question of doctrine or dogma. A large portion of the world had become tired of the antiquated delusion of a papal supremacy over every land, and had recorded its determination, once for all, to have done with it. The transition to freedom of conscience became a necessary step, sooner or later to be taken. To establish the principle of toleration for all religions was an inevitable consequence of the Dutch revolt; although thus far, perhaps

¹ 'Mémoires et Correspondence de Duplessis-Mornay,' Paris, 1824, iii. 27.

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only one conspicuous man in advance of his age had boldly announced that doctrine and had died in its defence. But a great true thought never dies—though long buried in the earth—and the day was to come, after long years, when the seed was to ripen into a harvest of civil and religious emancipation, and when the very word toleration was to sound like an insult and an absurdity.

A vast responsibility rested upon the head of a monarch, placed as Philip II. found himself, at this great dividing point in modern history. To judge him, or any man in such a position, simply from his own point of view, is weak and illogical. History judges the man according to his point of view. It condemns or applauds the point of view itself. The point of view of a malefactor is not to excuse robbery and murder. Nor is the spirit of the age to be pleaded in defence of the evil-doer at a time when mortals were divided into almost equal troops. The age of Philip II. was also the age of William of Orange and his four brethren, of Sainte Aldegonde, of Olden-Barneveldt, of Duplessis-Mornay, La Noue, Coligny, of Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin, Walsingham, Sidney, Raleigh, Queen Elizabeth, of Michael Montaigne, and William Shakspeare. It was not an age of blindness, but of glorious light. If the man whom the Maker of the Universe had permitted to be born to such boundless functions, chose to put out his own eyes that he might grope along his great pathway of duty in perpetual darkness, by his deeds he must be judged. The King perhaps firmly believed that the heretics of the Netherlands, of France, or of England, could escape eternal perdition only by being extirpated from the earth by fire and sword, and therefore, perhaps, felt it his duty to devote his life to their extermination. But he believed, still more firmly, that his own political authority, throughout his dominions, and his road to almost universal empire, lay over the bodies of those heretics. Three centuries have nearly past since this memorable epoch; and the world knows the fate of the states which accepted the dogma which it was Philip's life-work to enforce, and of those who protested

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EXTENSIVE POWER OF SPAIN.

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against the system. The Spanish and Italian Peninsulas have had a different history from that which records the career of France, Prussia, the Dutch Commonwealth, the British Empire, the Transatlantic Republic.

Yet the contest between those Seven meagre Provinces upon the sand-banks of the North Sea, and the great Spanish Empire, seemed at the moment with which we are now occupied a sufficiently desperate one. Throw a glance upon the map of Europe. Look at the broad magnificent Spanish Peninsula, stretching across eight degrees of latitude and ten of longitude, commanding the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, with a genial climate, warmed in winter by the vast furnace of Africa, and protected from the scorching heats of summer by shady mountain and forest, and temperate breezes from either ocean. A generous southern territory, flowing with wine and oil, and all the richest gifts of a bountiful nature—splendid cities—the new and daily-expanding Madrid, rich in the trophies of the most artistic period of the modern world—Cadiz, as populous at that day as London, seated by the straits where the ancient and modern systems of traffic were blending like the mingling of the two oceans—Granada, the ancient wealthy seat of the fallen Moors—Toledo, Valladolid, and Lisbon, chief city of the recently-conquered kingdom of Portugal, counting, with its suburbs, a larger population than any city, excepting Paris, in Europe, the mother of distant colonies, and the capital of the rapidly-developing traffic with both the Indies—these were some of the treasures of Spain herself.¹ But she possessed Sicily also, the better portion of Italy, and important dependencies in Africa, while the famous maritime discoveries of the age had all enured to her aggrandizement. The world seemed suddenly to have expanded its wings from East to West, only to bear the fortunate Spanish Empire to the most dizzy heights of wealth and power. The most accomplished generals, the most disciplined and daring infantry the world has ever known, the best-equipped and most extensive navy, royal and mercantile,

¹ Compare Guicciardini, 'Belgicæ Descript.' Amst. 1660, p. 210 *seq.*

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of the age, were at the absolute command of the sovereign. Such was Spain.

Turn now to the north-western corner of Europe. A morsel of territory, attached by a slight sand-hook to the continent, and half-submerged by the stormy waters of the German Ocean—this was Holland. A rude climate, with long, dark, rigorous, winters, and brief summers, a territory, the mere wash of three great rivers, which had fertilized happier portions of Europe only to desolate and overwhelm this less-favoured land, a soil so ungrateful, that if the whole of its four hundred thousand acres of arable land had been sowed with grain,¹ it could not feed the labourers alone, and a population largely estimated at one million of souls—these were the characteristics of the Province which already had begun to give its name to the new commonwealth. The isles of Zeeland—entangled in the coils of deep slow-moving rivers, or combating the ocean without—and the ancient episcopate of Utrecht, formed the only other Provinces that had quite shaken off the foreign yoke. In Friesland, the important city of Groningen was still held for the King, while Bois-le-Duc, Zutphen, besides other places in Gelderland and North Brabant, also in possession of the royalists, made the position of those provinces precarious.

The limit of the Spanish or “obedient” Provinces, on the one hand, and of the United Provinces on the other, cannot, therefore, be briefly and distinctly stated. The memorable treason—or, as it was called, the “reconciliation” of the Walloon Provinces in the year 1583-4—had placed the Provinces of Hainault, Arthois, Douay, with the flourishing cities Arras, Valenciennes, Lille, Tournay, and others—all Celtic Flanders, in short—in the grasp of Spain. Cambray was still held by the French governor, Seigneur de Balagny, who had taken advantage of the Duke of Anjou’s treachery to the States, to establish himself in an unrecognized but practical petty sovereignty, in defiance both of France and Spain; while East Flanders and South Brabant still remained a dis-

¹ ‘Mémoires de Jean de Wit,’ La Haye, 1709-18-19.

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RELIGIOUS ORIGIN OF THE REVOLT.

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puted territory, and the immediate field of contest. With these limitations, it may be assumed, for general purposes, that the territory of the United States was that of the modern Kingdom of the Netherlands, while the obedient Provinces occupied what is now the territory of Belgium.

Such, then, were the combatants in the great eighty years' war for civil and religious liberty; sixteen of which had now passed away. On the one side, one of the most powerful and populous world-empires of history, then in the zenith of its prosperity; on the other hand, a slender group of cities, governed by merchants and artisans, and planted precariously upon a meagre, unstable soil. A million and a half of souls against the autocrat of a third part of the known world. The contest seemed as desperate as the cause was certainly sacred; but it had ceased to be a local contest. For the history which is to occupy us in these volumes is not exclusively the history of Holland. It is the story of the great combat between despotism, sacerdotal and regal, and the spirit of rational human liberty. The tragedy opened in the Netherlands, and its main scenes were long enacted there; but as the ambition of Spain expanded, and as the resistance to the principle which she represented became more general, other nations were, of necessity, involved in the struggle. There came to be one country, the citizens of which were the Leaguers; and another country, whose inhabitants were Protestants. And in this lay the distinction between freedom and absolutism. The religious question swallowed all the others. There was never a period in the early history of the Dutch revolt when the Provinces would not have returned to their obedience, could they have been assured of enjoying liberty of conscience or religious peace; nor was there ever a single moment in Philip II.'s life in which he wavered in his fixed determination never to listen to such a claim. The quarrel was in its nature irreconcilable and eternal as the warfare between wrong and right; and the establishment of a comparative civil liberty in Europe and America was the result of the religious war of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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The struggle lasted eighty years, but the prize was worth the contest.

The object of the war between the Netherlands and Spain was not, therefore, primarily, a rebellion against established authority for the maintenance of civil rights. To preserve these rights was secondary. The first cause was religion. The Provinces had been fighting for years against the Inquisition. Had they not taken arms, the Inquisition would have been established in the Netherlands, and very probably in England, and England might have become in its turn a Province of the Spanish Empire.

The death of William the Silent produced a sudden change in the political arrangements of the liberated Netherlands. During the year 1583, the United Provinces had elected Francis, Duke of Anjou, to be Duke of Brabant and sove-reign of the whole country, under certain constitutional provisions enumerated in articles of solemn compact. That compact had been grossly violated. The Duke had made a treacherous attempt to possess himself of absolute power and to seize several important cities. He had been signally defeated in Antwerp, and obliged to leave the country, covered with ignominy. The States had then consulted William of Orange as to the course to be taken in the emergency. The Prince had told them that their choice was triple. They might reconcile themselves with Spain, and abandon the contest for religious liberty which they had so long been waging; they might reconcile themselves with Anjou, notwithstanding that he had so utterly forfeited all claims to their consideration; or they might fight the matter out with Spain single-handed. The last course was, in his opinion, the most eligible one, and he was ready to sacrifice his life to its furtherance. It was, however, indispensable, should that policy be adopted, that much larger supplies should be voted than had hitherto been raised, and, in general, that a much more extensive and elevated spirit of patriotism should manifest itself than had hitherto been displayed.

It was, on the whole, decided to make a second arrange-