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VI. FRANÇOIS DE GUISE AND THE TAKING OF CALAIS.

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FRANÇOIS DE GUISE AND THE TAKING OF CALAIS.

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In the latter part of the eighteenth century Anquetil, in the preface of *"L'Esprit de la Ligue,"* tells how, after having read all printed authorities essential to his subject, he went to Mr. Melot, keeper of the manuscripts of the Royal Library, who at once opened to him the cabinets of his treasures. After several visits, Anquetil became frightened at the vastness of the collection, and asked the learned librarian if he thought it necessary to go over all those manuscript volumes. He answered, "that the most important memoirs had been printed, that perhaps it might be possible to glean some useful and agreeable anecdotes, but that, for his part, he would not dare to assure me that the harvest would be worth the labour." "From that moment," Anquetil adds, "I stopped my work." It is a long way from that mood to the idolatry of the unprinted prevalent now, when, as Abbé Marchand remarks with a humorous sigh,¹ "One doesn't see anything but unedited documents; every day someone publishes contracts, receipts, public announcements of routine business which, without the smallest loss, could just as well have been left buried in the dust of the archives." And the tired modern reader, at the sight of more than one appendix of documents, feels inclined to adopt the sentiments of Mr. Melot's contemporary, the copyist of the *Portefeuilles de Fontanieu*, in regard to a certain collection of manuscripts. "It is a task almost beyond human patience to read all these pieces. The way to lose the important is to drown it thus in the little."

I trust you will not think I fall into this error by laying before you some extracts from a manuscript memoir unused by historians—at least a rather extensive reading has found citations from it only in Mr. Paul Courteault's *"Blaise de Monluc, Historien"* (Paris, 1908).

When François de Guise came back from Italy, October 9, 1557,² France was in a dangerous situation, for which he was as much responsible as any man living. He had been the most active in urging the King to break the truce with Spain, which left France in possession of all the conquests she had made from the house of

¹ *"Le Maréchal de Vieilleville"* (Paris, 1893).

² *"Calendar of State Papers, Venetian,"* Oct. 10, 1557.

Austria and gave her the peace imperatively demanded by her exhausted finances. He had led over the Alps 13,000 picked troops, partly drawn from Picardy and Champagne, thus left exposed to invasion.¹ He had pushed down the peninsula for a risky attack on Naples, which promised far more glory to him and gain to the ambitious nephews of the Pope than to France.

The costly and audacious enterprise, whose one chance of success lay in the faithful sacrifices of untrustworthy allies, ended in failure. Guise was obliged to raise the siege of the little town of Civitella. Habile captain as he always was, he drew off his troops without disaster, but Alva held him stalemated near Rome, with nothing to do but nurse his men attacked by disease and watch his Italian allies go over to the enemy. From the threatened discredit of this breakdown of his military and diplomatic plans, he was called home (May 28, 1558),² in a polite note by the Constable of France. He was a long while making his preparations, and it was not until September that the Venetian ambassador, visiting him in Rome, found him booted and spurred, ready to ride to his galleys and sail for France.

When he arrived he was not met as an unsuccessful general back from an inglorious and mistaken military adventure, but as the most powerful man beside the throne. He was greeted by a Latin poet as "the greatest leader of the French; the only man who could raise once more the fallen fortunes of France from the great catastrophe which had cast her prostrate never to rise unless he helped her."³

The thing which gave the unsuccessful general the rôle of national leader was a great misfortune, wiping out all thought of the ill success of his fundamentally bad plan of attacking Naples because of the terrible price France had to pay for a single blunder in the presence of the enemy; a blunder made by his greatest rival, the Constable Montmorency. The Spaniards and English invading France from the north with an army of about 50,000 men, had invested St. Quentin. The constable, who had with difficulty gathered 20,000 men, advanced to reenforce the besieged, and then retreated. In this movement he was caught at a disadvantage and his army was all but annihilated.

When, after this catastrophe, Guise was given supreme command of the military forces, with the title of lieutenant general of the King, he showed his usual energy and soon had 20,000 men mustered at Compiègne, with 15,000 more in reserve. The allied forces had been gradually withdrawn to winter quarters across the border, and it was supposed that the campaigning season was over. But, on the 7th of January, 1558,⁴ Guise announced to the King the completion of a

¹ de Crue, "Anne de Montmorency" (Paris, 1889), 194.

² "Mémoires-Journaux du Duc de Guise: Michand et Pou Joulat," 358.

³ L'Hôpital, "Oeuvres Complètes" (Paris, 1825), III, 232.

⁴ "Cal. St. P., Ven.," Jan. 9, 1558.

feat of arms that flattered French pride and pleased French feeling more than any victory that could have been imagined. After a week's siege, he had taken Calais, for 200 years the stronghold on French soil of the hereditary enemies of France, who had proudly cut into the arch of the gates that "the Frenchman would take Calais when iron and lead floated like cork." The joy of the French at the victory may be measured by the chagrin of the English. The Bishop of Ely, envoy to the peace conference, told the Spanish plenipotentiaries that "he would sooner go back to England in a coffin than agree that France should keep Calais, for the people would surely stone him."¹

The conqueror's glory was heightened by the magnificent generosity which made him refuse his share of the plunder of the city, estimated at about a million in gold. His brother wrote to his wife:²

I assure you there never was a lieutenant of the King so liberal of his goods or of his blood as he is. But the Cardinal of Lorraine intends to ask the King to give him the Conté d'Oy, which is worth perhaps seven or eight thousand livres annually, and attach the said county and the house of that city to his son, as a souvenir of the service which he has done by the conquest of that city.

It is small wonder that so spectacular a success, following such depression and danger, made Guise the man of the hour. The Parliament of Paris,³ in registering the deed of gift from the King of the old House of Merchants, commented on "the modest greatness of the said Seigneur Duc, who, content with the glory, spread now throughout the universe, of having taken a city and conquered a country whose capture, for 200 years, had not only never been undertaken by any man in deed but not even conceived of in thought, asks no other trophy than a house in that city which he has given to us."

Historians have not grown weary of pointing out the reasoned daring which led Guise to choose for attack the very time when everyone thought Calais safe, and so to take it. But a manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale, entitled "*Mémoires de l'Etat des Affaires de France sous la fin du Regne de Henri II,*" tells a circumstantial story which, sustained as it is by strong contemporary testimony, printed but hitherto overlooked, proves that Guise is not the man to praise for the strategy of attacking Calais in the winter. The manuscript is unsigned, but the writer shows a knowledge of details which adds force to his assertion that he writes "as near to the truth as possible, according to what I have been able to see and hear, being ordinarily close to the King and those who have the management of his affairs." He is so very laudatory of the Duke of Guise that he can not be suspected of any bias against him in relating facts which

¹ Plénipotentiaires Espagnols au roi, Oct. 26, 1558. *Papiers d'Etat du Cardinal Granville*, V, 319.

² Fonds français (Bibliothèque Nationale) 3231, f. 86. The MS. is undated but the following citation suggests the date.

³ "*Mémoires—Journaux du duc de Guise,*" 422.

give part of the glory to the King. He relates how the King, having been told before that Calais could be taken, ordered Guise to attack it.¹ Guise objected that it was impossible to attack it in the winter. The King then sent Marshal Strozzi and Senarpont to reconnoiter the place. Strozzi returned and assured the King that the enterprise was certainly feasible, if it were carried out at the proper time, but the season did not seem to him fit for the same reasons which the Duke of Guise had alleged.

To this the King replied, that if it was feasible at all, he wished to show them that this was the best time to do it, because the city is in a place full of water and marshes, where it is most necessary for assailants to have freezing weather; such weather would come in January or never. He added that what rendered the enterprise easier, was the small number of men there because they had no suspicion of attack. If they saw an army beginning to move in that direction at the commencement of spring, they could put more men into the garrison, but they would never do it now at a season so unusual for military operations. He added also that, in the spring, the sea was higher and therefore it was easier to help the besieged, and the swamps were fuller. In addition, the place was so far from the forces which must be assembled that the forces of the enemy would always get there before ours were mobilized, and that, if they had the least army in the world, there was no means of taking it. Besides the English were much occupied with the war in Scotland, and their best men were there, which stopped them from helping the city or doing anything to prevent its capture. These reasons, being entirely his own, and enforcing his will which was fixed on that point, gave him as much desire to try that enterprise as if our Lord Himself had inspired the idea against the counsel and opinion of everybody. It was impossible to turn him from it. There followed several goings and comings. M. de la Brosse was sent to the King by the Sieur de Guise. Another time M. de la Bourdaisière, gentleman of the Chamber of the King and intimate with his plans, was sent to M. de Guise. Afterwards the Sieur de Sipierre was sent to the King. All these laid before him the great difficulties already mentioned * * *. The season so troublesome and bad that it was probable the soldiers must endure great hardships—the probability that if the weather troubled them and at the same time money was lacking for their pay they would take that pretext to abandon him and refuse to do anything—the fact that it was necessary to take a big train of artillery into a country where, after rain, horses can not move a cannon, wherefore there was danger of the unpaid soldiers abandoning them in bad weather to the enemy, etc., etc.

The King, remaining firm in his opinion and will that this enterprise of his should be carried out no matter what reason was alleged against it, made the best provision he could for all the things asked for by the Duke of Guise * * *.

In that capture of Calais, one ought first to recognize the influence of Our Lord who gives us testimony of the favour which He has granted to the King and the Kingdom after the affliction which He gave him; because, having guided him as if by the hand against the opinion of all men to try to carry out so difficult an enterprise and one so unhopd of everyone, He gave him the victory in a time outside of the season of war; and in truth to show us that it was from Him the blessing came.

The correctness of this account of the origin of the plan for attacking Calais in winter (a risky plan which won success, but almost brought disaster) is supported by contemporary printed sources. Brantôme has vague and incomplete memory of the truth. The

¹ See extracts from the original at the end of this paper. Cinq cents de Colbert, XXVI.

testimony of La Place that "the duke made such difficulty about going to Calais, considering the success of the journey impossible, as even to protest that what he did in the matter was only in obedience to the very express commands of the King," might be put aside because of the known anti-Guise bias of the Huguenot author. And therefore Lemonnier in the section "La France sous Henri II" in Lavissee's history of France, the latest authoritative review of the period, alludes doubtfully to the "assertions" of these authors. But I should like to bring forward in support of the correctness of the manuscript three entirely uncited witnesses.

The first is the poet Du Bellay. He published in a single sheet "A hymn to the King on the taking of Calais."¹ In it occurs a verse thus translated:

But to whom, Sire, must the honor of so grand a victory and so great a happiness be attributed? After God, to you, who first designed the enterprise of so great a capture against the advice of those who had not well considered it.

The second witness is Michel de l'Hospital; and it must be remembered that at this time no such doubt could arise about L'Hospital's testimony concerning the Duke of Guise as might be alleged in regard to La Place. The Lorraines were still L'Hospital's patrons, and some 15 Latin poems and epistles of a flattering tone express his admiration for them. Among these is an "Ode on the taking of the cities of Calais and Guines." The following lines of it are based plainly on the fact that the King was the author of the plan to attack in winter:²

To our leaders by the great gift of the gods the victory long desired came from Heaven. When the sea and icy winter and the ancient renown of the city and the late disaster of the lost battle, and a too long adverse fortune, might have diverted even the bravest from such an undertaking, one purpose ever remained fixed in thy mind, O Henry, and thou alone, they say, didst keep firm the souls of thy soldiers. Doubtless that men might learn that the minds of Kings, by a heavenly power, are impelled and led whither it seems best to the gods, and where mortal senses would not suffice to bring them, and may cease to wonder why many things happen as they do and to ask the reasons.

The third witness to the truth of the manuscript story is the Venetian ambassador in France. I regret that I had not time, when I made these extracts from the manuscript *Mémoires de l'État des Affaires de France*, to consult the full transcripts of the dispatches in the Bibliothèque Nationale, but the printed calendars in the Rolls Series afford very remarkable confirmation in detail of the account—the more remarkable because the writer at the time could not always fathom what was going on. Let me bring out in summary the main points of a series of 12 dispatches:³

¹ *Fédéric Morel* (Paris, 1558). An example of this is in the *Portefeuilles de Fontanieu*, 287, f. 93.

² See citation from the original at the end of this article.

³ 1557, Oct. 10, 27, Nov. 4, 9, 14, 20, 21, Dec. 2, 6, 11, 15; 1558, Jan. 1.

November 4: "Yesterday Guise went to Compiègne with Strozzi. It is understood that he contemplates some expedition, but the project is kept secret."

November 20: "Guise still mustering troops in Compiègne. Four days ago Strozzi left Compiègne with a servant, and on returning, by order of Guise, came here to court, where he had a long conversation with the King. It is now said Guise will be here in two days, and, though the affair is secret, I hear on good authority that the expedition of Luxembourg is proposed, to which effect Strozzi went incognito to reconnoiter the fortress there. * * * Strozzi reports the enterprise to be easy when the season promises more propitious weather, but he rather dissuades the King from undertaking it * * * nor does the Duke of Guise assent to it in any way and will come to court to advise against it, but the King remains firm."

November 21: "Mutiny of German troops at Compiègne; therefore Guise will not come to court. All the nobility of France are with Guise, and the provisions of the army do not seem to imply a campaign of a few days."

November 29: "The day before last M. de la Brochia [de la Brosse], lieutenant of the Duke of Guise, came to tell the King that the duke was ready to march on receiving any commands from him, but it was his opinion and that of the whole army that, the season being so far advanced, nothing of any importance could be done, * * * so he prayed the King to be content that for the present winter things should pass without making any further expedition. * * * I have also heard, on good authority, that his excellency [Guise] desires the delay greatly for his own personal advantage, it seeming to him that, at the commencement of his rule, to begin with an undertaking of such difficult success could not but vastly disparage his repute."

December 6: "Public report is that the troops will be divided in garrisons, but it is still surmised that it is intended to make some expedition, but some persons now go jeering that it might be that of Calais. * * * His Most Christian Majesty continues more than ever bent on the performance of some undertaking."

December 11: "Reports that, in opinion of those in a position to know, Calais is the objective"

December 15: 'Reports ordered movement of troops in detail. The whole undertaking has been counseled with Marshal Strozzi and the execution left almost completely to his management. It is now positive that they will attempt Calais. * * * Strozzi reconnoitered it November 11, and, although from the difficulties he found there his opinion was that they let it be until a better season, the King nevertheless disapproved of any further delay.'

¹ "Environ ce temps Monsieur le mareschal Strossy qui avoit esté à pied recognoistre la place de Calais et veu toutes choses à l'oeil comme on les luy avoit designées lequel confirma au roy que certainement l'entreprise estoit fessable quand elle seroit executée en temps apropos mais que la saison ne luy sembloit pas propos pour les mesmes raisons que mondict Sieur de Guise luy avoit alleguées, ausquelles ayant esté repliqué par ledict Sieur que si elle estoit fessable il leur vouloit monstrier qu'elle estoit plus apropos que jamais d'autant qu'elle est en lieu plein d'eau et de marescz ou il est plus requis d'avoir un temps de gelée * * * qu'il falloit que ce temps vinst en Janvier ou jamais que ce qui rendoit l'entreprise plus aisée estoit le peu d'hommes qu'il y avoit qu'ils n'auroient nul doute d'estre assaillie * * * en une saison si estrange ils n'y en mettroient jamais davantage comme ils feroient au commencement du printemps quand ils verroient une armée marcher de ce costé là, qu'au printemps la mer estoit plus grande et par là le secours plus aisé et les marestz plus pleins que ce lieu estoit si loing des forces qu'il falloit qu'il assemblast qui estoient Suisses et Allemands que celles des ennemis leur seroient tousjours plustost venues que les siennes ne seroient ensemble et qu'ayant la moindre armée du monde il n'y avoit ordre d'y aller que

¹ Cinq Cents de Colbert, XXVI.

les Angloys estoient fort empeschez a la guerre d'Escosse ou estoient leurs meilleurs hommes que leur osteroit autant de moyen de la secourir n'y faire enterprise qui peust empescher la conquiste lesquelles raisons venues de luymesmes et confortant sa volonté qui estoit toutte en cela luy donnerent tant d'envie comme si nostre Seigneur l'eust inspiré de tenter et essayer cette enterprise contre l'opinion et conseil de tous les hommes qu'il n'y eust plus moyen de l'en destourner. Sur cela il y eust plusieurs allées et venues, une fois Monsieur de la Brosse fust envoyé vers le Roy par mondict Sieur de Guise, une autre fois Monsieur de la Bourdaisière gentilhomme de la chambre dudict Sieur qui est de ses affaires fust renvoyé vers Monsieur de Guise et despuis le Sieur de Sipierre vers le Roy par tous lesquels il luy remonstroit les grandes difficultes susdictes * * *. [There follows an account of the siege and capture of Calais in fifty-two pages.]

Le Roy demeurant ferme en son opinion et volonté que cette sienne enterprise se fist quelque raison qui luy fust alleguée donna la meilleure provision qu'il peust a toutes les choses susdictes * * *.

Il faut en cette prinse de Calais premièrement reconnoistre comme j'ay dict cy dessus en quelques endroits les effects de nostre Seigneur qui nous donnoit tesmoignage de la faveur qu'il a presté au Roy et à son royaume après l'affliction qu'il luy a donné car l'ayant guidé comme par la main contre l'opinion de tous les hommes à tenter et executer une si haulte enterprise et si inespirée à tout le monde il luy en a donné en un temps hors de saison la victoire et de fait pour nous monstrier que c'estoit de luy que ce bien nous venoit.

Voila Calais entre les mains du Roy voila les anglois qui en sont entierement chassez—voila le Roy le plus content et satisfait que prince scauroit estre pour se veoir à bout d'une enterprise qui luy seul a debattüe et voulu estre facteur qu'il a opiniastree et quasi par la main de Dieu conduite, dont * * *.

¹ Sed nostris ducibus praeclaro munire divum
Intentata prius coelo victoria venit.
Quum mare, quum glacialis hiems, et quum vetus urbis
Gloria, quumque recens adversae infamia pugnae
Et nimium fortuna diu contraria, possent
Talibus, audaces quamvis, abducere coeptis,
Mens, Errice, tamen semper tibi constitit una,
Te solum referunt animos firmasse tuorum:
Scilicet ut regum coelesti numine mentes
Impellique, trahique, Deis quocumque videtur,
Et quo mortales nequeunt pertingere sensus,
Addiscant homines: mirari cur ita fiant
Plurima, factorumque absistant quaerere causas.

¹ P. J. S. Dufey, "Oeuvres Complets de Michel L'Hospital" (Paris, 1825), III, 242.