CHAPTER FIVE

THE CONFEDERATE SPRING

1. Challenging Margaret

The excitement and splendor of the wedding ceremony vanished and anxiety brought on by the king’s letter and another savage turn in the weather replaced the previous mood of gaiety. Gloomy, desperate reports came to Brussels from every quarter by early January 1566. A hard, enduring freeze settled over the provinces as waves of Arctic air swept south in relentless succession. Every river froze and the cold took a cruel toll on the malnourished and poorly housed. Unprotected animals died, as did fruit trees and bushes. The terrifying winter had succeeded a miserable fall with a poor harvest. The provinces never produced enough grain for subsistence and the growth of the cities required reliance on imports. Affordable food supplies disappeared. The sharp rise in prices made the grain merchants objects of scorn and fear, and there were disorders in the cities. Worse still, floods the previous fall had damaged dikes and canals, leaving fields waterlogged, delaying spring sowing, and postponing relief from the food shortage.

Distress encouraged strain within the social and political fabric in the tense months of winter. Margaret knew that the aristocracy, which she admired, only adorned the provinces. The bourgeoisie created the prosperity she valued, but she found their independent political and social attitudes unattractive. A limited spirit of freedom had developed in every city of the Netherlands, and there was no lack of criticism of Spanish policy. The disastrous weather only added to popular dislike of the remote king, who made demands on money and traditions at such an awful time. Royal orders in 1566 threatened their way of life just as their spirit of independence challenged the basis of Spanish rule. Neither king nor magistrates grasped the determination of the other. Resistance to the provisions of the Council of Trent stiffened, making relations worse.

In Brabant, the provincial council referred the matter to the cities, whose

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magistrates protested the potential imposition of inquisitions. The Council of State agreed, and at court Margaret assumed the awkward role of listening to summaries of discussions that Philip had forbidden in advance. Nevertheless circumstances and conditions dictated acceptance of local rather than royal views.

She had worse news to send to Madrid. The palace had reports of semi-secret meetings among aristocrats who maintained the associations created when they drafted the Compromise the previous year. A note of panic entered her accounts since she viewed all gatherings as possible sectarian conspiracies and worried about rumors telling of thousands of armed men ready to take advantage of any disorder. The popularity of the League of the Compromise made her fear it might repudiate the Spanish regime. The warnings came to her from the members of the Golden Fleece and she took them seriously. Orange was in a precarious position since loyalty to the king was the foundation of his official position, but his status and prestige made him a logical leader of the opposition. Some in the League spoke openly about seizing Antwerp, taking Margaret as hostage, and calling an Estates General. Orange wanted no part in an uprising and sought instead to gather the aristocracy to prepare a new petition asking for moderation. However, Egmont, still smarting from the humiliation Philip had inflicted on him, wanted no part in such a petition, and others in the Order regarded it as a futile exercise. Margaret still wished to work closely with both men, but as attitudes hardened that became particularly difficult. Grim and worried, she lamented that she had not wished to fulfill her charge so badly, but chastised the king for ruining normal political life. Events and attitudes conspired to force a moment of truth at the Coudenburg Palace. Meetings between Margaret and the Council of State concluded that Philip had two options. First, arm the land and prepare for civil war. Second, remove the inquisition and the placards, the key complaints in the Compromise. In her own opinion the situation necessitated accepting the proposal of the aristocracy. She had not signed the Compromise, nor did she agree with all of its provisions, but she recognized it as an effort to maintain peace and order. If the king refused, she would be without support. Even the lords who remained with her could not guarantee the loyalty of their own retinues. In any event, she argued that the very idea of an inquisition disgusted both good and bad subjects,

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3 Iongh, Madama, Marguerite van Oostenrijk, Hertogin van Parma en Piacenza (Amsterdam: 1967), 306.