

In 1569 Mary Queen of Scots was a prisoner for high treason, and as the hopes of the Popish party centred in her, the leaders became desperate. The Duke of Norfolk had a plot to seize her by force, carry her off and marry her. He was a weak man, and a proper tool in the hands of Murray and Lethington and several other Italian priests, agents of Pius V, under the common pretence of uniting and combining the whole Popish party. He had been intriguing with Alva Phillip, governor of the Netherlands, to invade the kingdom, but the first step was to procure Phillip's consent. Phillip was a man very cautious and wholly unmoved by passion. Bigotry, prejudice and tyranny were the predominating influences that swayed him, and passion itself could not exercise so pernicious a power. The fraudulent maxims which governed his councils excited the most violent agitations, and engaged him in enormous acts of cruelty. When he consecrated himself afresh to God, and promised greater devotion, it was by the extirpation of heresy, which meant killing more Protestants. In his unrelenting zeal for orthodoxy he spared neither sex nor age. He was present with a countenance stern and inflexible at the most barbarous executions. He imprisoned Ponce, his father's confessor, and he in whose arms that father had died, and left him there to perish. He even entertained designs of treating his father's memory with severity, because he had been suspected of a leaning to Lutheranism for a short time. He issued most rigorous orders for the execution of all Protestants in Spain, Italy, and the low countries, and throughout his vast domain. His determined tyranny was based upon maxims of civil policy more than the principles of religion, but he made it plain to all his subjects that there was no escape but by flight or entire submission.

Phillip lived, so he said, to enforce the will of God,—noble mission! But while the Duke of Alva was fighting to destroy the constitution and Protestantism of the Netherlands, and enforce upon that inoffensive people the terrible Inquisition, the master was engaged in a far more serious plot, nothing less than the assassination of the Queen of England, and placing Mary Queen of Scots upon the throne; and, as this involved the reduction of England under the ancient church, it was very acceptable to Phillip. It included a conspiracy against a friendly power, an immense service to the Church, and a murder, all equally gratifying to a man of his tastes. His passion for intrigue, his love of God and hatred of man would all be gratified at once. There was one Ridolfi, a Florentine, long resident in England, had been sent to the Netherlands as a secret spy of the Duke of Norfolk. Alva read him at once, and denounced him to Phillip as a loose, prating creature, unfit to be trusted with affairs of importance, but Phillip was so blinded with the grandeur of the plot he could think but little of the plotters, and gave his approval without making direct promises. He wrote the Duke of Parma of his interview with Ridolfi, who had, he said, laid before him the suffering of Mary Stuart, and a plan for her liberation. By the assistance of the Spanish monarch it would be easy to seize her, carry her off, marry her to the Duke of Norfolk, and place her upon the throne, and England would be restored to Catholicism. The best time would be August or September, when Elizabeth would be in the country; then it would be easy to seize and dispatch her, and all opposition would be removed. Pius V to Ridolfi whom had made known the whole scheme, highly approved it, and warmly urged Phillip to co-operate. "Poor as I am," saith the Pope, "I am ready to sell my chalices, and, if need be, my vestments to provide funds for so pious a purpose." Phillip said it needed but few words to urge him, his desire to see the scheme executed was so extreme.