

## Chapter Eleven

*How is one to plan ahead now? Will war break out, or shall we remain at peace?*

When I arrived in Amsterdam the word, or the question, “What is the news?” was so common with everyone that it appeared as if the high and lordly states of the United Netherlands had chosen it as their motto. I feared at first when I heard it put to me only by my old acquaintances so continually, they might perchance have report that I was able to make myself invisible in such a rare and yet entirely new fashion, for scarcely one of them had bidden me welcome when he straightway came at me with this question, without even having asked how I was living, how my health was, what business I had to accomplish there, and the like. But after, in time (which brings experience) I looked at it in the clear light of day, I became aware that it was because they feared that the Most Christian King might begin to bother them if he wished to become, as they regarded it, a wealthy merchant there, or at least to relieve them of the lands and folk that they as common tradesmen possessed, and take possession of them himself as a king who was born to rule. Now when I remarked where the shoe was pinching these Netherlanders, I, as a German who was unaffected by the matter, was somewhat satisfied, but did ponder on the consequences and on what might finally result from them for my native land.

While I was turning these thoughts over in my mind, I asked myself whether there would probably be a war or not. But to answer this question of mine I deemed myself much too trifling and less than nothing; for this is up to the prophets, and to be sure not all of them, but only those to whom God reveals it (in order to warn mankind).

I know not whether anxiety or curiosity goaded me on to know anyway that the Almighty reserves unto Himself alone the right to know such things. I should have liked to ask a Jerimiah, but there was no living soul or one of his ilk there to satisfy my curiosity; and I knew of no pagan sybil, either, who might have given me an oral report about it. Therefore I went to those who have been called since time immemorial Chaldeans and bought me at least seven dozen calendars of their divers disciples or followers who had put them in print. But I found just as many mutually contradicting predictions, as there were prognosticators, just as many cumbersome outré statements as there were authors, I'll well nigh say just as many lies as there were soothsayings. Even though my curiosity was still tormenting me, and I believe that if the itinerant scholar had been there then who helped me to invisibility, I should have gladly presented him with a dozen new gold sovereigns if he had only filled my brain with even more such empty crotchets of mendacious predictions, even though 'twas well known to me that Apollo himself often said to those who asked him questions:

Why trouble yourself and me in vain?

The future's look is never plain.

All this nevertheless did not get me out of the hospital for curious phantasts, not to mention cure and liberate me from my sickness; but rather I searched day and night for a satisfying answer, as the alchemists do for their *lapis*, just as if I myself must needs put land and folk, crown and scepter, in danger of loss by doing so, and became so silly about it that someone who merely saw me running so earnestly after the news and heard me asking so zealously about it, might very likely with clear conscience and without committing any deadly sins, have written my name down in the roll of great fools.

I had taken lodging with a matron who was used to renting them out. It was a chamber together with a bedstead of which I need not be ashamed when reputable folk came to visit me, and then I had no lack of either men or women to wait upon me, for this old woman had well nigh more maidservants than lodgings to rent out, and therefore also a great traffic in all manner of men of quality of whom one would not have expected that they had need to let themselves be served in this fashion. Thus I soon made, not counting my old acquaintances, the acquaintance of many other diverse people who visited me on occasion and I them in return. This, however, commonly was done at slight expense, for we did not eat, drink, and gamble as much as people were wont to in my homeland, but rather most times came together just for a pipe of tobacco and a drink of beer.

And one time such a society was together: five Hollanders, a man from Hamburg, and I was the seventh, and even though, as stated above, we did not drink heavily, we did imbibe so much that we became tipsy from it, in which condition people are commonly more candid than when they are blind drunk, and more confiding than when they are completely sober. Now when we were talking about all sorts of things concerning business, for we were all merchants, one of them said: "We are indeed making our calculations about our business transactions, but know not whether peace will continue or not, and in times of war these transactions move as erratically as a crab rather than going straight through as is desirable." Thereupon another Hollander answered: "Who is going to declare war on us? We are members, with Hispania and England, of a *sancte* concluded Triple Alliance; in Denmark we have a loyal land, as it were an allied neighbor to stand by us in all contrary events; the king in Sweden is still too young to really touch us in person, and the *ministri* of his crown will think twice before beginning with us so difficult a

labor as a war is, which they afterwards, should it not have turned out as they wish, must needs answer for when their king comes of age; France is not man enough to achieve mastery over us, for 'tis indeed sufficiently well known what long resistance and excellence progresses our forefathers offered to the mighty crown of Hispania, and that indeed, which is more important to bear in mind, when it stood at the height of its power, whereas our folk were held to be beggars. Moreover, we have an incomparable navy which no intelligent ruler will ever scorn, and are so well provided with money that we may continue the war both on land and sea for a long time, so that it is not at all probable that we need anticipate a war."

This was the one Hollander's final conclusion, but the other one thereupon said: "All this which you have brought up can nevertheless not assure us a lasting peace. The Triple Alliance, to be sure, appears to be sufficient for this, but remember, too, that we have to do on the one hand with a mighty monarch who is of a different faith than ours and was in times gone by our forefather's natural lord, and on the other hand with the English, the most variable and fickle nation in the world, both of which are competing with our welfare and happy prosperity. Should that mighty crown really feel no pains and antipathy but instead still remain loyal and kindly disposed to us when it remembers that we strode from under their authority and on land and sea, and not only in Europe but also in Africa, in the East and West Indies, yea even in the furthest corners of the world, did them insurmountable damage which they will never recoup? The English, however, even though our neighbors and a faith akin to ours, are they going to be able to tolerate in the long run without inward griping our sailing and enjoying the sea like them, and through our maritime power prospering on it more than they themselves, the sea of which, after all, they heretofore imagined themselves to be the sole and highest master? Brothers, born of the same parents and of

the same blood, are wont to fall out with one another about earthly realms and kingdoms and finally to pursue one another so mortally that often neither of them can be satisfied save with the other's total demise and death. Now, should this not also occur much more easily between neighbors because of ruling the seas? Keeping possession of what is allegedly mine and thine is the cause of all wars, and accordingly our Triple Alliance is not as firm and secure as one may well think."

"And also," said the third one, "Denmark is not to be so firmly relied upon. Kings do not like to be allied to their inferiors, even though we had been of even greater military service to the Danish crown and had a state twice as powerful as it is. As far as Sweden is concerned, kings are not children even though they are still lying in the cradle; rather, on the contrary, that same nation is a warlike one and has been up till now a fortunate folk in war, even when it was ruled only by women, and a folk who without doubt still harbor a secret grudge stuck in their craw because of the aid we gave the Danes."

The fourth Hollander said that France was not to be regarded with contempt, for if it ever took up arms it would not make war against the United Netherlands as slowly and dispassionately as Spain had done earlier. France had its forces collected in one place, and it would not be as easy to cut off its sinews of war, as had befallen the Spanish in earlier times in the Indies. The French king, he continued, was one of the most valiant, one whose high ambition would spare neither reason, nor money, nor people, in which three things he was by no means lacking, to achieve dominion over the entire world. But that one should think, just because the United Netherlands had liberated itself from obedience to the Spanish crown at just the time when it was most powerful and when our forefathers, on the other hand, had been held to be mere beggars, they might now easily withstand the crown of France too, would find that he was deceived in this; for the

fact that at that time the United Netherlands had obtained its freedom and had preserved it till now was by no means to be ascribed to their weak strength and their own bravery at that time, but rather to the assistance of the crowns of both England and France, without whose aid the states of Holland would never ever have been able to progress so far. 'Twas indeed a fact that at that same time it appeared that the crown of Spain intended to make itself ruler of the entire world, so that one might with good reason wonder how the Hollanders might not only escape such a mighty power but also weaken it in the bargain, indeed even vanquish so many of them; but when one considered that all the potentates to whom the great power of Spain was threatening had also for that very reason resisted the house of Austria and otherwise kept it everywhere sufficiently busy, then the wonderment would soon cease which one might have because of the fact that Holland and the other United Provinces had become free and great."

The fifth Hollander hereupon answered: "Let matters be as they might, these were all old matters which were of no import save that one might incidentally deduce from them how France would fare if she made so bold as to place the United Provinces under her crown; so many sizeable and in part unconquerable fortresses could not be gobbled up as quickly as cold applesauce, much less digested, or as easily kept as conquered. Moreover, the United Netherlands was so choice a morsel that the other Christian potentates would hardly grant and give it to the crown of France, much less let it fall to France, considering that if the French king should conjoin their sea power and moneys with his own mighty wealth, and, as could be foreseen without any doubt, were to avail himself, in the bargain, of the usual French policies, that then no king, indeed even the German Empire itself, would be hardly equal to him any more if he wished to likewise subjugate them one after the other."

After this Hollander had presented his view, it was now the turn of the man from Hamburg to speak: "Our question was whether or not peace would continue. To that I shall answer in accord with my slight understanding, that Holland should really prepare for a war with France, for why else should the French king be arming himself so mightily? Hispania he has already sufficiently plucked of her feathers, and can no longer find any pretension to some pretext or the least vestige of fairness to support further abuse of this crown's patience and forbearance. With the Swiss he will hardly create friction at this time; to move against the German Empire will be inadvisable for him; Sweden is his friend; with Denmark he has nothing to do. Now who else is there save the state of the United Netherlands against whom he may sharpen his weapons, and with whose ambassadors he has already begun disputes anyway? I fear, I fear, and may God grant that my fears be in vain, you Hollanders will be obliged to receive a black eye, provided matters go on that well for you; for I see that you live securely, just as if the king of France would be terrified at the sound and fame of your government and would not dare even turn to you because you have hitherto remained unconquered. You yourself have doubts about the Triple Alliance, and how quickly it could be destroyed by him if he gave back to Hispania what he has hitherto taken from her and thereby persuaded her to share like a good blood relative the divided Netherlands with him. Moreover, I see (and I pray you forgive me, gentlemen, if I speak the truth here) your great arrogance, which shines from afar, as if you were not at all hesitant to prescribe laws to every powerful potentate; which pride annoys the princes and commonly goes before a fall. But do not doubt me that after the fire of war has flamed up with you, you will, with both money and cleverness, direct the course of its flames elsewhere."

“That I too believe,” I hereupon said, “for we still remember how many an enemy the Dutch in their foresight with their money sent into the German Empire to plague the house of Austria when Spain was earlier fighting a war with Holland, so that Austria might have enough to keep it occupied elsewhere and thus not compel with united forces the United Provinces to again be its obedient servant. In addition, I see our nation to indeed be ripe for divine punishment, which is not only downright invited, but even forcibly compelled as it were by all manners of sins and vices of both old and young, great and small, rich and poor. I shall not only say nothing of pride, envy, greed, etc., in our old and great cities, but will also keep silent about the luxuriousness and godless life of our undisciplined, unruly, wanton, and lecherous youth in our small villages. Just go into one of them where such young fellows are together either half or completely drunk, and you will see and hear in public such things as heaven might turn black at, from which it is easy to surmise for what manner of divine retribution our citizens are making their fatherland ripe and ready, to which retribution you may perchance give its beginning.”