Chapter Eighteen

THE FATE OF RICHARD II

RICHARD II has been called the last medieval king. He was certainly the most complicated. His court set new standards of taste and magnificence. It was the royal cook who wrote the first English cookery book, *The Forme of Cury*, from the Latin *curare*, meaning to dress food. The king's palaces at Kennington, Sheen and Eltham were the wonders of the age. They had every luxury; at Sheen there were even baths with huge bronze taps giving hot and cold water. Richard was a connoisseur of architecture, sculpture, books, music and painting. He loved splendid clothes, embroidery and jewels. He even invented the handkerchief. Special pieces of material were provided for him on which he blew his nose. Up until then no one had bothered with such a thing. All of this did not mean that he would make a successful king.

In order to rule Richard needed the support of some of the most powerful lords. His grandfather, Edward III, had permitted the lords to raise private armies for the French war. These they retained, even in time of peace. England was dominated by a few great families such as the FitzAlans, Mowbrays, Beauchamps, Staffords, Percys and Nevilles, who had vast lands, castles and manors, making a series of states within a state. Even more powerful were the king's uncles, sons of Edward III, above all John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. He was arrogant and boastful but he had huge energy and ambition. Through his second wife he claimed the throne of Castile. Richard always remained suspicious of his uncle but as king he had no choice other than to work with one group or other of the nobles. At the same time he sought to create men who depended wholly on the crown; this was resented both by the lords and by Parliament which they largely controlled. Parliament only met when the king summoned it, and that he did only when he needed money. Taxation was never popular and the Commons, abetted by some of the lords, used Parliament in order to criticise the king and his court. Every time the lords saw the king becoming more independent of them they set out to destroy his followers, sending them to exile or death. The tragedy of Richard II was that he was alone.

Richard II at about the age of thirty. The earliest portrait from life of a king of England, it has always hung in Westminster Abbey. It is likely that Richard commissioned this portrait to represent his perpetual presence in the choir of the Abbey, where he and his queen had worshipped. It would originally have been placed at the back of the king's pew.

The king also parted company with the great magnates in being a peacemaker. He realised that the long war with France which he inherited was ruining the country. The great lords always pressed for the war to be renewed, for through it they profited by plunder and ransoms. By wanting peace, Richard was also seen to be at odds with what the people believed a king should be, a brave knight and leader of the nation on the field of battle. In this he fell short of his hero father, the Black Prince, cherished as the ideal for him to follow. Instead the king, although fearless, was not physically strong and only took part once in the tournaments which were at the heart of court life. His view of what made a king depended not on battle but on the fact that he had been set apart from ordinary men at his coronation when he had been anointed as the chosen of God. The ceremony and etiquette of his court emphasised this, so that by the end of his reign it is recorded that:

> '. . . in solemn days and great feasts, in the which he weared his crown, and went in his royal array . . . and made in his chamber, a throne whereon he was wont to sit from after meat unto evensong speaking to no man, but overlooking all men, and if he looked on any man, what estate or degree that ever he were of, he must kneel.'

And kneel not once but three times. All through his life Richard clung to what was known as the royal prerogative, those rights which set him above everyone.

As a man Richard was intelligent, cultured, and passionately loyal to his friends. Like all the Plantagenets he was subject to sudden rages, and he became more neurotic as he grew older. He never forgot or forgave, nursing grudges until the opportunity arose to take vengeance. He was devoted to his queen, Anne of Bohemia, whom he married in 1382. She was sweet-natured and shared his interest in the elegancies of life. The fact that there were no children did not make for stability, for the succes-

The Wilton Diptych. This was a portable altarpiece almost certainly commissioned by the king himself for his own use. Its outside is decorated with emblems personal to Richard II but it opens to show the king being presented by three saints to the Virgin and Child attended by angels. Richard is said to have dedicated himself to the Virgin before riding out to face the Peasants' Revolt. Although painted about 1396-97 it shows the king as he was at his accession. At his breast he wears a jewel of a white hart, a favourite badge of his, which is also worn by the angels. From left to right behind him stand three saints whom he venerated: St. Edmund, the young Anglo-Saxon king of East Anglia, St. Edward the Confessor and St. John the Baptist. The king has just presented the Virgin with the island of Britain as her dowry. The island is painted on the globe atop the banner of St. George, held by one of the angels.

sion was always in doubt. When she died in 1394 his second wife, Isabella of France, was only eight. He was devoted to her too.

From his earliest years, following the defeat of the Great Revolt, the king tried to form his own circle of trusted advisers, men like his tutor, Sir Simon Burley, and Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, both of whom shared his love of the arts. Burley was always held to be one of those most responsible for Richard's exalted idea of kingship. Richard was able to pursue his policy of peace and truces were made with both France and Scotland. Inevitably those who were excluded from the king's inner circle gradually came to form an opposition. In 1385 one of the king's uncles, the malicious and vengeful Duke of Gloucester, together with the Earls of Warwick and Arundel, used Parliament to attack the king, demanding the removal of his ministers. 'I will not dismiss the meanest of my scullions at Parliament's command,' was his reply. Gloucester reminded his nephew of the terrible fate of Edward II and the young king was forced to give in. His friends and advisers were either dismissed or imprisoned. Parliament then appointed others in their place.

But the king knew that in capitulating, his royal prerogative had been infringed; he turned to the judges for their opinion and they agreed. As a result, by the end of the year both sides took to arms. The royal forces were defeated and their leader, Richard's friend, Robert de Vere, was forced to escape to France. The victors, now styled the Lords Appellant, took their revenge by means of what was called the Merciless Parliament. One by one the king's advisers were condemned without a trial. They were brutally executed or sent into exile. The queen even went on her knees to Arundel begging for the life of her husband's old tutor, Simon Burley, but he was callously executed. In one huge bloodbath the king lost almost everyone he most loved and trusted.

Richard never forgot this and he in his turn plotted revenge. It was to take him over a decade to achieve it. A year later he began to turn the tables on the Lords Appellant by the simple means of asking them how old he was. Gloucester answered that he was past twenty. Then the king said, 'Therefore I am of full age to govern myself, my household and my realm . . .' And so he dismissed Gloucester and appointed his own officers and advisers assuming himself the reins of government. Peace was once more made with France and then he turned his attention to Ireland, spending eight months there meeting the Irish chiefs and ordering those in England who had Irish estates to return to them. Few English kings have had such an enlightened interest in Ireland.

Meanwhile Gloucester and his allies plotted against Richard but they were foiled and arrested. In December 1397 Parliament was summoned but this time it was one

in fear of the king, who surrounded it with his own army of loyal archers wearing his badge of the white hind. Gloucester had already been taken to Calais Castle where he was murdered. He was posthumously condemned for treason. Then came Arundel and Warwick. Arundel was sentenced to death and executed on the same spot on Tower Hill where Richard's beloved tutor had met his end. A death had been paid for by a death. Warwick, now old, was banished for life to the Isle of Man. Richard seemed triumphant. He celebrated by using his father's badge of the rising sun. At last at the age of thirty it seemed that he was truly king. But that was to prove a mirage.

The trouble with such actions was that it made the nobility feel unsafe. If Gloucester and his cronies could be treated in this way so could all of them. And the treatment of two more confirmed their suspicions. The dukes of Norfolk and Hereford fell out and it was agreed that their differences should be settled by trial by battle. This was a fight to the death, for whoever lost the fight was led away to be executed. Both men were famous for their prowess. Hereford, better known as Bolingbroke, was the king's cousin and heir to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. He was not only cultured and politically astute but a superb man-at-arms, athletic and strong, possessing the qualities people looked for in a medieval king. The cousins did not like each other.

On 16 September 1398 the whole court gathered at Gosforth just outside Coventry to watch the encounter. There were thousands of onlookers from all over Europe. The trumpets sounded for the combat to begin. The tents of the contestants were taken away and Bolingbroke placed his lance on his thigh, made the sign of the cross and began to advance. Suddenly the king, splendidly enthroned on high, stood up and cried, 'Ho! Ho!' throwing his staff down and stopping the fight to the consternation of the onlookers. He then banished Norfolk for life and Bolingbroke for ten years. Norfolk was to die in Venice but Bolingbroke's sentence was reduced to six years with the guarantee that he would inherit his father's huge estates.

On 2 February 1399 John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, died. Richard broke his word and seized the estates. No one now felt safe. The great lords of the north, the Percys, protested and Richard ordered their arrest, but they fled. For Bolingbroke it was the final straw. He was persuaded to invade England but not at first with the idea of seizing the crown. Landing on 4 July in Hull, close to his Lancastrian castles, he soon found all the great magnates were flocking to his standard.

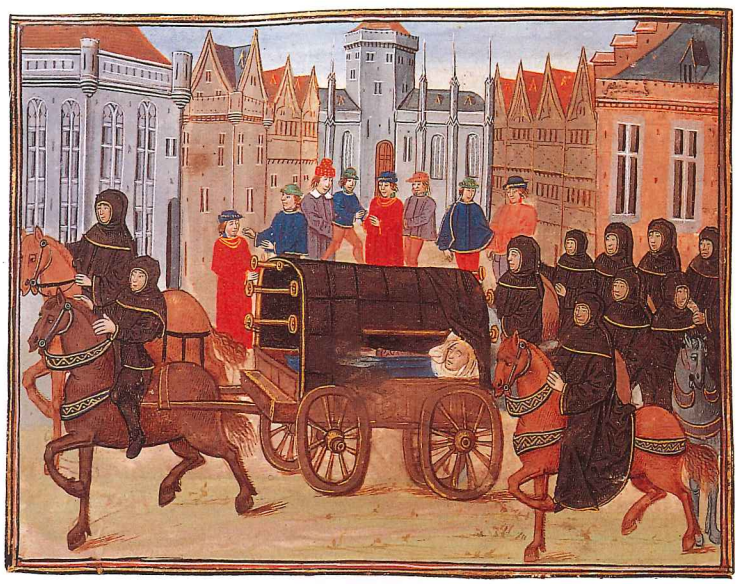
In the meantime the king had made a fatal mistake. He went again to Ireland. When he returned at the close of July it was already too late. There had been mass desertion to the enemy. By the time he reached Conway Castle even his own army had deserted him. When he sent emissaries to Bolingbroke they were taken hostage. Bolingbroke then sent his own to Richard. The king was to be guaranteed the throne but

Bolingbroke was to have the Lancastrian lands and the office of seneschal of the kingdom. The king, trusting in what he had been offered, then rode out of the castle. Six miles from it he was seized. He had been tricked.

From then on, everything was disaster. The king was humiliated and imprisoned. Parliament met and Bolingbroke claimed the throne by conquest and by his royal descent from Henry III. A group of 'sages in law' was set up who said that the king could be deposed on account of his 'perjuries, sacrileges, unnatural armies, exactions from his subjects, reduction of his people to slavery, and weakness of rule'. Richard was allowed no trial. On hearing what had happened he cried: 'My God: a wonderful land is this and a fickle – which hath exiled, slain, destroyed, or ruined so many kings, rulers and great men . . .' On 30 September his forced renunciation of the throne was read out to Parliament and Bolingbroke stepped forward and claimed it. A fortnight later he was crowned as Henry IV.

Richard II was taken northwards to the Lancastrian castle of Pontefract. He was never seen again and was dead by 14 February 1400, it seems deliberately starved to death or murdered. He was given a magnificent funeral by the new king just to ensure that everyone knew that Richard II was no more.

In this manner ended the reign of one of the most brilliant and flawed of all medieval kings. Much of his vision was far-seeing. He knew that peace with France was what was needed but the struggle was to continue for another hundred and fifty years. He realised too that no king could rule while he was at the mercy of the greed of the great magnates with their vast wealth and private armies. As long as the crown was isolated it was always in danger of becoming the victim of the double-dealing, cruelty and treachery of the nobles. Richard's failure to overcome that set the scene for the Wars of the Roses.



The transportation of the body of Richard II to London from Pontefract. Great show was made of the embalmed body, so that people should realise that the king was dead. An illumination from Froissart's *Chronicles*.