

History of the United Netherlands, 1592 eBook

History of the United Netherlands, 1592 by John Lothrop Motley

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HISTORY OF THE UNITED NETHERLANDS From the Death of William the Silent to the Twelve Year's Truce—1609

By John Lothrop Motley

MOTLEY'S HISTORY OF THE NETHERLANDS, Project Gutenberg Edition, Vol. 64

History of the United Netherlands, 1592

CHAPTER XXVI.

Return of Prince Maurice to the siege of Steenwyck—Capitulation of the besieged—Effects of the introduction of mining operations— Maurice besieges Coeworden—Verdugo attempts to relieve the city, but fails—The city capitulates, and Prince Maurice retreats into winter quarters.

While Farnese had thus been strengthening the bulwarks of Philip's universal monarchy in that portion of his proposed French dominions which looked towards England, there had been opportunity for Prince Maurice to make an assault upon the Frisian defences of this vast realm. It was difficult to make half Europe into one great Spanish fortification, guarding its every bastion and every point of the curtain, without far more

extensive armaments than the “Great King,” as the Leaguers proposed that Philip should entitle himself, had ever had at his disposal. It might be a colossal scheme to stretch the rod of empire over so large a portion of the earth, but the dwarfish attempts to carry the design into execution hardly reveal the hand of genius. It is astonishing to contemplate the meagre numbers and the slender funds with which this world-empire was to be asserted and maintained. The armies arrayed at any important point hardly exceeded a modern division or two; while the resources furnished for a year would hardly pay in later days for a few weeks’ campaign.

When Alexander, the first commander of his time, moved out of Flanders into France with less than twenty thousand men, he left most vital portions of his master’s hereditary dominions so utterly unprotected that it was possible to attack them with a handful of troops. The young disciple of Simon Stevinus now resumed that practical demonstration of his principles which had been in the previous year so well begun.

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On the 28th May, 1592, Maurice, taking the field with six thousand foot and two thousand horse, came once more before Steenwyck. It will be remembered that he had been obliged to relinquish the siege of this place in order to confront the Duke of Parma in July, 1591, at Nymegen.

The city—very important from its position, being the key to the province of Drenthe as well as one of the safeguards of Friesland—had been besieged in vain by Count Renneberg after his treasonable surrender of Groningen, of which he was governor, to the Spaniards, but had been subsequently surprised by Tassis. Since that time it had held for the king. Its fortifications were strong, and of the best description known at that day. Its regular garrison was sixteen companies of foot and some cavalry under Antoine de Quocqueville, military governor. Besides these troops were twelve hundred Walloon infantry, commanded by Lewis, youngest Count van den Berg, a brave lad of eighteen years, with whom were the lord of Waterdyck and other Netherland nobles.

To the military student the siege may possess importance as marking a transitional epoch in the history of the beleaguering science. To the general reader, as in most of the exploits of the young Poliorcetes, its details have but slender interest. Perhaps it was here that the spade first vindicated its dignity, and entitled itself to be classed as a military weapon of value along with pike and arquebus. It was here that the soldiers of Maurice, burrowing in the ground at ten stuyvers a day, were jeered at by the enemy from the battlements as boors and ditchers, who had forfeited their right to be considered soldiers—but jeered at for the last time.

From 30th May to 9th June the prince was occupied in throwing up earthworks on the low grounds in order to bring his guns into position. On the 13th June he began to batter with forty-five pieces, but effected little more than to demolish some of the breastworks. He threw hot shot into the town very diligently, too, but did small damage. The cannonading went on for nearly a week, but the practice was so very indifferent—notwithstanding the protection of the blessed Barbara and the tuition of the busmasters—that the besieged began to amuse themselves with these empty and monotonous salvos of the honourable Artillery Guild. When all this blazing and thundering had led to no better result than to convert a hundred thousand good Flemish florins into noise and smoke, the thrifty Netherlanders on both sides of the walls began to disparage the young general's reputation. After all, they said, the Spaniards were right when they called artillery mere 'espanta-vellacos' or scare-cowards. This burrowing and bellowing must at last give place to the old-fashioned push of pike, and then it would be seen who the soldiers were. Observations like these were freely made under a flag of truce; for on the 19th June—notwithstanding their contempt for the 'espanta-vellacos'—the besieged had sent out a deputation to treat for an honourable surrender. Maurice entertained the negotiators hospitably in his own tent, but the terms suggested to him were inadmissible. Nothing came of the conference therefore but mutual criticisms, friendly enough, although sufficiently caustic.

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Maurice now ceased cannonading, and burrowed again for ten days without interruption. Four mines, leading to different points of the defences, were patiently constructed, and two large chambers at the terminations, neatly finished off and filled respectively with five thousand and twenty-five hundred pounds of powder, were at last established under two of the principal bastions.

During all this digging there had been a couple of sorties in which the besieged had inflicted great damage on their enemy, and got back into the town with a few prisoners, having lost but six of their own men. Sir Francis Vere had been severely wounded in the leg, so that he was obliged to keep his bed during the rest of the siege. Verdugo, too, had made a feeble attempt to reinforce the place with three hundred men, sixty or seventy of whom had entered, while the rest had been killed or captured. On such a small scale was Philip's world-empire contended for by his stadholder in Friesland; yet it was certainly not the fault of the stout old Portuguese. Verdugo would rather have sent thirty thousand men to save the front door of his great province than three hundred. But every available man—and few enough of them they were—had been sent out of the Netherlands, to defend the world-empire in its outposts of Normandy and Brittany.

This was Philip the Prudent's system for conquering the world, and men looked upon him as the consummation of kingcraft.

On the 3rd July Maurice ordered his whole force to be in readiness for the assault. The mines were then sprung.

The bastion of the east gate was blown to ruins. The mine under the Gast-Huys bulwark, burst outwardly, and buried alive many Hollanders standing ready for the assault. At this untoward accident Maurice hesitated to give the signal for storming the breach, but the panic within the town was so evident that Lewis William lost no time in seizing the overthrown eastern bulwark, from the ruins of which he looked over the whole city. The other broken bastion was likewise easily mastered, and the besieged, seeing the storm about to burst upon them with irresistible fury, sent a trumpet. Meantime Maurice, inspecting the effects of the explosion and preparing for the assault, had been shot through the left cheek. The wound was not dangerous, and the prince extracted the bullet with his own hand, but the change of half an inch would have made it fatal. He was not incapacitated—after his wound had been dressed, amidst the remonstrances of his friends for his temerity—from listening to the propositions of the city. They were refused, for the prince was sure of having his town on his own terms.

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Next day he permitted the garrison to depart; the officers and soldiers promising not to serve the King of Spain on the Netherland side of the Rhine for six months. They were to take their baggage, but to leave arms, flags, munitions, and provisions. Both Maurice and Lewis William were for insisting on sterner conditions, but the States' deputies and members of the council who were present, as usual, in camp urged the building of the golden bridge. After all, a fortified city, the second in importance after Groningen of all those regions, was the real prize contended for. The garrison was meagre and much reduced during the siege. The fortifications, of masonry and earthwork combined, were nearly as strong as ever. Saint Barbara had done them but little damage, but the town itself was in a sorry plight. Churches and houses were nearly all shot to pieces, and the inhabitants had long been dwelling in the cellars. Two hundred of the garrison remained, severely wounded, in the town; three hundred and fifty had been killed, among others the young cousin of the Nassaus, Count Lewis van den Berg. The remainder of the royalists marched out, and were treated with courtesy by Maurice, who gave them an escort, permitting the soldiers to retain their side-arms, and furnishing horses to the governor.

In the besieging army five or six hundred had been killed and many wounded, but not in numbers bearing the same proportion to the slain as in modern battles.

The siege had lasted forty-four days. When it was over, and men came out from the town to examine at leisure the prince's camp and his field of operations, they were astounded at the amount of labor performed in so short a time. The oldest campaigners confessed that they never before had understood what a siege really was, and they began to conceive a higher respect for the art of the engineer than they had ever done before. "Even those who were wont to rail at science and labour," said one who was present in the camp of Maurice, "declared that the siege would have been a far more arduous undertaking had it not been for those two engineers, Joost Matthes of Alost, and Jacob Kemp of Gorcum. It is high time to take from soldiers the false notion that it is shameful to work with the spade; an error which was long prevalent among the Netherlanders, and still prevails among the French, to the great detriment of the king's affairs, as may be seen in his sieges."

Certainly the result of Henry's recent campaign before Rouen had proved sufficiently how much better it would have been for him had there been some Dutch Joosts and Jacobs with their picks and shovels in his army at that critical period. They might perhaps have baffled Parma as they had done Verdugo.

Without letting the grass grow under his feet, Maurice now led his army from Steenwyck to Zwol and arrived on the 26th July before Coeworden.

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This place, very strong by art and still stronger by-nature, was the other key to all north Netherland—Friesland, Groningen, and Drenthe. Should it fall into the hands of the republic it would be impossible for the Spaniards to retain much longer the rich and important capital of all that country, the city of Groningen. Coeworden lay between two vast morasses, one of which—the Bourtange swamp—extended some thirty miles to the bay of the Dollart; while the other spread nearly as far in a westerly direction to the Zuyder Zee. Thus these two great marshes were a frame—an almost impassable barrier—by which the northern third of the whole territory of the republic was encircled and defended. Throughout this great morass there was not a hand-breadth of solid ground—not a resting-place for a human foot, save the road which led through Coeworden. This passage lay upon a natural deposit of hard, dry sand, interposed as if by a caprice of nature between the two swamps; and was about half a mile in width.

The town itself was well fortified, and Verdugo had been recently strengthening the position with additional earthworks. A thousand veterans formed the garrison under command of another Van den Berg, the Count Frederic. It was the fate of these sister's-children of the great founder of the republic to serve the cause of foreign despotism with remarkable tenacity against their own countrymen, and against their nearest blood relations. On many conspicuous occasions they were almost as useful to Spain and the Inquisition as the son and nearly all the other kinsmen of William the Silent had rendered themselves to the cause of Holland and of freedom.

Having thoroughly entrenched his camp before Coeworden and begun the regular approaches, Maurice left his cousin Lewis William to superintend the siege operations for the moment, and advanced towards Ootmarsum, a frontier town which might give him trouble if in the hands of a relieving force. The place fell at once, with the loss of but one life to the States army, but that a very valuable one; General de Famars, one of the original signers of the famous Compromise; and a most distinguished soldier of the republic, having been killed before the gates.

On the 31st July, Maurice returned to his entrenchments. The enemy professed unbounded confidence; Van den Berg not doubting that he should be relieved by Verdugo, and Verdugo being sure that Van den Berg would need no relief. The Portuguese veteran indeed was inclined to wonder at Maurice's presumption in attacking so impregnable a fortress. "If Coeworden does not hold," said he, "there is no place in the world that can hold."

Count Peter Ernest, was still acting as governor-general for Alexander Farnese, on returning from his second French campaign, had again betaken himself, shattered and melancholy, to the waters of Spa, leaving the responsibility for Netherland affairs upon the German octogenarian. To him; and to the nonagenarian Mondragon at Antwerp, the veteran Verdugo now called loudly for aides against the youthful pedant, whom all men had been laughing at a twelvemonth or so before. The Macedonian phalanx, Simon

Stevinus and delving Dutch boors—unworthy of the name of soldiers--seemed to be steadily digging the ground from under Philip's feet in his hereditary domains.

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What would become of the world-empire, where was the great king—not of Spain alone, nor of France alone—but the great monarch of all Christendom, to plant his throne securely, if his Frisian strongholds, his most important northern outposts, were to fall before an almost beardless youth at the head of a handful of republican militia?

Verdugo did his best, but the best was little. The Spanish and Italian legions had been sent out of the Netherlands into France. Many had died there, many were in hospital after their return, nearly all the rest were mutinous for want of pay.

On the 16th August, Maurice formally summoned Coeworden to surrender. After the trumpeter had blown thrice; Count Van den Berg, forbidding all others, came alone upon the walls and demanded his message. “To claim this city in the name of Prince Maurice of Nassau and of the States-General,” was the reply.

“Tell him first to beat down my walls as flat as the ditch,” said Van den Berg, “and then to bring five or six storms. Six months after that I will think whether I will send a trumpet.”

The prince proceeded steadily with his approaches, but he was infinitely chagrined by the departure out of his camp of Sir Francis Vere with his English contingent of three regiments, whom Queen Elizabeth had peremptorily ordered to the relief of King Henry in Brittany.

Nothing amazes the modern mind so much as the exquisite paucity of forces and of funds by which the world-empire was fought for and resisted in France, Holland, Spain, and England. The scenes of war were rapidly shifted—almost like the slides of a magic-lantern—from one country to another; the same conspicuous personages, almost the same individual armies, perpetually re-appearing in different places, as if a wild phantasmagoria were capriciously repeating itself to bewilder the imagination. Essex, and Vere, and Roger Williams, and Black Norris-Van der Does, and Admiral Nassau, the Meetkerks and Count Philip-Farnese and Mansfeld, George Basti, Arenberg, Berlaymont, La None and Teligny, Aquila and Coloma—were seen alternately fighting, retreating, triumphant, beleaguering, campaigning all along the great territory which extends from the Bay of Biscay to the crags of Brittany, and across the narrow seas to the bogs of Ireland, and thence through the plains of Picardy and Flanders to the swamps of Groningen and the frontiers of the Rhine.

This was the arena in which the great struggle was ever going on, but the champions were so few in number that their individual shapes become familiar to us like the figures of an oft-repeated pageant. And now the withdrawal of certain companies of infantry and squadrons of cavalry from the Spanish armies into France, had left obedient Netherland too weak to resist rebellious Netherland, while, on the other hand, the withdrawal of some twenty or thirty companies of English auxiliaries—most hard-fighting

veterans it is true, but very few in number—was likely to imperil the enterprise of Maurice in Friesland.

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The removal of these companies from the Low Countries to strengthen the Bearnese in the north of France, formed the subject of much bitter diplomatic conference between the States and England; the order having been communicated by the great queen herself in many a vehement epistle and caustic speech, enforced by big, manly oaths.

Verdugo, although confident in the strength of the place, had represented to Parma and to Mansfeld the immense importance of relieving Coeworden. The city, he said, was more valuable than all the towns taken the year before. All Friesland hung upon it, and it would be impossible to save Groningen should Coeworden fall.

Meantime Count Philip Nassau arrived from the campaign in France with his three regiments which he threw into garrison, and thus set free an equal number of fresh troops, which were forthwith sent to the camp of Maurice. The prince at the same time was made aware that Verdugo was about to receive important succour, and he was advised by the deputies of the States-General present at his headquarters to send out his German Reiters to intercept them. Maurice refused. Should his cavalry be defeated, he said, his whole army would be endangered. He determined to await within his fortified camp the attack of the relieving force.

During the whole month of August he proceeded steadily with his sapping and mining. By the middle of the month his lines had come through the ditch, which he drained of water into the counterscarp. By the beginning of September he had got beneath the principal fort, which, in the course of three or four days, he expected to blow into the air. The rainy weather had impeded his operations and the march of the relieving army. Nevertheless that army was at last approaching. The regiments of Mondragon, Charles Mansfeld, Gonzaga, Berlaymont, and Arenberg had been despatched to reinforce Verdugo. On the 23rd August, having crossed the Rhine at Rheinberg, they reached Olfen in the country of Bentheim, ten miles from Coeworden. Here they threw up rockets and made other signals that relief was approaching the town. On the 3rd of September Verdugo, with the whole force at his disposal, amounting to four thousand foot and eighteen hundred horse, was at the village of Emblichen, within a league of the besieged city. That night a peasant was captured with letters from Verdugo to the Governor of Coeworden, giving information that he intended to make an assault on the besiegers on the night of 6th-7th September.

Thus forewarned, Maurice took the best precautions and calmly within his entrenchments awaited the onslaught. Punctual to his appointment, Verdugo with his whole force, yelling "Victoria! Victoria!" made a shirt-attack, or *camiciata*—the men wearing their shirts outside their armour to distinguish each other in the darkness—upon that portion of the camp which was under command of Hohenlo. They were met with determination and repulsed, after

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fighting all night, with a loss of three hundred killed and a proportionate number of wounded. The Netherlanders had but three killed and six wounded. Among the latter, however, was Lewis William, who received a musket-ball in the belly, but remained on the ground until the enemy had retreated. It was then discovered that his wound was not mortal—the intestines not having been injured—and he was soon about his work again. Prince Maurice, too, as usual, incurred the remonstrances of the deputies and others for the reckless manner in which he exposed himself wherever the fire was hottest. He resolutely refused, however, to permit his cavalry to follow the retreating enemy. His object was Coeworden—a prize more important than a new victory over the already defeated Spaniards would prove—and this object he kept ever before his eyes.

This was Verdugo's first and last attempt to relieve the city. He had seen enough of the young prince's tactics and had no further wish to break his teeth against those scientific entrenchments. The Spaniards at last, whether they wore their shirts inside or outside their doublets, could no longer handle the Dutchmen at pleasure. That people of butter, as the iron duke of Alva was fond of calling the Netherlanders, were grown harder with the pressure of a twenty-five years' war.

Five days after the sanguinary 'camiciata' the besieged offered to capitulate. The trumpet at which the proud Van den Berg had hinted for six months later arrived on the 12th September. Maurice was glad to get his town. His "little soldiers" did not insist, as the Spaniards and Italians were used to do in the good old days, on unlimited murder, rape, and fire, as the natural solace and reward of their labours in the trenches. Civilization had made some progress, at least in the Netherlands. Maurice granted good terms, such as he had been in the habit of conceding to all captured towns. Van den Berg was courteously received by his cousins, as he rode forth from the place at the head of what remained of his garrison, five hundred in number, with colours flying, matches burning, bullet in mouth, and with all their arms and baggage except artillery and ammunition, and the heroic little Lewis, notwithstanding the wound in his belly, got on horseback and greeted him with a cousinly welcome in the camp.

The city was a most important acquisition, as already sufficiently set forth, but Queen Elizabeth, much misinformed on this occasion, was inclined to undervalue it. She wrote accordingly to the States, reproaching them for using all that artillery and that royal force against a mere castle and earthheap, instead of attempting some considerable capital, or going in force to the relief of Brittany. The day was to come when she would acknowledge the advantage of not leaving this earth-heap in the hands of the Spaniard. Meantime, Prince Maurice—the season being so far advanced—gave the world no further practical lessons in the engineering science, and sent his troops into winter quarters.

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These were the chief military phenomena in France and Flanders during three years of the great struggle to establish Philip's universal dominion.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Negotiations between Queen Elizabeth and the States—Aspect of affair between England and the Netherlands—Complaints of the Hollanders on the piratical acts of the English—The Dutch Envoy and the English Government—Caron's interview with Elizabeth—The Queen promises redress of grievances.

It is now necessary to cast a glance at certain negotiations on delicate topics which had meantime been occurring between Queen Elizabeth and the States.

England and the republic were bound together by ties so close that it was impossible for either to injure the other without inflicting a corresponding damage on itself. Nevertheless this very community of interest, combined with a close national relationship—for in the European family the Netherlands and English were but cousins twice removed—with similarity of pursuits, with commercial jealousy, with an intense and ever growing rivalry for that supremacy on the ocean towards which the monarchy and the republic were so earnestly struggling, with a common passion for civil and religious freedom, and with that inveterate habit of self-assertion—the healthful but not engaging attribute of all vigorous nations—which strongly marked them both, was rapidly producing an antipathy between the two countries which time was likely rather to deepen than efface. And the national divergences were as potent as the traits of resemblance in creating this antagonism.

The democratic element was expanding itself in the republic so rapidly as to stifle for a time the oligarchical principle which might one day be developed out of the same matrix; while, despite the hardy and adventurous spirit which characterised the English nation throughout all its grades, there was never a more intensely aristocratic influence in the world than the governing and directing spirit of the England of that age.

It was impossible that the courtiers of Elizabeth and the burgher-statesmen of Holland and Friesland should sympathize with each other in sentiment or in manner. The republicans in their exuberant consciousness of having at last got rid of kings and kingly paraphernalia in their own, land—for since the rejection of the sovereignty offered to France and England in 1585 this feeling had become so predominant as to make it difficult to believe that those offers had been in reality so recent—were insensibly adopting a frankness, perhaps a roughness, of political and social demeanour which was far from palatable to the euphuistic formalists of other, countries.

Especially the English statesmen, trained to approach their sovereign with almost Oriental humility, and accustomed to exact for themselves a large amount of deference,

could ill brook the free and easy tone occasionally adopted in diplomatic and official intercourse by these upstart republicans.

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[The Venetian ambassador Contarin relates that in the reign of James I. the great nobles of England were served at table by lackeys on they knees.]

A queen, who to loose morals, imperious disposition, and violent temper united as inordinate a personal vanity as was ever vouchsafed to woman, and who up to the verge of decrepitude was addressed by her courtiers in the language of love-torn swain to blooming shepherdess, could naturally find but little to her taste in the hierarchy of Hans Brewer and Hans Baker. Thus her Majesty and her courtiers, accustomed to the faded gallantries with which the serious affairs of State were so grotesquely intermingled, took it ill when they were bluntly informed, for instance, that the State council of the Netherlands, negotiating on Netherland affairs, could not permit a veto to the representatives of the queen, and that this same body of Dutchmen discussing their own business insisted upon talking Dutch and not Latin.

It was impossible to deny that the young Stadholder was a gentleman of a good house, but how could the insolence of a common citizen like John of Olden-Barneveld be digested? It was certain that behind those shaggy, overhanging brows there was a powerful brain stored with legal and historic lore, which supplied eloquence to an ever-ready tongue and pen. Yet these facts, difficult to gainsay, did not make the demands so frequently urged by the States-General upon the English Government for the enforcement of Dutch rights and the redress of English wrongs the more acceptable.

Bodley, Gilpin, and the rest were in a chronic state of exasperation with the Hollanders, not only because of their perpetual complaints, but because their complaints were perpetually just.

The States-General were dissatisfied, all the Netherlanders were dissatisfied—and not entirely without reason—that the English, with whom the republic was on terms not only of friendship but of alliance, should burn their ships on the high seas, plunder their merchants, and torture their sea-captains in order to extort information as to the most precious portions of their cargoes. Sharp language against such malpractices was considered but proof of democratic vulgarity. Yet it would be hard to maintain that Martin Frobisher, Mansfield, Grenfell, and the rest of the sea-kings, with all their dash and daring and patriotism, were not as unscrupulous pirates as ever sailed blue water, or that they were not apt to commit their depredations upon friend and foe alike.

On the other hand; by a liberality of commerce in extraordinary contrast with the practice of modern times, the Netherlanders were in the habit of trading directly with the arch-enemy of both Holland and England, even in the midst of their conflict with him, and it was complained of that even the munitions of war and the implements of navigation by which Spain had been enabled to effect its foot-hold in Brittany, and thus to threaten the English coast, were derived from this very traffic.

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The Hollanders replied, that, according to their contract with England, they were at liberty to send as many as forty or fifty vessels at a time to Spain and Portugal, that they had never exceeded the stipulated number, that England freely engaged in the same traffic herself with the common enemy, that it was not reasonable to consider cordage or dried fish or shooks and staves, butter, eggs, and corn as contraband of war, that if they were illegitimate the English trade was vitiated to the same degree, and that it would be utterly hopeless for the provinces to attempt to carry on the war, except by enabling themselves, through the widest and most unrestricted foreign commerce, even including the enemy's realms, to provide their nation with the necessary wealth to sustain so gigantic a conflict.

Here were ever flowing fountains of bitterest discussion and recrimination. It must be admitted however that there was occasionally an advantage in the despotic and summary manner in which the queen took matters into her own hands. It was refreshing to see this great sovereign—who was so well able to grapple with questions of State, and whose very imperiousness of temper impelled her to trample on shallow sophistries and specious technicalities—dealing directly with cases of piracy and turning a deaf ear to the counsellors, who in that, as in every age, were too prone to shove by international justice in order to fulfil municipal forms.

It was, however, with much difficulty that the envoy of the republic was able to obtain a direct hearing from her Majesty in order to press the long list of complaints on account of the English piratical proceedings upon her attention. He intimated that there seemed to be special reasons why the great ones about her throne were disposed to deny him access to the queen, knowing as they did in what intent he asked for interviews. They described in strong language the royal wrath at the opposition recently made by the States to detaching the English auxiliaries in the Netherlands for the service of the French king in Normandy, hoping thereby to deter him from venturing into her presence with a list of grievances on the part of his government. "I did my best to indicate the danger incurred by such transferring of troops at so critical a moment," said Noel de Canon, "showing that it was directly in opposition to the contract made with her Majesty. But I got no answer save very high words from the Lord Treasurer, to the effect that the States-General were never willing to agree to any of her Majesty's prepositions, and that this matter was as necessary to the States' service as to that of the French king. In effect, he said peremptorily that her Majesty willed it and would not recede from her resolution."

The envoy then requested an interview with the queen before her departure into the country.

Next day, at noon, Lord Burghley sent word that she was to leave between five and six o'clock that evening, and that the minister would be welcome meantime at any hour.

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“But notwithstanding that I presented myself,” said Caron, “at two o’clock in the afternoon, I was unable to speak to her Majesty until a moment before she was about to mount her horse. Her language was then very curt. She persisted in demanding her troops, and strongly expressed her dissatisfaction that we should have refused them on what she called so good an occasion for using them. I was obliged to cut my replies very short, as it was already between six and seven o’clock, and she was to ride nine English miles to the place where she was to pass the night. I was quite sensible, however; that the audience was arranged to be thus brief, in order that I should not be able to stop long enough to give trouble, and perhaps to find occasion to renew our complaints touching the plunderings and robberies committed upon us at sea. This is what some of the great personages here, without doubt, are afraid of, for they were wonderfully well overhauled in my last audience. I shall attempt to speak to her again before she goes very deep into the country.”

It was not however before the end of the year, after Caron had made a voyage to Holland and had returned, that he 14 Nov. was able to bring the subject thoroughly before her Majesty. On the 14th November he had preliminary interviews with the Lord High Admiral and the Lord Treasurer at Hampton Court, where the queen was then residing. The plundering business was warmly discussed between himself and the Admiral, and there was much quibbling and special pleading in defence of the practices which had created so much irritation and pecuniary loss in Holland. There was a good deal of talk about want of evidence and conflict of evidence, which, to a man who felt as sure of the facts and of the law as the Dutch envoy did—unless it were according to public law for one friend and, ally to plunder and burn the vessels of another friend and ally—was not encouraging as to the probable issue of his interview with her Majesty. It would be tedious to report the conversation as fully as it was laid by Noel de Caron before the States-General; but at last the admiral expressed a hope that the injured parties would be able to make good their case. At any rate he assured the envoy that he would take care of Captain Mansfield for the present, who was in prison with two other captains, so that proceedings might be had against them if it was thought worth while.

Caron answered with Dutch bluntness. “I recommended him very earnestly to do this,” he said, “and told him roundly that this was by all means necessary for the sake of his own honour. Otherwise no man could ever be made to believe that his Excellency was not seeking to get his own profit out of the affair. But he vehemently swore and protested that this was not the case.”

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He then went to the Lord Treasurer's apartment, where a long and stormy interview followed on the subject of the withdrawal of the English troops. Caron warmly insisted that the measure had been full of danger, for the States; that they had been ordered out of Prince Maurice's camp at a most critical moment; that, had it not, been for the Stallholder's promptness and military skill; very great disasters to the common cause must have ensued; and that, after all, nothing had been done by the contingent in any other field, for they had been for six months idle and sick, without ever reaching Brittany at all.

"The Lord Treasurer, who, contrary to his custom," said the envoy, "had been listening thus long to what I had to say, now observed that the States had treated her Majesty very ill, that they had kept her running after her own troops nearly half a year, and had offered no excuse for their proceedings."

It would be superfluous to repeat the arguments by which Caron endeavoured to set forth that the English troops, sent to the Netherlands according to a special compact, for a special service, and for a special consideration and equivalent, could not honestly be employed, contrary to the wishes of the States-General, upon a totally different service and in another country. The queen willed it, he was informed, and it was ill-treatment of her Majesty on the part of the Hollanders to oppose her will. This argument was unanswerable.

Soon afterwards, Caron was admitted to the presence of Elizabeth. He delivered, at first, a letter from the States-General, touching the withdrawal of the troops. The queen, instantly broke the seal and read the letter to the end. Coming to the concluding passage, in which the States observed that they had great and just cause highly to complain on that subject, she paused, reading the sentences over twice or thrice, and then remarked:

"Truly these are comical people. I have so often been complaining that they refused to send my troops, and now the States complain that they are obliged to let them go. Yet my intention is only to borrow them for a little while, because I can give my brother of France no better succour than by sending him these soldiers, and this I consider better than if I should send him four thousand men. I say again, I am only borrowing them, and surely the States ought never to make such complaints, when the occasion was such a favourable one, and they had received already sufficient aid from these troops, and had liberated their whole country. I don't comprehend these grievances. They complain that I withdraw my people, and meantime they are still holding them and have brought them ashore again. They send me frivolous excuses that the skippers don't know the road to my islands, which is, after all, as easy to find as the way to Caen, for it is all one. I have also sent my own pilots; and I complain bitterly that by making this difficulty they will cause the loss of all Brittany. They run with their people far away from me, and meantime they allow the enemy to become master of all the coasts lying opposite me. But if it goes badly with me they will rue it deeply themselves."

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There was considerable reason, even if there were but little justice, in this strain of remarks. Her Majesty continued it for some little time longer, and it is interesting to see the direct and personal manner in which this great princess handled the weightiest affairs of state. The transfer of a dozen companies of English infantry from Friesland to Brittany was supposed to be big with the fate of France, England, and the Dutch republic, and was the subject of long and angry controversy, not as a contested point of principle, in regard to which numbers, of course, are nothing, but as a matter of practical and pressing importance.

“Her Majesty made many more observations of this nature,” said Caron, “but without getting at all into a passion, and, in my opinion, her discourse was sensible, and she spoke with more moderation than she is wont at other times.”

The envoy then presented the second letter from the States-General in regard to the outrages inflicted on the Dutch merchantmen. The queen read it at once, and expressed herself as very much displeased with her people. She said that she had received similar information from Counsellor Bodley, who had openly given her to understand that the enormous outrages which her people were committing at sea upon the Netherlanders were a public scandal. It had made her so angry, she said, that she knew not which way to turn. She would take it in hand at once, for she would rather make oath never more to permit a single ship of war to leave her ports than consent to such thieveries and villanies. She told Caron that he would do well to have his case in regard to these matters verified, and then to give it into her own hands, since otherwise it would all be denied her and she would find herself unable to get at the truth.”

“I have all the proofs and documents of the merchants by me,” replied the envoy, “and, moreover, several of the sea-captains who have been robbed and outraged have come over with me, as likewise some merchants who were tortured by burning of the thumbs and other kinds of torments.”

This disturbed the queen very much, and she expressed her wish that Caron should not allow himself to be put off with, delays by the council, but should insist upon all due criminal punishment, the infliction of which she promised in the strongest terms to order; for she could never enjoy peace of mind, she said; so long as such scoundrels were tolerated in her kingdom.

The envoy had brought with him a summary of the cases, with the names of all the merchants interested, and a list of all the marks on the sacks of money which had been stolen. The queen looked over it very carefully, declaring it to be her intention that there should be no delays interposed in the conduct of this affair by forms of special pleading, but that speedy cognizance should be taken of the whole, and that the property should forthwith be restored.

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She then sent for Sir Robert Cecil, whom she directed to go at once and tell his father, the Lord Treasurer, that he was to assist Caron in this affair exactly as if it were her own. It was her intention, she said, that her people were in no wise to trouble the Hollanders in legitimate mercantile pursuits. She added that it was not enough for her people to say that they had only been seizing Spaniards' goods and money, but she meant that they should prove it, too, or else they should swing for it.

Caron assured her Majesty that he had no other commission from his masters than to ask for justice, and that he had no instructions to claim Spanish property or enemy's goods. He had brought sufficient evidence with him, he said, to give her Majesty entire satisfaction.

It is not necessary to pursue the subject any farther. The great nobles still endeavoured to interpose delays, and urged the propriety of taking the case before the common courts of law. Caron strong in the support of the queen, insisted that it should be settled, as her Majesty had commanded, by the council, and it was finally arranged that the judge of admiralty should examine the evidence on both sides, and then communicate the documents at once to the Lord Treasurer. Meantime the money was to be deposited with certain aldermen of London, and the accused parties kept in prison. The ultimate decision was then to be made by the council, "not by form of process but by commission thereto ordained." In the course of the many interviews which followed between the Dutch envoy and the privy counsellors, the Lord Admiral stated that an English merchant residing in the Netherlands had sent to offer him a present of two thousand pounds sterling, in case the affair should be decided against the Hollanders. He communicated the name of the individual to Caron, under seal of secrecy, and reminded the Lord Treasurer that he too had seen the letter of the Englishman. Lord Burghley observed that he remembered the fact that certain letters had been communicated to him by the Lord Admiral, but that he did not know from whence they came, nor anything about the person of the writer.

The case of the plundered merchants was destined to drag almost as slowly before the council as it might have done in the ordinary tribunals, and Caron was "kept running," as he expressed it, "from the court to London, and from London to the court," and it was long before justice was done to the sufferers. Yet the energetic manner in which the queen took the case into her own hands, and the intense indignation with which she denounced the robberies and outrages which had been committed by her subjects upon her friends and allies, were effective in restraining such wholesale piracy in the future.

On the whole, however, if the internal machinery is examined by which the masses of mankind were moved at epoch in various parts of Christendom, we shall not find much reason to applaud the conformity of Governments to the principles of justice, reason, or wisdom.

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ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Accustomed to the faded gallantries
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