

EGMONT

by

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

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Egmont

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Introductory Note

In 1775, when Goethe was twenty-six, and before he went to Weimar, he began to write "Egmont" After working on it at intervals for twelve years, he finished it at Rome in 1787.

The scene of the drama is laid in the Low Countries at the beginning of the revolt against Spain. In the fifteenth century Philip of Burgundy had usurped dominion over several of the provinces of the Netherlands, and through him they had passed into the power of his descendant, the Emperor Charles V. This powerful ruler abolished the constitutional rights of the provinces, and introduced the Inquisition in order to stamp out Protestantism. Prominent among his officers was the Fleming, Lamoral, Count Egmont, upon whom he lavished honors and opportunities of service--opportunities so well improved that, by his victories over the French at Saint-Quentin (1557) and Gravelines (1558) Egmont made a reputation as one of the most brilliant generals in Europe, and became the idol of his countrymen. When in 1559 a new Regent of the Netherlands was to be created, the people hoped that Philip II, who had succeeded Charles, would choose Egmont; but instead he appointed his half-sister Margaret, Duchess of Parma. Under the new Regent the persecution of the Protestants was rigorously pressed, and in 1565 Egmont, though a Catholic, was sent to Madrid to plead for clemency. He was received by the King with every appearance of cordiality, but shortly after his return home the Duke of Alva was sent to the Netherlands with instructions to put down with an iron hand all resistance to his master's will. How terribly he carried out his orders has been told by Prescott and Motley. Egmont was an early victim, but his martyrdom, with that of Count Horn, and later the assassination of William of Orange, roused the Netherlands to a resistance that ended only with the complete throwing off of the Spanish yoke.

Such in outline is the background chosen by Goethe for his tragedy. With many changes in detail, the dramatist has still preserved a picture of a historical situation of absorbing interest, and has painted a group of admirable portraits. The drama has long been a favorite on the stage, where it enjoys the advantage of Beethoven's musical setting.

Dramatis Personae

Margaret of Parma, (Daughter of Charles V., and Regent of the Netherlands)

Count Egmont, (Prince of Gaure)

The Duke of Alva

William of Orange

Ferdinand, (his natural Son)

Machiavel, in the service of the Regent

Richard, (Egmont's Private Secretary)

Silva, Gomez, (in the service of Alva)

Clara, (the Beloved of Egmont)

Her Mother

Brackenburg, (a Citizen's Son), and Vansen, (a Clerk)

Soest, (a Shopkeeper), Jetter, (a Tailor), A Carpenter, A Soapboiler
(Citizens of Brussels)

Buyck, (a Hollander), a Soldier under Egmont

Ruysum, (a Frieslander), an invalid Soldier, and deaf

People, Attendants, Guards, &c.

The Scene is laid in Brussels.

ACT I

Scene I.--Soldiers and Citizens (with cross-bows)

Jetter (steps forward, and bends his cross-bow). Soest, Buyck, Ruysum

Soest. Come, shoot away, and have done with it! You won't beat me! Three black rings, you never made such a shot in all your life. And so I'm master for this year.

Jetter. Master and king to boot; who envies you? You'll have to pay double reckoning; 'tis only fair you should pay for your dexterity.

Buyck. Jetter, I'll buy your shot, share the prize, and treat the company. I have already been here so long, and am a debtor for so many civilities. If I miss, then it shall be as if you had shot.

Soest. I ought to have a voice, for in fact I am the loser. No matter! Come, Buyck, shoot away.

Buyck (shoots). Now, corporal, look out!--One! Two! Three! Four!

Soest. Four rings! So be it!

All. Hurrah! Long live the King! Hurrah! Hurrah!

Buyck. Thanks, sirs, master even were too much! Thanks for the honour.

Jetter. You have no one to thank but yourself. Ruysum. Let me tell you--

Soest. How now, grey-beard?

Ruysum. Let me tell you!--He shoots like his master, he shoots like Egmont.

Buyck. Compared with him I am only a bungler. He aims with the rifle as no one else does. Not only when he's lucky or in the vein; no! he levels, and the bull's-eye is pierced. I have learned from him. He were indeed a blockhead, who could serve under him and learn nothing!--But, sirs, let us not forget! A king maintains his followers; and so, wine here, at the king's charge!

Jetter. We have agreed among ourselves that each--

Buyck. I am a foreigner, and a king, and care not a jot for your laws and customs.

Jetter. Why, you are worse than the Spaniard, who has not yet ventured to meddle with them.

Ruysum. What does he say?

Soest (loud to Ruysum). He wants to treat us; he will not hear of our clubbing together, the king paying only a double share.

Ruysum. Let him! under protest, however! 'Tis his master's fashion, too, to be munificent, and to let the money flow in a good cause. (Wine is brought.)

All. Here's to his Majesty! Hurrah!

Jetter (to Buyck). That means your Majesty, of course, Buyck. My hearty thanks, if it be so.

Soest. Assuredly! A Netherlander does not find it easy to drink the health of his Spanish majesty from his heart.

Ruysum. Who?

Soest (aloud). Philip the Second, King of Spain.

Ruysum. Our most gracious king and master! Long life to him.

Soest. Did you not like his father, Charles the Fifth, better?

Ruysum. God bless him! He was a king indeed! His hand reached over the whole earth, and he was all in all. Yet, when he met you, he'd greet you just as one neighbour greets another,--and if you were frightened, he knew so well how to put you at your ease--ay, you understand me--he walked out, rode out, just as it came into his head, with very few followers. We all wept when he resigned the government here to his son. You understand me--he is another sort of man, he's more majestic.

Jetter. When he was here, he never appeared in public, except in pomp and royal state. He speaks little, they say.

Soest. He is no king for us Netherlanders. Our princes must be joyous and free like ourselves, must live and let live. We will neither be despised nor oppressed, good-natured fools though we be.

Jetter. The king, methinks, were a gracious sovereign enough, if he had only better counsellors.

Soest. No, no! He has no affection for us Netherlanders; he has no heart for the people; he loves us not; how then can we love him? Why is everybody so fond of Count Egmont? Why are we all so devoted to him? Why, because one can read in his face that he loves us; because joyousness, open-heartedness, and good-nature, speak in his eyes; because he possesses nothing that he does not share with him who needs it, ay, and with him who needs it not. Long live Count Egmont! Buyck, it is for you to give the first toast; give us your master's health.

Buyck. With all my heart; here's to Count Egmont! Hurrah!

Ruysum Conqueror of St. Quintin.

Buyck. The hero of Gravelines.

All. Hurrah!

Ruysum. St. Quintin was my last battle. I was hardly able to crawl along, and could with difficulty carry my heavy rifle. I managed, notwithstanding, to singe the skin of the French once more, and, as a parting gift, received a grazing shot in my right leg.

Buyck. Gravelines! Ha, my friends, we had sharp work of it there! The victory was all our own. Did not those French dogs carry fire and desolation into the very heart of Flanders? We gave it them, however! The old hard-listed veterans held out bravely for a while, but we pushed on, fired away, and laid about us, till they made wry faces, and their lines gave way. Then Egmont's horse was shot under him; and for a long time we fought pell-mell, man to man, horse to horse, troop to troop, on the broad, flat, sea-sand. Suddenly, as if from heaven, down came the cannon shot from the mouth of the river, bang, bang, right into the midst of the French. These were English, who, under Admiral Malin, happened to be sailing past from Dunkirk. They did not help us much, 'tis true; they could only approach with their smallest vessels, and that not near enough; --besides, their shot fell sometimes among our troops. It did some good, however! It broke the French lines, and raised our courage. Away it went. Helter- skelter! topsy-turvy! all struck dead, or forced into the water; the fellows were drowned the moment they tasted the water, while we Hollanders dashed in after them. Being amphibious, we were as much in our element as frogs, and hacked away at the enemy, and shot them down as if they had been ducks. The few who struggled through, were struck dead in their flight by the peasant women, armed with hoes and pitchforks. His Gallic majesty was compelled at once to hold out his paw and make peace. And that peace you owe to us, to the great Egmont.

All. Hurrah, for the great Egmont! Hurrah! Hurrah!

Jetter. Had they but appointed him Regent, instead of Margaret of Parma!

Soest. Not so! Truth is truth! I'll not hear Margaret abused. Now it is my turn.
Long live our gracious lady!

All. Long life to her!

Soest. Truly, there are excellent women in that family. Long live the Regent!

Jetter. Prudent is she, and moderate in all she does; if she would only not hold so fast and stiffly with the priests. It is partly her fault, too, that we have the fourteen new mitres in the land. Of what use are they, I should like to know? Why, that foreigners may be shoved into the good benefices, where formerly abbots were chosen out of the chapters! And we're to believe it's for the sake of religion. We know better. Three bishops were enough for us; things went on decently and reputably. Now each must busy himself as if he were needed; and this gives rise every moment to dissensions and ill-will. And the more you agitate the matter, so much the worse it grows. (They drink.)

Soest. But it was the will of the king; she cannot alter it, one way or another.

Jetter. Then we may not even sing the new psalms; but ribald songs, as many as we please. And why? There is heresy in them, they say, and heaven knows what. I have sung some of them, however; they are new, to be sure, but I see no harm in them.

Buyck. Ask their leave, forsooth! In our province, we sing just what we please. That's because Count Egmont is our stadtholder, who does not trouble himself about such matters. In Ghent, Ypres, and throughout the whole of Flanders, anybody sings them that chooses. (Aloud to Ruysum.) There is nothing more harmless than a spiritual song--Is there, father?

Ruysum. What, indeed! It is a godly work, and truly edifying.

Jetter. They say, however, that they are not of the right sort, not of their sort, and, since it is dangerous, we had better leave them alone. The officers of the Inquisition are always lurking and spying about; many an honest fellow has already fallen into their clutches. They had not gone so far as to meddle with conscience! If they will not allow me to do what I like, they might at least let me think and sing as I please.

Soest. The Inquisition won't do here. We are not made like the Spaniards, to let our consciences be tyrannized over. The nobles must look to it, and clip its wings betimes.

Jetter. It is a great bore. Whenever it comes into their worships' heads to break into my house, and I am sitting there at my work, humming a French psalm, thinking nothing about it, neither good nor bad--singing it just because it is in my throat;--forthwith I'm a heretic, and am clapped into prison. Or if I am passing through the country, and stand near a crowd listening to a new preacher, one of those who have come from Germany; instantly I'm called a rebel, and am in danger of losing my head! Have you ever heard one of these preachers?

Soest. Brave fellows! Not long ago, I heard one of them preach in a field, before thousands and thousands of people. A different sort of dish he gave us from that of our humdrum preachers, who, from the pulpit, choke their hearers with scraps of Latin. He spoke from his heart; told us how we had till now been led by the nose, how we had been kept in darkness, and how we might procure more light;--ay, and he proved it all out of the Bible.

Jetter. There may be something in it. I always said as much, and have often pondered over the matter. It has long been running in my head.

Buyck. All the people run after them.

Soest. No wonder, since they hear both what is good and what is new.

Jetter. And what is it all about? Surely they might let every one preach after his own fashion.

Buyck. Come, sirs! While you are talking, you; forget the wine and the Prince of Orange.

Jetter. We must not forget him. He's a very wall of defence. In thinking of him, one fancies, that if one could only hide behind him, the devil himself could not get at one. Here's to William of Orange! Hurrah!

All. Hurrah! Hurrah!

Soest. Now, grey-headed, let's have your toast.

Ruysum. Here's to old soldiers! To all soldiers! War for ever!

Buyck. Bravo, old fellow. Here's to all soldiers. War for ever!

Jetter. War! War! Do ye know what ye are shouting about? That it should slip glibly from your tongue is natural enough; but what wretched work it is for us, I have not words to tell you. To be stunned the whole year round by the beating of the drum; to hear of nothing except how one troop marched here, and another there; how they came over this height, and halted near that mill; how many were left dead on this field, and how many on that; how they press forward, and how one wins, and another loses, without being able to comprehend what they are fighting about; how a town is taken, how the citizens are put to the sword, and how it fares with the poor women and innocent children. This is a grief and a trouble, and then one thinks every moment, "Here they come! It will be our turn next."

Soest. Therefore every citizen must be practised in the use of arms.

Jetter. Fine talking, indeed, for him who has a wife and children. And yet I would rather hear of soldiers than see them.

Buyck. I might take offence at that.

Jetter. It was not intended for you, countryman. When we got rid of the Spanish garrison, we breathed freely again.

Soest. Faith! They pressed on you heavily enough.

Jetter. Mind your own business.

Soest. They came to sharp quarters with you.

Jetter. Hold your tongue.

Soest. They drove him out of kitchen, cellar, chamber--and bed. (They laugh.)

Jetter. You are a blockhead.

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