

## "CECIL OVER ENGLAND: PHILIP OVER SPAIN"

FROM 1558 to 1598 Cecil ruled in England, under Elizabeth the Queen, and all that time Philip II reigned over Spain and America. Philip kept both his country and his continent Catholic, and nearly all his European possession. That he lost Holland can be laid to the wiles of that extraordinary character William Cecil, whose continued opposition to Catholicism was a dominant factor in making England Protestant. Here is the man as seen by a modern writer: Never in the history of England has there appeared a man Cecil's superior in astuteness. There was something satanic about the man; an hypocrisy almost unparalleled, frightening in its profundity. His duplicity can never have been surpassed by any ruler. With equal facility he deceived friend and foe. Even Philip and the wise Cardinal Pole were his victims, and his success with Elizabeth and his defeat of the Catholics is described in lengthy and masterly fashion by Walsh, famous as the author of "Isabella of Spain," in his new and vast life of Philip II.<sup>1</sup> There was one however whom he could not deceive, Mary the Catholic, so he let his cold heart feed on his hatred till that unfortunate woman passed to the grave. Vain it was for him to clack his rosary in the church at Wimbledon and in the streets of Stamford. When the Queen gave back her Church lands to their owners as an example to the new nobility to do the same, the parliamentary opposition was secretly led by this man, "he of the rattling rosary beads, who knelt with his wife in a Catholic church at Christmas that year (1555) to receive the Holy Eucharist with unbelief and hatred (to judge from his later actions) in his unfathomable heart."

Walsh describes him for us at this period of his life. "Cecil was then (1555) about thirty-five, with a mask-like face and small ferret eyes that could assume a look of gentleness and innocence. He had a first-rate intelligence, enormous industry, a veritable genius for business negotiation;

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<sup>1</sup> *Philip II*, by William Thomas Walsh. London; Sheed & Ward. 188.

patience and judgment; a devotion to the teachings of Machiavelli and to astrology; an hypocrisy so plausible that it deceived many even of the elect. The name of God was always on his lips, even in the most despicable affairs of his long life. When an end was to be sought, he had no scruples at all.”

Cecil, wise man though he was, committed early in his career a blunder which, had Mary been what certain historians say she was, had cost Master Cecil his head. This blunder was his action in supporting the claims of Lady Jane Grey. Selling his patron Somerset was the beginning of his mistake; his signing the Council’s insolent letter to Mary when the death of Edward VI gave her the throne, was the crowning of the blunder. But in fairness to Cecil it must be remembered that he always protested he had signed under compulsion. Also in the previous reign he had associated himself with the attempt to force Mary to Protestantism. When she read the letter from her brother ordering her to discontinue the celebration of Mass in her house, she replied: “Good Master Cecil took much pains here.” Lingard’s remarks concerning him are well-known. “Having obtained a pardon for his share in the treason of Northumberland, he had sought, by feigning an attachment to the Catholic faith, to worm himself into the good graces of Mary. But that queen, though Cardinal Pole professed to be his friend, always doubted his sincerity; her reserve, joined to her increasing infirmities, taught him to divert his attention from the setting to the rising sun; and Elizabeth accepted with joy and gratitude the services of so able and experienced a statesman.”<sup>2</sup> This refusal of trust by Mary must indeed have angered Cecil, principally because the man’s chief love was power. Walsh says “he worshipped power rather than money. He was a figure such an Annas must have been, cold, ingratiating, far-sighted, sceptical, implacable, full of such worldly wisdom as appears in those precepts to his son, which may have suggested the maxims

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<sup>2</sup> Lingard, 5th ed. of the *History of England*, v. 2, and note 2, where he quotes from Nares’ *Memoirs of Lord Burghley*, the entry in the Wimbledon Easter Book, giving the certificate of Cecil’s confession and Easter Communion, of the year 1556, and that of Mildred his wife.

of Polonius to Shakespeare; thoroughly devoted to Machiavelli's principles, and more successful than most in covering up his traces; a foeman worthy of any Renaissance statesman's steel" (p. 216). Another motive for anger was his failure to dupe Mary when almost all were his victims.

Perhaps his most important conquest was that of Philip, who placed him on his list of pensioners and actually persuaded Mary to send him to Brussels, along with Paget and Hastings, to invite the legate, Pole, to England to absolve that realm from the guilt of its schism, and restore it to the unity of Christendom. Mary however refused to employ him any further, and angered him by her generous return to the Church of the Crown's ill-gotten share of its property. But for this generosity, the minds of such men as then composed the ruling class would not have been troubled. They feared a forced surrender of their own share, and Cecil quietly led them in their opposition to any such demand. When Mary died, as all knew she soon would, he had his programme ready to put before her successor. It was here that Philip was his greatest, but unwilling auxiliary. Mary seemed determined not to allow the throne to pass to one in whose sincerity she could nowise believe, but Philip was determined that it should. He claimed to have saved Elizabeth's life after the Cleobury conspiracy, when Mary was bent on her being "tried and executed for high treason." Hearing that his wife was dying, he, being absent in Spain where his father, the abdicated Charles V, was breathing his last in the Monastery of Yuste, sent orders to his ambassador, Feria, to hasten to her bedside to console her—"and to make sure that she would not die without naming Elizabeth her successor." Deprived of her chief counsellor Gardiner by death, and of her cousin, Cardinal Pole, by a mortal sickness, the poor dying woman having no one to consult surrendered to her husband's request, but only after Elizabeth had taken a solemn oath to remain an obedient child of the Church. How much Cecil had to do with this action of Philip we may never know, but this we do know that Philip, hoping to have Elizabeth his constant friend and ally, even his wife, found too late that she

had over-reached him, and that not only was England lost to him but also to united Christendom. It is scarcely unjust to attribute Elizabeth's dissembling in part to Cecil, who was in attendance on her at Hatfield when Mary died at St. James's. His appointment as secretary of the Council was her first official act on succeeding to the Crown and to those with vision—they were indeed few—this was a foreboding of the evil days to come. There are extant notes in his handwriting of the steps to be taken by the new government, the first being the removal of the late queen's two Catholic secretaries. "He was too astute to make a radical change. He advised Elizabeth to keep as many as possible of her sister's councillors, most of them time-servers who had shown great dexterity in changing their religion. Only the most uncompromising adherents of Rome were to be dropped. The more pliant 'broad-minded' Catholic, in fact, was of real value as a stalking horse to keep the Catholic population off-guard until the ground could be cut from under their feet." (p. 210.)

There is no doubt of this Catholic majority. In 1558 the well-informed Sanders told Cardinal Morone that the common people in England were divided into three classes, farmers, shepherds and artisans. He claimed the first two as Catholic, and added that of the third class only those employed in sedentary work, such as weavers and cobblers, were inclined to schism. No one will read with surprise that Cecil himself, on the occasion of the northern rising in 1572, was amazed at the strong hold Catholicism still had on the nation.

All this is of course nothing new to the student of Lingard, but Walsh brings it forward with telling strength. Cecil's method was to make changes before people were aware of their significance, and in the beginning prevent Catholic influence being brought to bear on the queen. When Feria demanded an audience of Elizabeth to get an explanation why she had forbidden the Elevation during Mass in her chapel, he could get no further than Cecil's room; and during the last part of January after Cecil had allowed putting him off.

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piracy against Philip's ships from Flanders he was only allowed to see her once, and then she only joked with him,

Thus began a forty years' struggle between the all-powerful minister and the greatest monarch in the world, a struggle that was never to slacken. Cecil kept all the bishops in prison to prevent a new set of priests being ordained. This was checkmated by Cardinal Allen's seminary, financially helped by Philip. Cecil drove Catholics from England by his iniquitous laws, Philip made them his pensioners. But the one tie that held them together in at least one point of policy was the necessity of Elizabeth holding and continuing to hold the sceptre. The legitimate heir, as all Europe knew, was Mary, Queen of Scots, wife of the Dauphin. The union of the two crowns of Scotland and France was a bitter enough pill for the King of Spain to swallow, but the union of these with that of England he would not stomach. Cecil knew that if Elizabeth died, or were dethroned, nothing could prevent the Scottish Queen succeeding her, and that would terminate his own rule and probably his life. As far as Philip was concerned the affair was settled by the death of Mary's husband in 1560, the year after his accession to the French throne as Francis II. Mary's return to Scotland settled the matter so Philip decided, but not so Cecil. His persecution of this unfortunate woman until in 1587 he saw her head stricken from her body is part of our national story.

There is no need to recapitulate here what is so well-known in Europe's story, Cecil's machinations abroad, his helping the Calvinists in Holland and France, and his persecuting them at home. One country only was he responsible for, but his great antagonist had to govern almost a third part of the known world. Cecil, however, had one handicap that Philip was spared, a headstrong, fickle mistress. The wild beast that seemed to possess Henry VIII seemed at times to possess his daughter. That Cecil guided her steps for forty years, perhaps often without her knowing it, is a tribute to his uncanny skill in studying character. As Henry discarded his women, so Elizabeth discarded her favourites. Even in the heyday of their attraction for her

she never handed to them any of the power she gave to Cecil. But that he might some day be destroyed by the woman he served had always to be considered and guarded against. One such occasion seemed to threaten definitely in 1579 when Elizabeth actually accused him of intriguing secretly against her with Mary, Queen of Scots. The irony of the thing was a shock to Cecil that he scarcely could have anticipated even in the wildest nightmare. And Elizabeth persisted in her accusation, for long days refusing to accept a denial. This one only storm he safely survived, to remain “her spirit” for nineteen more years. On August 8th, 1598, he was summoned to the tribunal which all must face, and little more than a month later Philip too died. Cecil could count as part of his life’s work the almost complete disappearance from his native land of that religion in which he was born and baptised; Philip could count as his success that through many faults, many sins, many trials he had kept the faith and preserved it in his country. But then he had always the prayers of “Madre Teresa.” When one of her nuns related how she had heard Christ say to her, “Daughter, I wish him to be saved” the Saint said the same thing had often happened to her, and urged the sister to pray earnestly for him. “God wishes it. That Person has passed through great trials and more are to come.”

Certainly Philip’s faults were many and great, and the complexity of his character makes it almost impossible to estimate them at their true value. His affection for those nearest to him was well-known, yet these he would sacrifice for exigencies of state. He would beggar himself in fitting out fleets and armies for the defence of the faith, with little or no hope of being repaid, yet his extortions from the clerical revenues were ruthless. Never would he compromise on any teaching of the faith, yet would he compromise politically when evil would come to the Church in consequence; witness his dealings with Elizabeth. Saint Teresa, we are told, once brought him a message God had told her to deliver. Nothing now remains of the letter but her signature “Teresa of Jesus,” followed by a postscript “Remember, Sire, that King Saul was anointed, and yet he

was rejected.” When urged by the Council of the Indies to give up the possession and care of so worthless a colony as the Philippines, he told them that were the revenues of these islands insufficient to support even a single hermit, yet “if there were only one person there to keep the name and veneration of Jesus Christ alive, I would send missionaries from Spain to spread His gospel. *Looking for mines of precious metals is not the only business of kings.*”

Saint Teresa’s prophecy that “he had to suffer great pains on account of the deaths of persons which touched him closely” was more than fulfilled in the bitterness that came to him in the death of that appalling son of his, Don Carlos, also in the loss of his beautiful young wife, Isabella of France, and the untimely death of the once heroic and magnificent Don John of Austria. The agony lay not so much in their loss as in the foul accusations still made by enemies of Catholic Spain that Philip was their murderer. We know that never as long as this world endures will a calumny against the Church be utterly destroyed—the Father of Lies will see to that—but Walsh has in his great work triumphantly acquitted Philip of these terrible charges, at least to the satisfaction of those who will have patience to read him. Even Chesterton wrote:

“King Philip’s in his closet with the Fleece about his neck  
(*Don John of Austria is armed upon the deck.*)

The walls are hung with velvet that is black and soft as  
sin,

And little dwarfs creep out of it and little dwarfs creep in.  
He holds a crystal phial that has colours like the moon,  
He touches, and it tingles, and he trembles very soon,  
And his face is as a fungus of a leprous white and grey  
Like plants in the high houses that are shuttered from the  
day,

And death is in the phial, and the end of noble work,  
But Don John of Austria has fired upon the Turk.”

All very magnificent but without a streak of truth. Don John died young enough, but not before he had shown signs of deteriorating from Christendom’s hero into a disappointed

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roué. A hard campaign in Flanders against the Cecil-supported Dutch Calvinists, during 1577 and 1578, restored him to something of his former and better self, and his death from fever which occurred on October 1st, 1578, was one of great peace and no little sanctity.

Philip's own death was physically an appalling affair of six weeks' intolerable agony, his body literally corrupting before the eyes of his attendants. Spiritually it was one of the most beautiful deaths in the history of kings. Day and night he thanked God for the torments he suffered, time and again he had the Passion of Our Lord and Saviour read to him, and it was the Primate of Spain who read it to him before he died on the morning of September 13th, 1598. At five o'clock on the Vigil of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross "Philip gave three little gasps, like a child's. His eyes, still on the crucifix, became stony."

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