

THE FLOODS IN HOLLAND.

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BUT for the articles which recently appeared in the Press, drawing the attention of the whole of Europe to a devastating cyclone which destroyed several Dutch towns in a few hours, numbers of people would have continued to regard Holland as a picturesque country surrounded by low hills with sleek cows peacefully grazing in rich meadows interspersed with ceaselessly turning mill wheels and the ubiquitous fishermen in heavy clogs and the traditional baggy trousers completing the picture. Unfortunately this pleasing scene is subject to change, the country being situated below sea-level and in constant danger of inundation in spite of the dikes which have been erected as a protective measure. In order fully to understand the situation created by the floods in Holland, it is necessary to realise that the sea is not the only menace to the country. It is traversed by large rivers such as the Rhine and the Meuse, and by numerous canals and streams which in summer flow gently within their verdant banks, but in winter are transformed into regular torrents. These are hemmed in by dikes, but too often, alas, the water penetrates into the surrounding country, especially in the Southern Provinces with their low-lying tracts of marsh land. The water which penetrates in this manner is pumped up by machines and diverted into large communicating basins and canals which form a network of waterways, each having an outlet at the sea. When heavy rains descend upon the already brimming rivers, and when a violent West wind prevents the waterways from emptying themselves into the sea, it is easy to understand that the protective measures described above are of little avail. The present disaster has once more brought home this sad truth to the Dutch people who were also the victims of a terrible disaster ten years ago.

The recent inundations were chiefly caused by the Rhine and the Meuse which gradually overflowed into the surrounding country and transformed several flourishing provinces into a raging sea where dead cattle and household goods, swept away from the ruined farms, might be seen floating hither and thither. The mild weather which melted the snow in the mountainous regions traversed by the Rhine, and the rain which fell without ceasing during December, coupled with a strong westerly gale which drove the water back from the sea, were responsible for this terrible state of affairs. Shortly before the inundations, the *uiterwaarden** presented a most alarming aspect. The reservoirs intended for the surplus water were full, so that the rapidly-rising rivers caused great consternation amongst the people even before the general flooding took place on January 1st.

There are at present no available statistics as to the extent of the disaster. The situation was particularly serious in the Provinces of Gueldre and Limburg where the refugees were to be seen trying to reach higher ground by way of the dikes which were crumbling beneath their feet. All traffic was suspended in the large towns and the water entered the houses. In the rural districts, the only indications of once fertile fields were the roofs of the farm houses and the

* Fields bordering rivers which are not protected by dikes. When the rivers rise slightly, the water spreads into the *uiterwaarden* before reaching the dikes which are situated further off.

tops of trees which seemed to be floating on the water. It poured into the polders (low-lying, reclaimed land) through large holes about 300 metres wide which it had made in the first row of dikes, and hurled itself with great force against the second row of dikes. The railroads, which run along the dikes in some parts, naturally did not escape the general devastation, and thus the dangers and difficulties of rescuing the refugees were increased. On January 2nd, the Provinces of Gueldre and Limburg were almost completely flooded, and the disaster assumed alarming aspects. The Army and Navy were immediately mobilized to rescue the victims. Thousands of peasants, who had taken refuge in attics or on the roofs of their houses, were conveyed to places of safety in barks or motor boats. Groups of workers from the Netherlands Red Cross assisted the soldiers and sailors in their relief work, and all performed their task with untiring courage and devotion, in many cases under the eyes of the Queen of Holland who paid daily visits to the most dangerous spots. Meantime, the water achieved its work of destruction by penetrating into the richest districts, and the Provinces of Brabant, Gueldre, Limburg, Overijssel, Utrecht and even Frise were inundated in ten days. The cattle, which are the true wealth of the Dutch farmer, were rescued in some cases, but only by superhuman efforts. All available hospitals, barracks and public buildings were filled with refugees in the most lamentable physical and mental condition. The churches, which are mostly built on elevated ground, were also favourite places of refuge. Groups of peasants, men, women and children, surrounded by live stock of every description, clustered round the priests, recalling scenes from the Middle Ages.

The Military Engineer Corps blew up the dikes at certain points, where large volumes of water had collected, in a desperate attempt to save the polders which were still intact, but the situation was well-nigh hopeless. On January 5th, the Rhine burst the Pannerden dam and added several thousands to the already long list of sufferers.

It would indeed be difficult to describe the state of despair into which the Dutch peasants have been thrown by this terrible disaster, but this is easy to imagine when one realizes that their chief source of livelihood is farming and cattle-rearing, and when one considers that, in addition to the fear of drowning, they were beset with anxiety as to the fate of their cattle and lands.

After a cyclone or an earthquake, it is usually possible to begin the work of reconstruction without delay, but, alas, when inundations occur, nothing can be done until the waters have entirely subsided. As a contrast to other forms of devastation, an inundated country presents a calm and peaceful appearance. Nevertheless the work of destruction is going on steadily but surely beneath the surface. During this painful period of suspense, the peasant, usually so independent, is obliged to rely upon public charity for a livelihood, and the knowledge that the foundations of his home are being slowly sapped by the waters and that his cattle are probably lying dead in their stalls does not help to improve his state of mind.

In the meantime, the Netherlands Red Cross is making a noble effort to meet the most pressing needs.

The League of Red Cross Societies has advanced the sum of \$2,000, from its disaster relief reserve fund, to the Netherlands Red Cross for relief to the sufferers from the recent floods.