

**THE FATE OF
DIETRICH
FLADE, PP. 189-243**

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The Fate of Dietrich Flade, pp. 189-243 by George L. Burr

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GEORGE L. BURR

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*The Rev. Joseph Henry Allen,
with the regards
of G. L. B.*

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THE FATE OF DIETRICH FLADE

~~Historical~~

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BY

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PROFESSOR GEORGE L. BURR

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

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Rev. J. H. Allen

THE FATE OF DIETRICH FLADE.

By Professor GEORGE L. BURR, Cornell University.

When, just three hundred years ago, in the spring of the year 1589, it was whispered abroad in Europe that no less a personage than Dr. Dietrich Flade, of Trier,¹ city Judge of that oldest of German towns, Dean of its juristic faculty, ex-Rector of its university, a councillor of the Archbishop-Elector himself, had been put on his trial for witchcraft, men turned with a shudder of interest to watch the result. And when, in mid-September of that year, there came the further tidings that he had been convicted on his own confession and burned at the stake, pious folk everywhere drew a long sigh of relief that at last a ringleader of the horrid crew of Satan had, spite of money and influence, been brought to the fate he deserved. No voice anywhere was raised in protest or in question. No word of pity found its way into print.

But never again, even in Germany, did the persecution strike so high. Though two centuries of witch-burning followed, Dietrich Flade remains to our day its most eminent victim in the land of its greatest thoroughness. And in these later years of failing faith men have dared to ask whether he was, after all, guilty of the preternatural crime laid to his charge, and to wonder what other cause may have brought the accusation which cost his life. Wide has been the field of conjecture. Was he, perhaps, a martyr who brought suspicion on himself by opposing the persecution of others? Was he a heretic, whose politic foes found

¹ Better known to us, though a German city, by its Gallicized name of Treves, or Trèves.

it easier to burn him as a witch than as a Protestant? Was he only a corrupt magistrate, for whom this seemed the most convenient method of impeachment? Did he but owe his death to the malice of some spiteful criminal,—to the cunning of some private foe,—to the greed of some heir who coveted his wealth? Each of these theories might be sustained by contemporary hints, and either is but too sadly plausible in the light of what we know of his time; but the scholars who have thus speculated as to the fate of Dietrich Flade have been forced to add that the one document which might have answered their question—the minutes of his trial—has long been lost to research.¹

That document lies before me²; and it is upon the basis

¹ What has been known about Flade is, all told, very little. Just before the middle of the last century, Hauber, stirred to curiosity by the allusion of Delrio, discussed his fate in the chapter of his *Bibliotheca magica* which has remained the main source for all later historians of witchcraft; but, beside Delrio, Hauber had no materials save the bare mention by the contemporary Cratespolius. Later in the eighteenth century, the eminent Trier historian and Vice-Bishop, Hontheim, gave to Flade a foot-note of sympathetic appreciation; while the Trier jurist, Neller, on the other hand, blackened his fame by resurrecting for a student's thesis the Elector's letter to the theological faculty (see page 36 below). In 1817, the city librarian, Wytttenbach (in his *Versuch einer Geschichte von Trier*, published as a serial in the *Trierischer Adresskalender*, 1810-22), would gladly have told more about him; but the records of his trial, which were known to have shortly before existed at Trier, Wytttenbach could not find, though he found men who had read them. In 1818, however, the Echternach antiquary, Clotten, produced what seemed fragments of them. They were printed by Müller (in the *Trierisches Wochenblatt* for 1818, Nos. 49-51), and were afterward given to the city library at Trier, in whose keeping they still are. When, a few years later, the two last-named historians (Wytttenbach and Müller) published their edition of the *Custa Trevirorum*, they added to its third volume (1839) a valuable note on Flade. The later histories of Trier, including even the elaborate work of Marx, add nothing to our knowledge of him. The article upon him, by Professor Dr. Kraus, in the *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie* contributes, however, one or two fresh facts.

² Since 1883 it has been in the possession of the President White library at Cornell University. Glancing through an old-book catalogue issued, late in 1882, by Albert Cohn, of Berlin, my eye lit on the title of this manuscript. I laid it before President White, who at once, spite of an inaccuracy in the name, divined that it was the trial of Dr. Flade, whose case he knew well through his researches in this field. We ordered it forthwith, and were overjoyed both to secure it and to find it what we had hoped. Of its earlier fortunes I have

of this and of other papers¹ which have hitherto escaped the historians that I wish to discuss once more the story of his life.

For at least three generations the Flades had been loyal servants of the Electors of Trier. Before the close of the fifteenth century Hupert Flade had left his Luxemburg home at St. Vith to enter the archiepiscopal *Kanzlei*; and he had received more than one substantial recognition of his worth as a secretary before he found himself snugly

been able to learn only that it was for a time in the possession of the well-known Cöln bookseller, Lempertz, who offered it in a catalogue of 1874. Whence it had come into his hands he could in 1886 no longer remember. It was bought from him by a Cöln collector, at the dispersion of whose library it drifted to the shelves of the Berlin dealer. Wytttenbach's words as to its loss are: "Bis auf unsere Zeiten waren die Originalpapiere dieses Prozesses aufbewahrt worden; aber sie sind entkommen, man weiss nicht wohin. Ich habe sie nie gelesen; aber man sagt mir, dass darin der Doctor der Zauberey selbst geständig gewesen." It is possible that, with so much else, they went astray during the French occupation. I hope to print the manuscript as an appendix to my forthcoming catalogue of the President White collection on witchcraft. It is a folio, neatly written in a *Kanzlei* hand familiar to the contemporary records at Trier. Of its original 126 leaves, the first is detached and sadly worn; the second is wholly gone (I have fortunately been able to supply its contents from the fragments at Trier), while ff. 105, 106 (a part of Flade's confession—the later *Urgicht* suggests their substance) have been rudely cut out, their stubs remaining. Else the document is complete, beginning with the first calling together of the court, and ending with the execution. The Clotten fragments (see last note), still preserved at Trier, were never a part of it, but are rather the original papers from which this final protocol was drawn up. They comprise: (1) Most of the Fath report, in what I believe the handwriting of that commissioner; (2) all the miscellaneous reports therewith submitted to the court by the Elector (see note on page 32 below); (3) the minutes of the proceedings connected with Flade's arrest, in the handwriting of the court clerk, Wilhelm von Biedborgh; (4) three more or less complete reports of the first examination of Flade, partly in the handwriting of Biedborgh, partly in a *Kanzlei* hand resembling that of our own protocol. These could not have been what Wytttenbach's informant had seen, for they contain nothing of Flade's confession, nor indeed of his trial proper. A brief account of our own manuscript, by Dr. William H. Carpenter, now of Columbia College, was published in the library bulletin of Cornell University in April, 1883.

¹ Of these the most important are: (1) The annual reports, manuscript and printed, of the Trier Jesuits; (2) the remains at Trier of the judicial records of the witch-trials; (3) the significant passages of Brouwer and of Binsfeld. There has been, indeed, hitherto no attempt at investigation of the case.