**The Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day (1572)**

Robinson's note: *The statesman and fair-minded historian De Thou (1553-1617), who as a young man witnessed the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, thus describes that terrible event.*

*Members of the Guise family were leaders of the extremist Catholic League in France during the French wars of Religion. Coligny was one of the key aristocratic leaders of the French Protestants.*

**[Page 180]** So it was determined to exterminate all the Protestants, and the plan was approved by the queen. They discussed for some time whether they should make an exception of the king of Navarre and the prince of Conde. All agreed that the king of Navarre should be spared by reason of the royal dignity and the new alliance [Henry had just married the princess]. The duke of Guise, who was put in full command of the enterprise, summoned by night several captains of the Catholic Swiss mercenaries from the five little cantons, and some commanders of French companies, and told them that it was the will of the king that, according to God's will, they should take vengeance on the band of rebels while they had the beasts in the toils. Victory was easy and the booty great and to be obtained without danger. The signal to commence the massacre should be given by the bell of the palace, and the marks by which they should recognize each other in the darkness were a bit of white linen tied around the left arm and a white cross on the hat.

Meanwhile Coligny awoke and recognized from the noise that a riot was taking place. Nevertheless he remained assured of the king's good will, being persuaded thereof either by his credulity or by Teligny, his son-in-law: he believed the populace had been stirred up by the Guises, and that quiet would be restored as soon as it was seen that soldiers of the guard, under the command of Cosseins, had been detailed to protect him and guard his property.

But when he perceived that the noise increased and that some one had fired an arquebus [early gunpowder weapon] in the courtyard of his dwelling, then at length, conjecturing what it might be, but too late, he arose from his bed and having put on his dressing gown he said his prayers, leaning against the wall. Labonne held the key of the house, and when Cosseins commanded him, in the king's name, to open the door he obeyed at once without fear and apprehending nothing. But scarcely had Cosseins entered when Labonne, who stood in his way, was killed with a dagger thrust. The Swiss who were in the courtyard, when they saw this, fled into the house and closed the door, piling against it tables **[Page 181]** and all the furniture they could find. It was in the first scrimmage that a Swiss was killed with a ball from an arquebus fired by one of Cosseins' people. But finally the conspirators broke through the door and mounted the stairway, Cosseins, Attin, Corberan de Cordillac, Seigneur de Sarlabous, first captains of the regiment of the guards, Achilles Petrucci of Siena, all armed with cuirasses, and Besme the German, who had been brought up as a page in the house of Guise; for the duke of Guise was lodged at court, together with the great nobles and others who accompanied him.

After Coligny had said his prayers with Merlin the minister, he said, without any appearance of alarm, to those who were present (and almost all were surgeons, for few of them were of his retinue) : "I see clearly that which they seek, and I am ready steadfastly to suffer that death which I have never feared and which for a long time past I have pictured to myself. I consider myself happy in feeling the approach of death and in being ready to die in God, by whose grace I hope for the life everlasting. I have no further need of human succor. Go then from this place, my friends, as quickly as you may, for fear lest you shall be involved in my misfortune, and that some day your wives shall curse me as the author of your loss. For me it is enough that God is here, to whose goodness I commend my soul, which is so soon to issue from my body. After these words they ascended to an upper room, whence they sought safety in flight here and there over the roofs.

Meanwhile the conspirators, having burst through the door of the chamber, entered, and when Besme, sword in hand, had demanded of Coligny, who stood near the door, "Are you Coligny ?" Coligny replied, "Yes, I am he," with fearless countenance. "But you, young man, respect these white hairs. What is it you would do? You cannot shorten by many days this life of mine." As he spoke, Besme gave him a sword thrust through the body, and having withdrawn his sword, another thrust in the mouth, by which his face was disfigured. So Coligny fell, killed with many thrusts. **[Page 182]** Others have written that Coligny in dying pronounced as though in anger these words: "Would that I might at least die at the hands of a soldier and not of a valet." But Attin, one of the murderers, has reported as I have written, and added that he never saw any one less afraid in so great a peril, nor die more steadfastly.

Then the duke of Guise inquired of Besme from the courtyard if the thing were done, and when Besme answered him that it was, the duke replied that the Chevalier d'Angouleme was unable to believe it unless he saw it; and at the same time that he made the inquiry they threw the body through the window into the courtyard, disfigured as it was with blood. When the Chevalier d'Angouleme, who could scarcely believe his eyes, had wiped away with a cloth the blood which overran the face and finally had recognized him, some say that he spurned the body with his foot. However this may be, when he left the house with his followers he said: "Cheer up, my friends! Let us do thoroughly that which we have begun. The king commands it." He frequently repeated these words, and as soon as they had caused the bell of the palace clock to ring, on every side arose the cry, "To arms !" and the people ran to the house of Coligny. After his body had been treated to all sorts of insults, they threw it into a neighboring stable, and finally cut off his head, which they sent to Rome. They also shamefully mutilated him, and dragged his body through the streets to the bank of the Seine, a thing which he had formerly almost prophesied, although he did not think of anything like this.

…After he had served for several days as a spectacle to gratify the hate of many **[Page 183]** and arouse the just indignation of many others, who reckoned that this fury of the people would cost the king and France many a sorrowful day, Francois de Montmorency, who was nearly related to the dead man, and still more his friend, and who moreover had escaped the danger in time, had him taken by night from the gibbet by trusty men and carried to Chantilly, where he was buried in the chapel.

J.H. Robinson, ed.,
*Readings in European History* 2 vols.
(Boston: Ginn, 1906), 2:179-183.

The Edict of Nantes

*Henry IV (the aforementioned Henry of Navarre) had become King of France in 1589 (after converting from Protestantism to Catholicism), and passed the Edict of Nantes in 1598, granting toleration to Protestants living in France. The “Reformed Religion” refers to French Protestants (also called Huguenots)*

Henry, By the Grace of God, King of France, and Navarre, To all Present, and to Come, greetings. Among the infinite Mercies that God hath pleased to bestow upon us, that most Signal and Remarkable is, his having given us Power and Strength not to yield to the dreadful Troubles, Confusions, and Disorders, which were found at our coming to this Kingdom, divided into so many Parties and Factions, that the most Legitimate was almost the least, enabling us with Constancy in such manner to oppose the Storm, as in the end to surmount it, reducing this Estate to Peace and Rest; For which, to Him alone be given the Honour and Glory, and us the Grace to acknowledge our obligation, in having our Labours made use of for the accomplishing so good a work,

…For the general difference among our good Subjects, and the particular evils of the soundest parts of the State, we judged might be easily cured, after the Principal cause (the continuation of the Civil Wars) was taken away, in which we have, by the blessing of God, well and happily succeeded, all Hostility and Wars through the Kingdom being now ceased, and we hope he will also prosper us in our other affairs, which remain to be composed, and that by this means we shall arrive at the establishment of a good Peace, with tranquility and rest, (which hath ever been the end of all our vows and intentions) as all the reward we desire or expect for much pains and trouble, as we have taken in the whole course of our Life. Amongst our said affairs (towards which it behooves us to have patience) one of the principal hath been, the many complaints we received from divers of our Provinces and Catholic Cities, for that the exercise of the Catholic Religion was not universally re-established, as is provided by Edicts or Statutes heretofore made for the Pacification of the Troubles arising from Religion; as also the Supplications and Remonstrances [formal complaints to the king] which have been made to us by our Subjects of the reformed Religion, as well upon the execution of what hath been granted by the said former Laws, as that they desire to have some addition for the exercise of their Religion, the liberty of their Consciences and the security of their Persons and Fortunes. . . .

6. And not to leave any occasion of trouble and difference among our Subjects, we have permitted and do permit to those of the Reformed Religion [Protestants], to live and dwell in all the Cities and places of this our Kingdom and Countries under our obedience, without being inquired after, vexed, molested, or compelled to do any thing in Religion, contrary to their Conscience, nor by reason of the same be searched after in houses or places where they live, they comporting themselves in other things as is contained in this our present Edict or Statute.

7. We also permit to all Lords, Gentlemen and other Persons, as well inhabitants as others, making profession of the Reformed Religion, having in our Kingdom and Countries under our obedience, high Justice as chief Lord (as in Normandy) be it in propriety or usage, in whole, moiety, or third part, to have in such of their houses of the said high Justice or Fiefs, as above said (which they shall be obliged to Nominate for their principal residence to our Bailiffs and chief Justice each in their jurisdiction) the exercise of the said Religion as long as they are Resident there, and in their absence, their wives or families, or part of the same. And though the right of Justice or whole Fief be controverted, nevertheless the exercise of the said Religion shall be allowed there, provided that the above said be in actual possession of the said high Justice, though our Attorney Generall be a Party. We permit them also to have the said exercise in their other houses of high Justice or Fiefs above said, so long as they shall be present, and not otherwise: and all, as well for them, their families and subjects, as others that shall go thither.

8. In the Houses that are Fiefs, where those of the said Religion have not high Justice, there the said Exercise of the Reformed Religion shall not be permitted, save only to their own Families, yet nevertheless, if other persons, to the number of thirty, besides their Families, shall be there upon the occasion of Christenings, Visits of their Friends, or otherwise, our meaning is, that in such case they shall not be molested: provided also, that the said Houses be not within Cities, Burroughs, or Villages belonging to any Catholic Lord (save to Us) having high Justice, in which the said Catholic Lords have their Houses. For in such cases, those of the said Religion shall not hold the said Exercise in the said Cities, Burroughs, or Villages, except by permission of the said Lords high Justices.

9. We permit also to those of the said Religion to hold, and continue the Exercise of the same in all the Cities and Places under our obedience, where it hath by them been Established and made public by many and divers times, in the Year 1586, and in 1597, until the end of the Month of August, notwithstanding all Decrees and Judgments whatsoever to the contrary. . . .

16. Following the second Article of the Conference of Nerat, we grant to those of the said Religion power to build Places for the Exercise of the same, in Cities and Places where it is granted them. . . .

27. To the end to reunited so much the better the minds and good will of our Subjects, as is our intention, and to take away all complaints for the future; We declare all those who make or shall make profession of the said Reformed Religion, to be capable of holding and exercising all Estates, Dignities, Offices, and public charges whatsoever, Royal, Signioral, or of Cities of our Kingdom, Countries, Lands, and Lordships under our obedience, notwithstanding all Oaths to the contrary, and to be indifferently admitted and received into the same, and our Court of Parliament and other Judges shall content themselves with informing and inquiring after the lives, manners, Religion and honest Conversation of those that were or shall be preferred to such offices, as well of the one Religion as the other, without taking other Oath of them than for the good and faithful service of the King in the exercise of their Office. . . .

from Roland Mousnier. *The Assassination of Henry IV* (New York, 1973), 316-347