

FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER

HISTORY OF THE REVOLT
OF THE NETHERLANDS —
VOLUME 03

Friedrich Schiller
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Netherlands — Volume 03**

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BOOK III

CONSPIRACY OF THE NOBLES

1565. Up to this point the general peace had it appears been the sincere wish of the Prince of Orange, the Counts Egmont and Horn, and their friends. They had pursued the true interests of their sovereign as much as the general weal; at least their exertions and their actions had been as little at variance with the former as with the latter. Nothing bad as yet occurred to make their motives suspected, or to manifest in them a rebellious spirit. What they had done they had done in discharge of their bounden duty as members of a free state, as the representatives of the nation, as advisers of the king, as men of integrity and honor. The only weapons they had used to oppose the encroachments of the court had been remonstrances, modest complaints, petitions. They had never allowed themselves to be so far carried away by a just zeal for their good cause as to transgress the limits of

prudence and moderation which on many occasions are so easily overstepped by party spirit. But all the nobles of the republic did not now listen to the voice of that prudence; all did not abide within the bounds of moderation.

While in the council of state the great question was discussed whether the nation was to be miserable or not, while its sworn deputies summoned to their assistance all the arguments of reason and of equity, and while the middle-classes and the people contented themselves with empty complaints, menaces, and curses, that part of the nation which of all seemed least called upon, and on whose support least reliance had been placed, began to take more active measures. We have already described a class of the nobility whose services and wants Philip at his accession had not considered it necessary to remember. Of these by far the greater number had asked for promotion from a much more urgent reason than a love of the mere honor. Many of them were deeply sunk in debt, from which by their own resources they could not hope to emancipate themselves. When then, in filling up appointments, Philip passed them over he wounded them in a point far more sensitive than their pride. In these suitors he had by his neglect raised up so many idle spies and merciless judges of his actions, so many collectors and propagators of malicious rumor. As their pride did not quit them with their prosperity, so now, driven by necessity, they trafficked with the sole capital which they could not alienate — their nobility and the political influence of their names; and brought into circulation a

coin which only in such a period could have found currency — their protection. With a self-pride to which they gave the more scope as it was all they could now call their own, they looked upon themselves as a strong intermediate power between the sovereign and the citizen, and believed themselves called upon to hasten to the rescue of the oppressed state, which looked imploringly to them for succor. This idea was ludicrous only so far as their self-conceit was concerned in it; the advantages which they contrived to draw from it were substantial enough. The Protestant merchants, who held in their hands the chief part of the wealth of the Netherlands, and who believed they could not at any price purchase too dearly the undisturbed exercise of their religion, did not fail to make use of this class of people who stood idle in the market and ready to be hired. These very men whom at any other time the merchants, in the pride of riches, would most probably have looked down upon, now appeared likely to do them good service through their numbers, their courage, their credit with the populace, their enmity to the government, nay, through their beggarly pride itself and their despair. On these grounds they zealously endeavored to form a close union with them, and diligently fostered the disposition for rebellion, while they also used every means to keep alive their high opinions of themselves, and, what was most important, lured their poverty by well-applied pecuniary assistance and glittering promises. Few of them were so utterly insignificant as not to possess some influence, if not personally, yet at least by their relationship with

higher and more powerful nobles; and if united they would be able to raise a formidable voice against the crown. Many of them had either already joined the new sect or were secretly inclined to it; and even those who were zealous Roman Catholics had political or private grounds enough to set them against the decrees of Trent and the Inquisition. All, in fine, felt the call of vanity sufficiently powerful not to allow the only moment to escape them in which they might possibly make some figure in the republic.

But much as might be expected from the co-operation of these men in a body it would have been futile and ridiculous to build any hopes on any one of them singly; and the great difficulty was to effect a union among them. Even to bring them together some unusual occurrence was necessary, and fortunately such an incident presented itself. The nuptials of Baron Montigny, one of the Belgian nobles, as also those of the Prince Alexander of Parma, which took place about this time in Brussels, assembled in that town a great number of the Belgian nobles. On this occasion relations met relations; new friendships were formed and old renewed; and while the distress of the country was the topic of conversation wine and mirth unlocked lips and hearts, hints were dropped of union among themselves, and of an alliance with foreign powers. These accidental meetings soon led to concealed ones, and public discussions gave rise to secret consultations. Two German barons, moreover, a Count of Holle and a Count of Schwarzenberg, who at this time were on a visit

to the Netherlands, omitted nothing to awaken expectations of assistance from their neighbors. Count Louis of Nassau, too, had also a short time before visited several German courts to ascertain their sentiments.

[It was not without cause that the Prince of Orange suddenly disappeared from Brussels in order to be present at the election of a king of Rome in Frankfort. An assembly of so many German princes must have greatly favored a negotiation.]

It has even been asserted that secret emissaries of the Admiral Coligny were seen at this time in Brabant, but this, however, may be reasonably doubted.

If ever a political crisis was favorable to an attempt at revolution it was the present. A woman at the helm of government; the governors of provinces disaffected themselves and disposed to wink at insubordination in others; most of the state counsellors quite inefficient; no army to fall back upon; the few troops there were long since discontented on account of the outstanding arrears of pay, and already too often deceived by false promises to be enticed by new; commanded, moreover, by officers who despised the Inquisition from their hearts, and would have blushed to draw a sword in its behalf; and, lastly, no money in the treasury to enlist new troops or to hire foreigners. The court at Brussels, as well as the three councils, not only divided by internal dissensions, but in the highest degree — venal and corrupt; the regent without full powers to act on the spot,

and the king at a distance; his adherents in the provinces few, uncertain, and dispirited; the faction numerous and powerful; two-thirds of the people irritated against popery and desirous of a change — such was the unfortunate weakness of the government, and the more unfortunate still that this weakness was so well known to its enemies!

In order to unite so many minds in the prosecution of a common object a leader was still wanting, and a few influential names to give political weight to their enterprise. The two were supplied by Count Louis of Nassau and Henry Count Brederode, both members of the most illustrious houses of the Belgian nobility, who voluntarily placed themselves at the head of the undertaking. Louis of Nassau, brother of the Prince of Orange, united many splendid qualities which made him worthy of appearing on so noble and important a stage. In Geneva, where he studied, he had imbibed at once a hatred to the hierarchy and a love to the new religion, and on his return to his native country had not failed to enlist proselytes to his opinions. The republican bias which his mind had received in that school kindled in him a bitter hatred of the Spanish name, which animated his whole conduct and only left him with his latest breath. Popery and Spanish rule were in his mind identical — as indeed they were in reality — and the abhorrence which he entertained for the one helped to strengthen his dislike for the other. Closely as the brothers agreed in their inclinations and aversions the ways by which each sought to gratify them were widely dissimilar. Youth

and an ardent temperament did not allow the younger brother to follow the tortuous course through which the elder wound himself to his object. A cold, calm circumspection carried the latter slowly but surely to his aim, and with a pliable subtilty he made all things subserve his purpose; with a foolhardy impetuosity which overthrew all obstacles, the other at times compelled success, but oftener accelerated disaster. For this reason William was a general and Louis never more than an adventurer; a sure and powerful arm if only it were directed by a wise head. Louis' pledge once given was good forever; his alliances survived every vicissitude, for they were mostly formed in the pressing moment of necessity, and misfortune binds more firmly than thoughtless joy. He loved his brother as dearly as he did his cause, and for the latter he died.

Henry of Brederode, Baron of Viane and Burgrave of Utrecht, was descended from the old Dutch counts who formerly ruled that province as sovereign princes. So ancient a title endeared him to the people, among whom the memory of their former lords still survived, and was the more treasured the less they felt they had gained by the change. This hereditary splendor increased the self-conceit of a man upon whose tongue the glory of his ancestors continually hung, and who dwelt the more on former greatness, even amidst its ruins, the more unpromising the aspect of his own condition became. Excluded from the honors and employments to which, in his opinion, his own merits and his noble ancestry fully entitled him (a squadron of light

cavalry being all which was entrusted to him), he hated the government, and did not scruple boldly to canvass and to rail at its measures. By these means he won the hearts of the people. He also favored in secret the evangelical belief; less, however, as a conviction of his better reason than as an opposition to the government. With more loquacity than eloquence, and more audacity than courage, he was brave rather from not believing in danger than from being superior to it. Louis of Nassau burned for the cause which he defended, Brederode for the glory of being its defender; the former was satisfied in acting for his party, the latter discontented if he did not stand at its head. No one was more fit to lead off the dance in a rebellion, but it could hardly have a worse ballet-master. Contemptible as his threatened designs really were, the illusion of the multitude might have imparted to them weight and terror if it had occurred to them to set up a pretender in his person. His claim to the possessions of his ancestors was an empty name; but even a name was now sufficient for the general disaffection to rally round. A pamphlet which was at the time disseminated amongst the people openly called him the heir of Holland; and his engraved portrait, which was publicly exhibited, bore the boastful inscription: —

Sum Brederodus ego, Batavae non infima gentis
Gloria, virtutem non unica pagina claudit.

(1565.) Besides these two, there were others also from among the most illustrious of the Flemish nobles the young Count Charles of Mansfeld, a son of that nobleman whom we have

found among the most zealous royalists; the Count Kinlemburg; two Counts of Bergen and of Battenburg; John of Marnix, Baron of Toulouse; Philip of Marnix, Baron of St. Aldegonde; with several others who joined the league, which, about the middle of November, in the year 1565, was formed at the house of Von Hammes, king at arms of the Golden Fleece. Here it was that six men decided the destiny of their country as formerly a few confederates consummated the liberty of Switzerland, kindled the torch of a forty years' war, and laid the basis of a freedom which they themselves were never to enjoy. The objects of the league were set forth in the following declaration, to which Philip of Marnix was the first to subscribe his name: "Whereas certain ill-disposed persons, under the mask of a pious zeal, but in reality under the impulse of avarice and ambition, have by their evil counsels persuaded our most gracious sovereign the king to introduce into these countries the abominable tribunal of the Inquisition, a tribunal diametrically opposed to all laws, human and divine, and in cruelty far surpassing the barbarous institutions of heathenism; which raises the inquisitors above every other power, and debases man to a perpetual bondage, and by its snares exposes the honest citizen to a constant fear of death, inasmuch as any one (priest, it may be, or a faithless friend, a Spaniard or a reprobate), has it in his power at any moment to cause whom he will to be dragged before that tribunal, to be placed in confinement, condemned, and executed without the accused ever being allowed to face his accuser, or to adduce

proof of his innocence; we, therefore, the undersigned, have bound ourselves to watch over the safety of our families, our estates, and our own persons. To this we hereby pledge ourselves, and to this end bind ourselves as a sacred fraternity, and vow with a solemn oath to oppose to the best of our power the introduction of this tribunal into these countries, whether it be attempted openly or secretly, and under whatever name it may be disguised. We at the same time declare that we are far from intending anything unlawful against the king our sovereign; rather is it our unalterable purpose to support and defend the royal prerogative, and to maintain peace, and, as far as lies in our power, to put down all rebellion. In accordance with this purpose we have sworn, and now again swear, to hold sacred the government, and to respect it both in word and deed, which witness Almighty God!

"Further, we vow and swear to protect and defend one another, in all times and places, against all attacks whatsoever touching the articles which are set forth in this covenant. We hereby bind ourselves that no accusation of any of our followers, in whatever name it may be clothed, whether rebellion, sedition, or otherwise, shall avail to annul our oath towards the accused, or absolve us from our obligation towards him. No act which is directed against the Inquisition can deserve the name of a rebellion. Whoever, therefore, shall be placed in arrest on any such charge, we here pledge ourselves to assist him to the utmost of our ability, and to endeavor by every allowable means to effect

his liberation. In this, however, as in all matters, but especially in the conduct of all measures against the tribunal of the Inquisition, we submit ourselves to the general regulations of the league, or to the decision of those whom we may unanimously appoint our counsellors and leaders.

"In witness hereof, and in confirmation of this our common league and covenant, we call upon the holy name of the living God, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that are therein, who searches the hearts, the consciences, and the thoughts, and knows the purity of ours. We implore the aid of the Holy Spirit, that success and honor may crown our undertaking, to the glory of His name, and to the peace and blessing of our country!"

This covenant was immediately translated into several languages, and quickly disseminated through the provinces. To swell the league as speedily as possible each of the confederates assembled all his friends, relations, adherents, and retainers. Great banquets were held, which lasted whole days — irresistible temptations for a sensual, luxurious people, in whom the deepest wretchedness could not stifle the propensity for voluptuous living. Whoever repaired to these banquets — and every one was welcome — was plied with officious assurances of friendship, and, when heated with wine, carried away by the example of numbers, and overcome by the fire of a wild eloquence. The hands of many were guided while they subscribed their signatures; the hesitating were derided, the pusillanimous threatened, the scruples of loyalty clamored

down; some even were quite ignorant what they were signing, and were ashamed afterwards to inquire. To many whom mere levity brought to the entertainment the general enthusiasm left no choice, while the splendor of the confederacy allured the mean, and its numbers encouraged the timorous. The abettors of the league had not scrupled at the artifice of counterfeiting the signature and seals of the Prince of Orange, Counts Egmont, Horn, Mcgen, and others, a trick which won them hundreds of adherents. This was done especially with a view of influencing the officers of the army, in order to be safe in this quarter, if matters should come at last to violence. The device succeeded with many, especially with subalterns, and Count Brederode even drew his sword upon an ensign who wished time for consideration. Men of all classes and conditions signed it. Religion made no difference. Roman Catholic priests even were associates of the league. The motives were not the same with all, but the pretext was similar. The Roman Catholics desired simply the abolition of the Inquisition, and a mitigation of the edicts; the Protestants aimed at unlimited freedom of conscience. A few daring spirits only entertained so bold a project as the overthrow of the present government, while the needy and indigent based the vilest hopes on a general anarchy. A farewell entertainment, which about this time was given to the Counts Schwarzenberg and Holle in Breda, and another shortly afterwards in Hogstraten, drew many of the principal nobility to these two places, and of these several had already signed the covenant. The Prince

of Orange, Counts Egmont, Horn, and Megen were present at the latter banquet, but without any concert or design, and without having themselves any share in the league, although one of Egmont's own secretaries and some of the servants of the other three noblemen had openly joined it. At this entertainment three hundred persons gave in their adhesion to the covenant, and the question was mooted whether the whole body should present themselves before the regent armed or unarmed, with a declaration or with a petition? Horn and Orange (Egmont would not countenance the business in any way) were called in as arbiters upon this point, and they decided in favor of the more moderate and submissive procedure. By taking this office upon them they exposed themselves to the charge of having in no very covert manner lent their sanction to the enterprise of the confederates. In compliance, therefore, with their advice, it was determined to present their address unarmed, and in the form of a petition, and a day was appointed on which they should assemble in Brussels.

The first intimation the regent received of this conspiracy of the nobles was given by the Count of Megen soon after his return to the capital. "There was," he said, "an enterprise on foot; no less than three hundred of the nobles were implicated in it; it referred to religion; the members of it had bound themselves together by an oath; they reckoned much on foreign aid; she would soon know more about it." Though urgently pressed, he would give her no further information. "A nobleman," he said,

"had confided it to him under the seal of secrecy, and he had pledged his word of honor to him." What really withheld him from giving her any further explanation was, in all probability, not so much any delicacy about his honor, as his hatred of the Inquisition, which he would not willingly do anything to advance. Soon after him, Count Egmont delivered to the regent a copy of the covenant, and also gave her the names of the conspirators, with some few exceptions. Nearly about the same time the Prince of Orange wrote to her: "There was, as he had heard, an army enlisted, four hundred officers were already named, and twenty thousand men would presently appear in arms." Thus the rumor was intentionally exaggerated, and the danger was multiplied in every mouth.

The regent, petrified with alarm at the first announcement of these tidings, and guided solely by her fears, hastily called together all the members of the council of state who happened to be then in Brussels, and at the same time sent a pressing summons to the Prince of Orange and Count Horn, inviting them to resume their seats in the senate. Before the latter could arrive she consulted with Egmont, Megen, and Barlaimont what course was to be adopted in the present dangerous posture of affairs. The question debated was whether it would be better to have recourse to arms or to yield to the emergency and grant the demands of the confederates; or whether they should be put off with promises, and an appearance of compliance, in order to gain time for procuring instructions from Spain, and obtaining

money and troops? For the first plan the requisite supplies were wanting, and, what was equally requisite, confidence in the army, of which there seemed reason to doubt whether it had not been already gained by the conspirators. The second expedient would it was quite clear never be sanctioned by the king; besides it would serve rather to raise than depress the courage of the confederates; while, on the other hand, a compliance with their reasonable demands and a ready unconditional pardon of the past would in all probability stifle the rebellion in the cradle. The last opinion was supported by Megen and Egmont but opposed by Barlaimont. "Rumor," said the latter, "had exaggerated the matter; it is impossible that so formidable an armament could have been prepared so secretly and, so rapidly. It was but a band of a few outcasts and desperadoes, instigated by two or three enthusiasts, nothing more. All will be quiet after a few heads have been struck off." The regent determined to await the opinion of the council of state, which was shortly to assemble; in the meanwhile, however, she was not inactive. The fortifications in the most important places were inspected and the necessary repairs speedily executed; her ambassadors at foreign courts received orders to redouble their vigilance; expresses were sent off to Spain. At the same time she caused the report to be revived of the near advent of the king, and in her external deportment put on a show of that imperturbable firmness which awaits attack without intending easily to yield to it. At the end of March (four whole months consequently from the framing

of the covenant), the whole state council assembled in Brussels. There were present the Prince of Orange, the Duke of Arschot, Counts Egmont, Bergen, Megen, Aremberg, Horn, Hosstraten, Barlaimont, and others; the Barons Montigny and Hachicourt, all the knights of the Golden Fleece, with the President Viglius, State Counsellor Bruxelles, and the other assessors of the privy council. Several letters were produced which gave a clearer insight into the nature and objects of the conspiracy. The extremity to which the regent was reduced gave the disaffected a power which on the present occasion they did not neglect to use. Venting their long suppressed indignation, they indulged in bitter complaints against the court and against the government. "But lately," said the Prince of Orange, "the king sent forty thousand gold florins to the Queen of Scotland to support her in her undertakings against England, and he allows his Netherlands to be burdened with debt. Not to mention the unseasonableness of this subsidy and its fruitless expenditure, why should he bring upon us the resentment of a queen, who is both so important to us as a friend and as an enemy so much to be dreaded?" The prince did not even refrain on the present occasion from glancing at the concealed hatred which the king was suspected of cherishing against the family of Nassau and against him in particular. "It is well known," he said, "that he has plotted with the hereditary enemies of my house to take away my life, and that he waits with impatience only for a suitable opportunity." His example opened the lips of Count Horn also, and of many

others besides, who with passionate vehemence descanted on their own merits and the ingratitude of the king. With difficulty did the regent succeed in silencing the tumult and in recalling attention to the proper subject of the debate. The question was whether the confederates, of whom it was now known that they intended to appear at court with a petition, should be admitted or not? The Duke of Arschot, Counts Aremberg, Megen, and Barlaimont gave their negative to the proposition. "What need of five hundred persons," said the latter, "to deliver a small memorial? This paradox of humility and defiance implies no good. Let them send to us one respectable man from among their number without pomp, without assumption, and so submit their application to us. Otherwise, shut the gates upon them, or if some insist on their admission let them be closely watched, and let the first act of insolence which any one of them shall be guilty of be punished with death." In this advice concurred Count Mansfeld, whose own son was among the conspirators; he had even threatened to disinherit his son if he did not quickly abandon the league.

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