Chapter Fourteen

AN INCOMPETENT KING

EDWARD II's coronation foretold in ritual the catastrophe to come. In the procession a handsome young Gascon knight, Piers Gaveston, recently created Earl of Cornwall, carried the crown of St. Edward. In his robes of purple velvet embroidered with pearls, Gaveston outshone every other noble present. For a newly created earl to take one of the leading ceremonial roles on such an occasion was seen as a calculated affront. It was one which Gaveston made worse by deliberately dressing to eclipse his peers all of whom wore the traditional cloth of gold. Envy and resentment set in and he was never to be forgiven. For the first time the natural balance of crown and nobility was seriously put out by a new phenomenon, the royal favourite, someone with whom a ruler was so infatuated that he not only showered that person with riches and honours but would listen to him and to him alone.

Although medieval history records the clashes of king and barons, for the majority of the time they worked together in harmony governing the state. That harmony was achieved by the king keeping a rigorous check on the distribution of rewards and benefits known as patronage. To obtain the support of his nobles the king had vast resources which he could call upon: grants of land, the bestowal of rich heiresses, the allocation of wardships of heirs to great estates, besides positions at court. Edward I had been brilliant at this, having even more to give away to the barons as a result of his successful Welsh campaigns. His son, Edward II, still had much at his disposal, but the problem was that what he had he gave to the wrong people, men who were greedy, ruthless and ambitious. In the end this was to ruin him.

But none of that could be foreseen when Edward came to the throne in 1307 amidst a surge of optimism. He was then twenty-three. Tall, good-looking, with fair curly hair, muscular in build, he was a keen addict of the open air life, not only hunting but other forms of sport, such as boating and swimming, which were then viewed as being unkingly. That was not, however, his only unkingly trait, for he loved to spend time on menial work of the type undertaken by peasants, like hedging, ditching and plastering. In common with all his family he was subject to wild fits of temper, but that was less damaging than his inclination to laziness and lack of decision. His real undoing, however, was his passion for male favourites. Although the father of four children by Isabella of France, 'a most elegant lady and beautiful woman', Edward was homosexual by nature, something viewed then as a mortal sin on the level with heresy. All of this combined dramatically to lower respect for the monarchy.

Head of Edward II from his tomb in Gloucester Cathedral. Constructed at the behest of his son it was conceived as one for a martyr with prayer niches for pilgrims to use. The cult of Edward as a saint was to be short-lived. The effigy of the king was carved from alabaster.

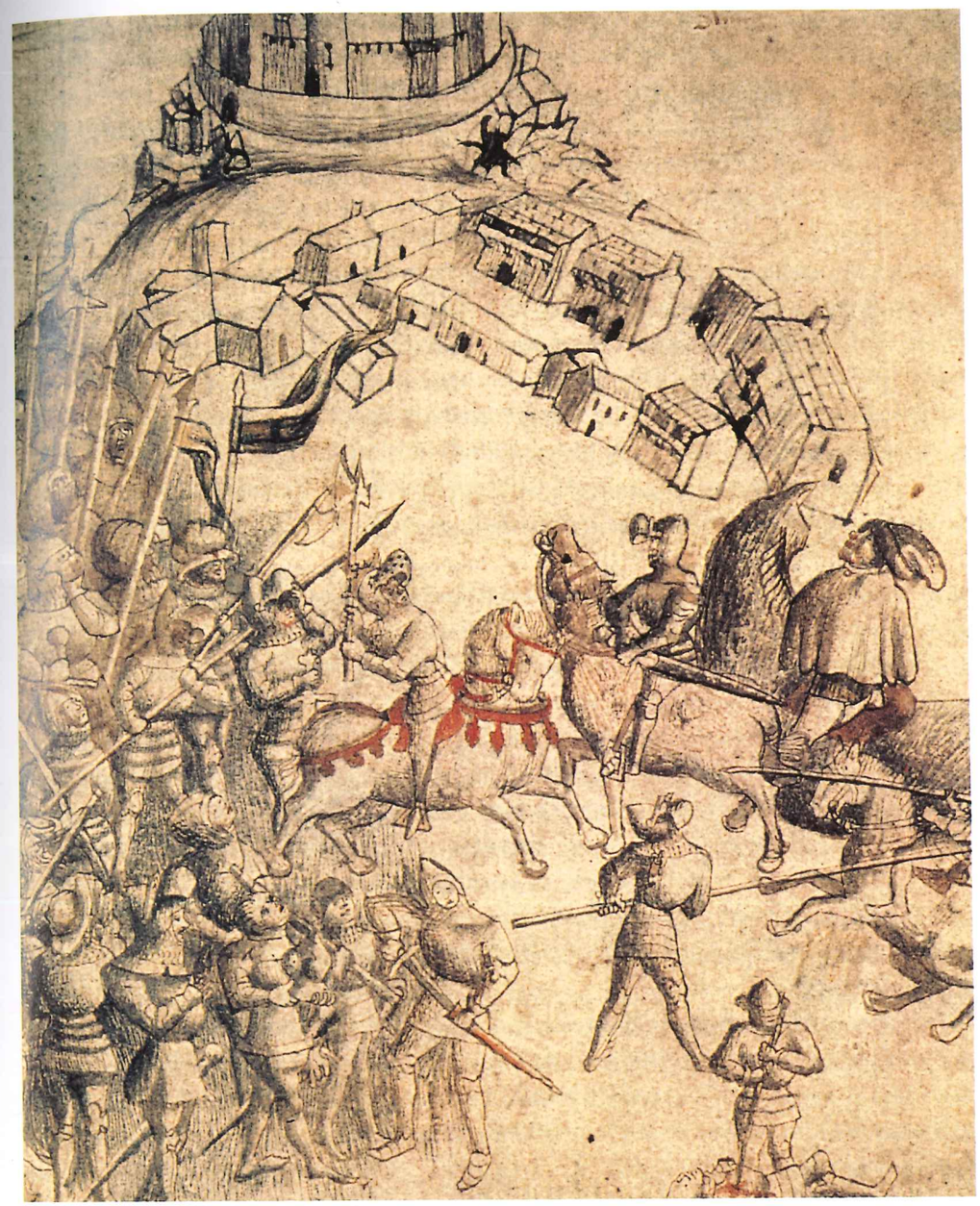
In the eyes of the king, Piers Gaveston could do no wrong, and he was showered with rewards which made him more and more envied and disliked. He was far from tactful. After the coronation he went on to unhorse and defeat many of the greatest nobles at the tournament staged to celebrate the event. His biting, witty tongue mocked and derided them. To each of the great earls he accorded a nickname. Gloucester was 'whoreson' or 'cuckold's bird', Lincoln 'broste belly', Leicester 'the fiddler' and Warwick 'black hound of Arden'. 'Let him call me hound,' the earl exclaimed. 'One day the hound will bite him.'

The king's relationship with Gaveston went back a long way. Indeed his father had been so enraged with his son that he had torn out great handfuls of his hair from his head in anger over it. Soon after Edward came to the throne the earls met, anxious to curb what they regarded as the growing power of the king and to curtail the influence of his favourite. They agreed to act to secure the reform of 'things which have been done before this time contrary to his [the king's] honour and rights of the crown'. When Edward was crowned there was an additional phrase added to the coronation oath, in which he promised to obey 'the rightful laws and customs which the community of the realm shall have chosen'. Both of these moves represented their unease and their deep distrust of Piers Gaveston whose exile the earls obtained.

But Edward could not live without Gaveston, and soon afterwards he returned. So wildly unpopular was he that the king began to lose the support of barons who had always been loyal to the crown. What made matters worse was that Edward failed to create any new group to replace those who joined the opposition. In 1311 he was presented with a long list of demands by the barons called the Ordinances which included Gaveston's exile. This the king refused to accept. Both the king and his favourite went north. Gaveston was besieged by the barons in Scarborough Castle and was forced to surrender, albeit promised safe conduct. He was led south, when an even greater disaster befell him. He was captured by his deadliest enemy, the man he had jeeringly named the 'black hound of Arden', the Earl of Warwick. Warwick had only one thing in mind, vengeance. He took Gaveston off to Warwick Castle, where he was tried and convicted by the earls. The favourite was executed a mile north of the town amidst scenes of mob enthusiasm and blowing of horns. When the king heard the news he said, 'By God's soul, he acted like a fool. If he had taken my advice he would never have fallen into the hands of the earls.'

During the next decade the earls found a leader in the king's cousin, Thomas of Lancaster. His power was enormous, having inherited five earldoms, maintaining a huge retinue and having as many armed knights in his services as the king. Unfortunately, like Edward, he too was lazy, lacking vision and direction. During these years the barons dominated the king whose position was pathetically weak. His only chance to retrieve the situation failed. In 1314 he led the largest army against the Scots since his father's campaigns. On 23 and 24 June the English suffered defeat at the Battle of Bannockburn, their armoured knights floundering in the bog which the Scots had deliberately chosen as the site for combat. Victory could have restored Edward's fortunes. Defeat only hastened his ruin.

The same year was marked by heavy rains which returned again the next year. It poured down from the skies seemingly without ceasing. Even if seed did germinate



The Battle of Bannockburn in June 1314 as depicted in a fifteenth century Scottish manuscript.

the grain rotted on the stalk. This meant that following defeat in battle came hunger and starvation. The price for what little food there was rocketed. The huge households of the nobility were drastically reduced in size, which only added to the numbers of the distressed. As there was little with which to feed the cattle, disease set in. Fewer cattle meant fewer oxen with which to plough the fields. It also meant less meat, cheese and milk. These were years of utter misery for the whole population.

The responsibility for much of this was laid at the door not of the king but of Thomas of Lancaster and the earls. Edward began to form a new group of favourites but once again the barons demanded and obtained their removal. Then, when the Scots took Berwick, it was seen even more as the fault of the earls. By then Edward had a new favourite, Hugh Despencer, who, like Gaveston, was greedy and ambitious. Despencer's aim was to build up a huge estate in South Wales and in doing so he upset the lords of the Marches who seized his lands and demanded and got his exile. This time, however, the king rallied his forces against the barons and defeated them under the leadership of Thomas of Lancaster at the Battle of Boroughbridge. At last, ten years on, the king was able to have his revenge for their treatment of Piers Gaveston. Just as Gaveston had been mocked and jeered at before his execution so Thomas of Lancaster was forced to ride to his on a 'lean white palfrey' with a tattered and torn hat put on his head. It was winter and the crowds lining the route pelted him with snowballs. As it was alleged that he had looked to the enemy, Scotland, to help him he was made to kneel facing northwards to be executed.

That was the signal for a bloodbath on a scale not seen before. On the advice of the young Despencer and his father, a reign of terror followed aimed at wiping out the opposition. Twenty-five nobles were executed, others went to prison or into exile. Many were forced to buy their freedom by means of crippling fines. The Ordinances of 1311 were annulled. The Despencers now grasped at everything they could in the way of money and lands. Men were made to pay them fictitious debts. Rich heiresses and widows were harassed until they parted with their estates. Royal funds paid for the Despencers' every whim. The opposition to all of this came from a most unexpected quarter, the queen, now seen no longer as that 'most elegant lady and beautiful woman' but as that 'she-wolf' of France. Edward had already abandoned Isabella. As he came to realise just how strong-willed she was he vowed that, if he had no other weapon, he would crush her with his own teeth.

The queen left England with her son Edward, the Prince of Wales, for France where he was bethrothed to the daughter of the Count of Hainault. There Isabella was joined by many exiles from England including Roger Mortimer, who had been condemned to death but who drugged the guards in the Tower of London at the banquet he gave on the eve of his execution and escaped. He became the queen's lover and, together with a small band of mercenaries from the Count of Hainault, they landed in Suffolk in September 1326. So unpopular was the king that members of his household fled. London threw open its gates in joy. In the face of this, Edward and the two Despencers panicked and left for Wales. Horror now piled on horror. The elder Despencer was caught up with at Bristol and this time it was the turn of the barons to exact revenge. He was tried and hanged, drawn and quartered amidst the cries of the townspeople. Meanwhile the king and the younger Despencer set sail from Chepstow and landed in Glamorgan. Their fate was to be even more appalling, for they were captured by Thomas of Lancaster's youngest brother, Henry. Despencer was carried to Hereford and barbarously executed.

The king was taken to Kenilworth castle. He refused to attend Parliament which, when it met, was told in a sermon by the Archbishop of Canterbury that Edward, by consent of the magnates, clergy and people, was no longer king. A deputation, including representatives of all these groups, was sent to Kenilworth to inform him. Edward fainted with grief and then begged for mercy, agreeing to resign his throne on condition that his son succeed him.

No one knows the fate of Edward II. It remains one of the great mysteries of British history. Roger Mortimer certainly plotted his death but did he succeed? One account would lead us to believe that he did. According to this the king was deliberately imprisoned in squalor and finally murdered at Berkeley Castle. Another account is so extraordinary that it could be true. In this Edward succeeds in escaping by killing the porter. He journeyed first to Ireland, then to France, where he was received by the pope at Avignon, and finally to Italy, where he became a hermit. Whatever his fate a splendid tomb was erected to him in Gloucester Cathedral.

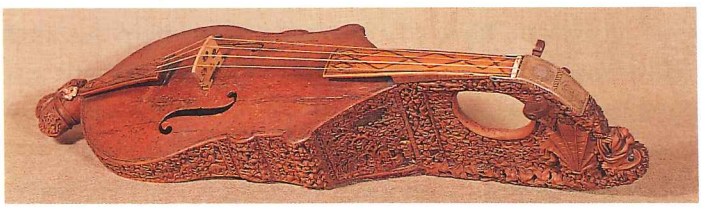
The triumph of Queen Isabella and Mortimer, now Earl of March, was by no means one of right over wrong. In fact all it meant was that one group of ruthless and greedy people had replaced another. For three years these two ruled England disastrously, until, once more, an opposition formed to remove them. That failed, but their fate was to be sealed by the young Edward III. Unlike his father, Edward had a knack for choosing the right associates. In 1330 he and his friends gained entrance to Nottingham Castle, by way of underground tunnels, and confronted the queen and Mortimer. Isabella begged, 'Good son, good son, have pity on gentle Mortimer,' but none was forthcoming. He was taken to London, tried and executed. The queen went into an enforced retirement, spent reading romances and eventually becoming a Franciscan nun.

The real reign of Edward III now began but with a terrible legacy. For twenty-five

years the country had been ruled by an incompetent king challenged by incompetent nobles. There had been defeat in war, and famine. Never had there been such horrendous and cruel bloodshed as revenge took its toll. Beneath this melodrama real problems were fought out about the relationship of king and barons. The barons wished to limit the king's power, his right to select ministers and grant lands to whom he thought fit. They viewed the royal household as a sink of iniquity peopled by shifty and unsavoury characters out to get what they could. Despicable as the king was he had, nonetheless, a case for his rights as an efficient way of running the country. When one earl said to him, 'King, if you destroy your barons, you indeed make light of your own honour,' he replied, 'There is no one who is sorry for me; none fights for my rights against them.'

In the midst of these struggles Parliament grew in importance, almost by accident, for it gave either side a means of making it seem that they had popular support. With a strong king, like Edward I, Parliament was used to show that the nation backed his aggressive policies. With a weak one, like Edward II, those who came together ceased meekly to assent to the king's proposals, and began to initiate ones of their own. As both king and barons wished to demonstrate that they acted on behalf of the whole country, the two sides were anxious that representatives of the shires and the towns were always included. The magnates were summoned by royal writ. The knights of the shires and the burgesses of the boroughs were elected in response to writs. The task of the magnates was to advise and debate great policy matters. The knights and the burgesses were there to sanction taxes to pay for that policy. The Scottish war gave them more and more power which they used as a lever to get what they wanted before agreeing to confirm the taxes. When they returned home their task was to tell everyone what had been decided. In this way, more and more people became involved in the process of governing the country.

Never had the monarchy sunk so low in public esteem as during the reign of Edward II. The fact that the king was a failure did not in any way, however, shake people's belief in the sanctity of the crown and its position at the summit of the social pyramid. With the accession of a more than capable king, everything was to go into reverse and its glory was to return.



An early fourteenth century gittern, an instrument which would have been played like a guitar. The instrument was carved from a single piece of wood.