

Chapter Seventeen

THE GREAT REVOLT

*When Adam delved and Eve span
Who was then a gentleman?*

THIS was the couplet used by the priest John Ball when preaching to the thousands of peasants gathered outside London who made up the Great Revolt. What he spoke about was social revolution:

'In the beginning all men were equal: servitude man to man was introduced by the unjust dealings of the wicked. For if God had intended some to be serfs and others lords, He would have made a distinction between them at the beginning.'

There had never before in England been such an eruption of the lowest and most deprived classes of society. It threatened everything that the medieval world held as God-ordained, a structure descending in pyramid form with the king at the top to lord, knight, squire, burgess and freeman. All of these, however, were represented in Parliament and their voices could be heard in the government of the realm. Below them was the vast mass of the population, the poor villeins and wage-earners, who had no such voice. For a few months, during the summer of 1381, the governing classes were stunned into shock and inaction when this underclass all but succeeded in toppling them from power.

The revolt occurred four years into the reign of the new king, Richard II, son of the Black Prince and grandson of Edward III. He was only ten when he came to the throne in 1377 so that many quoted the biblical verse: 'Woe be to thee, O land, when thy king is a child.' Richard was tall and delicately featured, with wavy fair hair and blue eyes. His every gesture was regal and his coronation was staged as a great spectacle designed to impress on everyone the sanctity of an anointed king. But in fact for many years real power lay in the hands of the great lords and magnates and in those of his mother, Princess Joan, known when young as 'the Fair Maid of Kent'. The policy they pursued was the ruinous one of war with France.

The Great Revolt was triggered off by the need for money to continue that struggle. In 1380 Parliament imposed what was called a poll-tax on the whole adult popu-

lation of the kingdom. The amount was one shilling. Men like carters, ploughmen and shepherds only earned about thirteen shillings and four pence a year. The average monthly wage for a man and his family was just about a shilling. The poll-tax was a monument to the greed and selfishness of those in Parliament, for they deliberately pushed the burden of taxation onto those who were unrepresented. When it came to collection, there was widespread evasion. So large was the shortfall that in the spring of 1381 government officials were sent out into the shires to force its collection. The result was open revolt, for the tax was the final straw in a list of grievances which had lain smouldering over several decades.

There is no chronicle which tells us the story of this revolt from the viewpoint of the revolutionaries. They were illiterate and often inarticulate men whose lot in life cannot be described as anything other than wretched. The villeins led an existence just short of animal. They were tied to their lord's manor, receiving in return for service strips of land scattered over what might be several large fields. They lived in huts of wattle and daub, together with their animals and fowls. The floor was mud, and there was no chimney. From dawn till dusk they laboured in the fields, three of those days working on the lord's land, tending and shearing his sheep, feeding his swine, and sowing and reaping his crops. There was no escaping the lord of the manor for they were bound to take their grain to his mill for grinding and their flour to his bakehouse for bread. Sometimes the miller and baker were dishonest. A villein could not even marry without his lord's permission and when he died the lord took his best beast.

The second best beast was taken by the church. The priest in fact took a tenth of everything a villein produced, which was called the tithe. This included all his crops whether in the fields or the kitchen garden, honey, milk, and firewood too. The villeins of England were slaves in all but name.

But in the late fourteenth century things were changing due to the effects of the Black Death. As the population fell dramatically, labour became expensive and villeins, growing prosperous, could sometimes buy their freedom. Most, however, were refused it and the result was bitter frustration. This frustration was made even worse by the Statute of Labourers in 1351 which laid down that wages had to remain the same as they were before the plague. Any villein caught being paid more or, worse, leaving his lord's manor to be better treated elsewhere, was punished either by fine, imprisonment, the stocks or pillory. They had no rights. The attempt to freeze wages not only aroused bitterness in the country; in the towns, too, it affected craftsmen who were wage-earners, people like weavers, tilers and tailors. There it was a case of employers versus employed.

The most conservative and unbending of all the landlords was the church. No wonder then that the ordinary people listened intently to what was said by some priests in their pulpits when they denounced the sinfulness of the clergy. In particular they would have heard such things from the followers of John Wycliffe, known as the Lollards, who believed that the role of the church was a spiritual and not a temporal one, criticising its great riches and power, and believing that these should be taken away.

What was so remarkable about the Great Revolt was its speed and suddenness, evidence of a widespread network working in unison. On the very last day of May there were simultaneous risings in Kent and Essex. In Kent the peasants stormed and took Rochester Castle and later Canterbury. In Essex they took Colchester, Brentwood and Chelmsford. The discontented massed in thousands and soon their leaders emerged, Jack Straw in Essex and Wat Tyler in Kent. Everywhere they went they released prisoners but above all they burnt documents: court rolls and tax lists, anything which recorded serfdom. Landlords were seized and forced to give their villeins charters of freedom. Everyone was asked to swear loyalty to 'King Richard and the true Commons', for they did not blame the king but his wicked advisers.

By 12 June both groups had converged on London, the Essex men at Mile End and the Kentish men on Blackheath. They then sacked Southwark and the Archbishop of Canterbury's palace of Lambeth. The government was panic-stricken and powerless. The army was at Plymouth, about to embark for France. So the king and his mother took refuge in the Tower. Richard was only fourteen but he agreed to meet Wat Tyler on the banks of the Thames. On 13 June he and members of his council took barge for Greenwich. The king called to the rebels: 'Sirs, what have you to say to me? Tell me, I came here to talk to you.' The rebels shouted back, bidding them land, but those attending the king were so paralysed with fear that they ordered the barge to row back to the Tower.

Through treachery, the rebels gained admittance to the city, inside which they had many supporters. There were terrible scenes. They hated the king's uncle, John of Gaunt, so his splendid palace of the Savoy was sacked and burnt to the ground. Next they turned to the Temple in the Inns of Court, seat of the equally hated lawyers. That was plundered and then the mob advanced on the Tower, threatening to kill everyone in it unless the king met them. The Council was divided, but many urged what was in fact to happen, to grant the rebels everything and then later rescind it on the grounds that it had been exacted by force. It called for exceptional bravery by the young king who agreed to the meeting which was to take place at Mile End outside the city.

On 14 June it was recorded that Richard rode forth 'like a lamb among wolves' to

face sixty thousand peasants attended by only a few nobles. He was fearless, and bravely rode into their midst, proclaiming: 'Good people, I am your lord and king. What do you have to say to me?' They petitioned for the abolition of villeinage, 'so that we shall never again be called serfs and bondmen.' The king agreed that their former service to their lord be replaced by an annual payment of four pence per acre. Thirty clerks were also ordered to draw up pardons for the rebels. They then started to disperse homewards, and the king and his attendants began to return to the Tower.

There, in his absence, scenes of untold horror had taken place for someone had stupidly left the drawbridge down. The mob invaded the palace, seizing the archbishop and others and executing them all. Princess Joan was carried by the mob to the Queen's Wardrobe, a repository near St. Paul's, where the king joined her. Anarchy then reigned in London.



The rebels gained access to the Tower of London where they murdered several of the king's ministers, including the Archbishop of Canterbury. An illumination from Froissart's *Chronicles*.

A second conference was arranged, this time in the square at Smithfield, but on this occasion the king and his entourage, fearing violence, wore steel beneath their clothes. The king began by asking William Walworth, Lord Mayor of London, to summon Wat Tyler. Tyler came forward but showed no deference to the king who

asked, 'Why do you not go home?' Another set of conditions followed which included the total abolition of serfdom and the confiscation of all church property to which the king agreed. Then, suddenly, a member of the king's train denounced Tyler as the most notorious thief in Kent. Tyler attempted to stab the man. Richard then ordered Walworth to arrest Tyler. A scuffle ensued in which Walworth was saved by his chain mail from being wounded by Tyler and a squire ran the rebel through with his sword, killing him.

A terrible moment then followed. The rebels drew their bows on the royal party but the king advanced towards them saying, 'Sirs, will you shoot your king? I will be your chief and captain, you shall have from me that which you seek. Only follow me to the fields without.' He then led them in the direction of Clerkenwell. Walworth meanwhile returned to the city, swiftly mustered seven thousand men and advanced to where the king and the rebels had gone, bearing Tyler's head on a lance. Richard, however, would not permit a massacre, and dismissed the rebels who thanked him for his clemency. They then swarmed off towards the country. The king returned to the Wardrobe where he was met by his mother in tears: 'Ah, fair son, what pain and anguish have I had for you this day!' Froissart relates she said. 'Certes, Madam,' he replied, 'I know it well. But now rejoice and praise God, for today I have recovered my heritage which was lost, and the realm of England also.' Such was the bravery of Richard of Bordeaux.

But that was not quite the end. The rebellion had to be crushed wherever it had taken place all through the country. In London the rebels, including their leader Jack Straw, were rounded up and executed by Walworth. In the country they were hunted down, hanged, drawn and quartered. The king's new Chief Justice browbeat juries to condemn rebels to death or imprisonment. But in terms of the age the treatment was not over-cruel. The Great Revolt was a failure, for villeinage went on and only died a slow death through the following century. What the governing classes learnt once and for all was never again unfairly to transfer the burden of taxation from the rich onto the poor.



The encounter of Richard II and Wat Tyler at Smithfield, the occasion when Tyler was killed, as depicted in Froissart's *Chronicles*.