

Fox's Book of Martyrs

A History of the lives, sufferings and triumphant deaths of the early Christian martyrs

Edited by William Byron Forbush

CHAPTER XI

An Account of the Persecutions in the Netherlands

The light of the Gospel having successfully spread over the Netherlands, the pope instigated the emperor to commence a persecution against the Protestants; when many thousand fell martyrs to superstitious malice and barbarous bigotry, among whom the most remarkable were the following:

Wendelinuta, a pious Protestant widow, was apprehended on account of her religion, when several monks, unsuccessfully, endeavored to persuade her to recant. As they could not prevail, a Roman Catholic lady of her acquaintance desired to be admitted to the dungeon in which she was confined, and promised to exert herself strenuously towards inducing the prisoner to abjure the reformed religion. When she was admitted to the dungeon, she did her utmost to perform the task she had undertaken; but finding her endeavors ineffectual, she said, "Dear Wendelinuta, if you will not embrace our faith, at least keep the things which you profess secret within your own bosom, and strive to prolong your life." To which the widow replied, "Madam, you know not what you say; for with the heart we believe to righteousness, but with the tongue confession is made unto salvation." As she positively refused to recant, her goods were confiscated, and she was condemned to be burnt. At the place of execution a monk held a cross to her, and bade her kiss and worship God. To which she answered, "I worship no wooden god, but the eternal God who is in heaven." She was then executed, but through the before-mentioned Roman Catholic lady, the favor was granted that she should be strangled before fire was put to the fagots.

Two Protestant clergymen were burnt at Colen; a tradesman of Antwerp, named Nicholas, was tied up in a sack, thrown into the river, and drowned; and Pistorius, a learned student, was carried to the market of a Dutch village in a fool's coat, and committed to the flames.

Sixteen Protestants, having received sentence to be beheaded, a Protestant minister was ordered to attend the execution. This gentleman performed the function of his office with great propriety, exhorted them to repentance, and gave them comfort in the mercies of their Redeemer. As soon as the sixteen were beheaded, the magistrate cried out to the executioner, "There is another stroke remaining yet; you must behead the minister; he can never die at a better time than with such excellent precepts in his mouth, and such laudable examples before him." He was accordingly beheaded, though even many of the Roman Catholics themselves reprobated this piece of treacherous and unnecessary cruelty.

George Scherter, a minister of Salzburg, was apprehended and committed to prison for instructing his flock in the knowledge of the Gospel. While he was in confinement he wrote a confession of his faith; soon after which he was condemned, first to be beheaded, and afterward to be burnt to ashes. On his way to the place of execution he said to the spectators, "That you may know I die a true Christian, I will give you a sign." This was indeed verified in a most singular manner; for after his head was cut off, the body lying a short space of time with the belly to the ground, it suddenly turned upon the back, when the right foot crossed over the left, as did also the right arm over the left: and in this manner it remained until it was committed to the flames.

In Louviana, a learned man, named Percinal, was murdered in prison; and Justus Insparg was beheaded, for having Luther's sermons in his possession.

Giles Tilleman, a cutler of Brussels, was a man of great humanity and piety. Among others he was apprehended as a Protestant, and many endeavors were made by the monks to persuade him to recant. He had once, by accident, a fair opportunity of escaping from prison and being asked why he did not avail himself of it, he replied, "I would not do the keepers so much injury, as they must have answered for my absence, had I gone away." When he was sentenced to be burnt, he fervently thanked God for granting him an opportunity, by martyrdom, to glorify His name. Perceiving, at the place of execution, a great quantity of fagots, he desired the principal part of them might be given to the poor, saying, "A small quantity will suffice to consume me." The executioner offered to strangle him before the fire was lighted, but he would not consent, telling him that he defied the flames; and, indeed, he gave up the ghost with such composure amidst them, that he hardly seemed sensible of their effects.

In the year 1543 and 1544, the persecution was carried on throughout all Flanders in a most violent and cruel manner. Some were condemned to perpetual imprisonment, others to perpetual banishment; but most were put to death either by hanging, drowning, immuring, burning, the rack, or burying alive.

John de Boscane, a zealous Protestant, was apprehended on account of his faith, in the city of Antwerp. On his trial, he steadfastly professed himself to be of the reformed religion, which occasioned his immediate condemnation. The magistrate, however, was afraid to put him to death publicly, as he was popular through his great generosity, and almost universally beloved for his inoffensive life, and exemplary piety. A private

execution being determined on, an order was given to drown him in prison. The executioner, accordingly, put him in a large tub; but Boscane struggling, and getting his head above the water, the executioner stabbed him with a dagger in several places, until he expired.

John de Buisons, another Protestant, was, about the same time, secretly apprehended, and privately executed at Antwerp. The numbers of Protestants being great in that city, and the prisoner much respected, the magistrates feared an insurrection, and for that reason ordered him to be beheaded in prison.

A.D. 1568, three persons were apprehended in Antwerp, named Scoblant, Hues, and Coomans. During their confinement they behaved with great fortitude and cheerfulness, confessing that the hand of God appeared in what had befallen them, and bowing down before the throne of his providence. In an epistle to some worthy Protestants, they expressed themselves in the following words: "Since it is the will of the Almighty that we should suffer for His name, and be persecuted for the sake of His Gospel, we patiently submit, and are joyful upon the occasion; though the flesh may rebel against the spirit, and hearken to the council of the old serpent, yet the truths of the Gospel shall prevent such advice from being taken, and Christ shall bruise the serpent's head. We are not comfortless in confinement, for we have faith; we fear not affliction, for we have hope; and we forgive our enemies, for we have charity. Be not under apprehensions for us, we are happy in confinement through the promises of God, glory in our bonds, and exult in being thought worthy to suffer for the sake of Christ. We desire not to be released, but to be blessed with fortitude; we ask not liberty, but the power of perseverance; and wish for no change in our condition, but that which places a crown of martyrdom upon our heads."

Scoblant was first brought to his trial; when, persisting in the profession of his faith, he received sentence of death. On his return to prison, he earnestly requested the jailer not to permit any friar to come near him; saying, "They can do me no good, but may greatly disturb me. I hope my salvation is already sealed in heaven, and that the blood of Christ, in which I firmly put my trust, hath washed me from my iniquities. I am not going to throw off this mantle of clay, to be clad in robes of eternal glory, by whose celestial brightness I shall be freed from all errors. I hope I may be the last martyr to papal tyranny, and the blood already spilt found sufficient to quench the thirst of popish cruelty; that the Church of Christ may have rest here, as his servants will hereafter." On the day of execution, he took a pathetic leave of his fellow prisoners. At the stake he fervently said the Lord's Prayer, and sung the Fortieth Psalm; then commending his soul to God, he was burnt alive.

Hues, soon after died in prison; upon which occasion Coomans wrote thus to his friends: "I am now deprived of my friends and companions; Scoblant is martyred, and Hues dead, by the visitation of the Lord; yet I am not alone, I have with me the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob; He is my comfort, and shall be my reward. Pray unto God to strengthen me to the end, as I expect every hour to be freed from this tenement of clay."

On his trial he freely confessed himself of the reformed religion, answered with a manly fortitude to every charge against him, and proved the Scriptural part of his answers from the Gospel. The judge told him the only alternatives were recantation or death; and concluded by saying, "Will you die for the faith you profess?" To which Coomans replied, "I am not only willing to die, but to suffer the most excruciating torments for it; after which my soul shall receive its confirmation from God Himself, in the midst of eternal glory." Being condemned, he went cheerfully to the place of execution, and died with the most manly fortitude, and Christian resignation.

William of Nassau fell a sacrifice to treachery, being assassinated in the fifty-first year of his age, by Beltazar Gerard, a native of Ranche Compte, in the province of Burgundy. This murderer, in hopes of a reward here and hereafter, for killing an enemy to the king of Spain and an enemy to the Catholic religion, undertook to destroy the prince of Orange. Having procured firearms, he watched him as he passed through the great hall of his palace to dinner, and demanded a passport. The princess of Orange, observing that the assassin spoke with a hollow and confused voice, asked who he was, saying that she did not like his countenance. The prince answered that it was one that demanded a passport, which he should presently have.

Nothing further passed before dinner, but on the return of the prince and princess through the same hall, after dinner was over, the assassin, standing concealed as much as possible by one of the pillars, fired at the prince, the balls entering at the left side, and passing through the right, wounding in their passage the stomach and vital parts. On receiving the wounds, the prince only said, "Lord, have mercy upon my soul, and upon these poor people," and then expired immediately.

The lamentations throughout the United Provinces were general, on account of the death of the prince of Orange; and the assassin, who was immediately taken, received sentence to be put to death in the most exemplary manner, yet such was his enthusiasm, or folly, that when his flesh was torn by red-hot pincers, he coolly said, "If I was at liberty, I would commit such an action over again."

The prince of Orange's funeral was the grandest ever seen in the Low Countries, and perhaps the sorrow for his death the most sincere, as he left behind him the character he honestly deserved, viz., that of father of his people.

To conclude, multitudes were murdered in different parts of Flanders; in the city of Valence, in particular, fifty-seven of the principal inhabitants were butchered in one day, for refusing to embrace the Romish superstition; and great numbers were suffered to languish in confinement, until they perished through the inclemency of their dungeons.