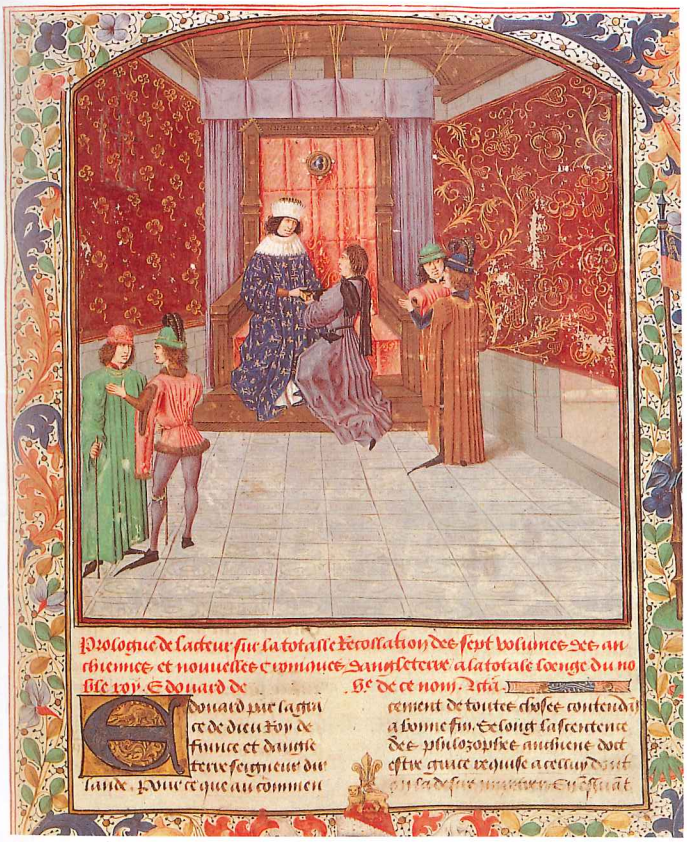
Chapter Twenty-Two

RETURN TO ORDER: EDWARD IV

AFTER his return to power in 1471 Edward IV ruled for twelve years as a tremendously successful and popular king blessed with nearly all the attributes men looked for in a monarch. Well over six feet tall he was renowned for his good looks and exquisite manners but he also possessed that rare gift, the common touch. This is how an Italian, Mancini, described him:



A manuscript being presented to Edward IV, one he commissioned while he was in exile in Flanders in 1470-71. It is likely to depict him actually during his residence in Bruges and the second figure from the left wearing the Order of the Garter may be intended for the future Richard III.

The family of Edward IV as recorded in contemporary stained glass between 1475 and 1483 in Canterbury Cathedral. From left to right the figures are: Richard, Duke of York, Edward, Prince of Wales, Edward IV, Elizabeth Woodville and, in the furthest two panels, five of her seven daughters. The heads of the two princes are modern replacements.

'Edward was of a gentle nature and cheerful aspect . . . He was easy of access to his friends and to others, even the least notable. Frequently he called to his side strangers . . . He was so genial in his greeting that if he saw a newcomer bewildered at his appearance and royal magnificence he would give him courage to speak by laying a kindly hand upon his shoulder.'

Much to the horror of the nobility he would give hunting parties for rich London merchants. If he had any weaknesses they were food (he became fat as he grew older), and women, for his mistresses were many; a particular favourite was Jane Shore, the widow of a London grocer, who was an influence for the good. According to Sir Thomas More:

'Where the king took displeasure she would mitigate and appease his mind; where men were out of favour she would bring them in his grace. For many that had highly offended she obtained pardon . . .'

She was clearly hugely intelligent and attractive and More goes on to say about her: 'For a proper wit had she and could read well and write, merry in company, ready and quick in answer . . .'

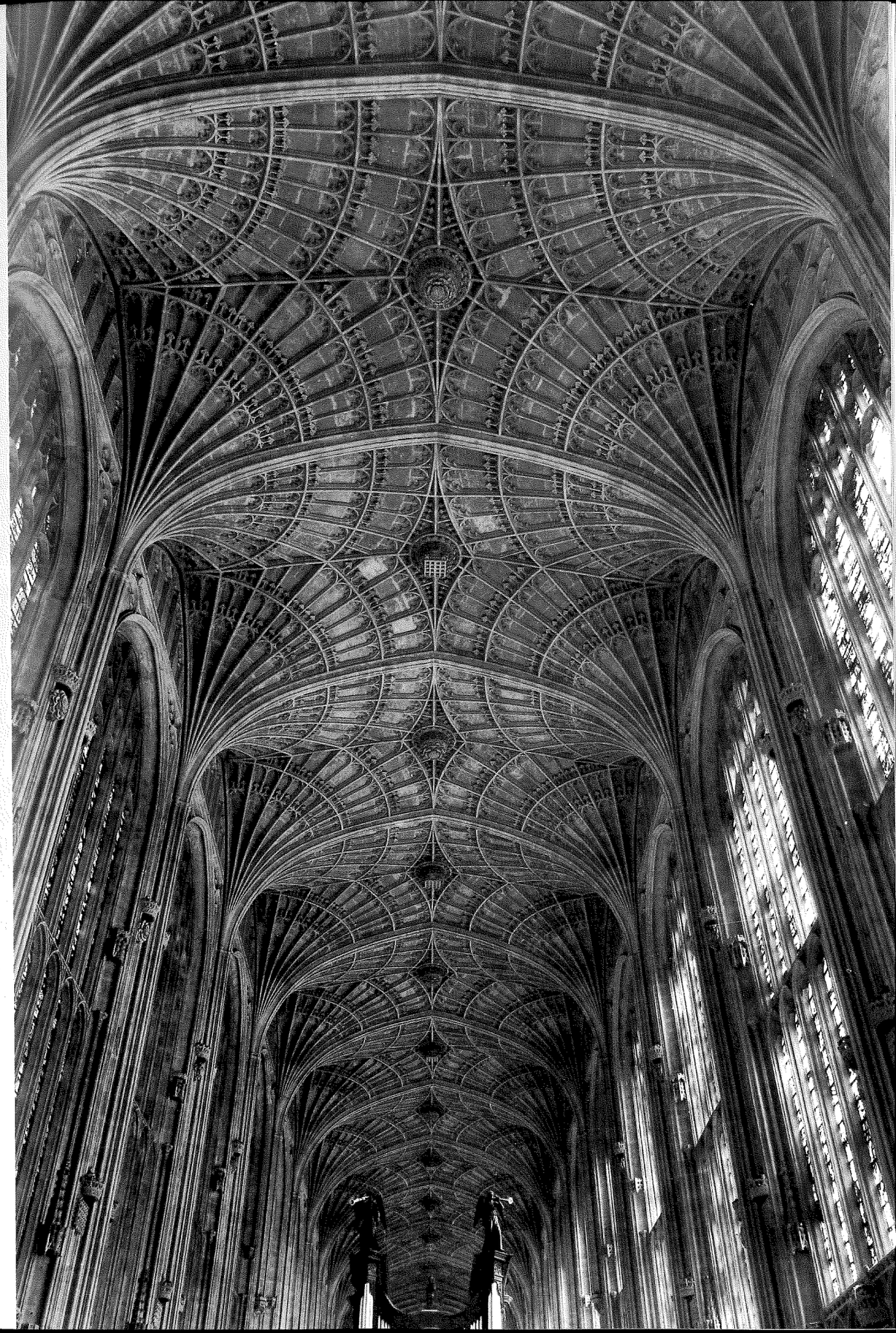
All over Europe, as the fifteenth century drew to its close, men looked more and more to rulers as the focus for holding a state together. During the last twelve years of his life Edward was able to put the monarchy back once again at the centre of the country's life. This called for acting the part to the full which he did, always dressing magnificently in the height of fashion unlike Henry VI who wore an old blue gown. Edward also ceremonially wore his crown on great festivals before the assembled court. The royal household was put into good order, not only in the interests of efficiency and value for money but to provide regal splendour aimed at impressing both his subjects and visitors from abroad. When, for example, a great Flemish nobleman visited Windsor

he was led to three 'rooms of pleasance'. In the first there was a bed with a counterpane of cloth of gold furred with ermine, in the second a bed hung in white and in the third two baths within tents. There were elaborate processions, banquets and dancing as well as rich gifts. The nobleman would have returned to his master, the Duke of Burgundy, whose court set style for every other, and told him of the splendour of that of England.

Edward realised even more the importance of money and knew that the shortest route to unpopularity was to ask Parliament to grant taxes. There was then no distinction between the public and private revenue of the crown and when Edward announced his intention to 'live of his own' he meant he would attempt to pay the costs of running the country from his own wealth. That involved making the king the richest person in the country. He began by creating a new financial department called the King's Chamber so that he could keep an eye on expenditure, so much so that later in the reign he was accused of being a miser. The royal estates were put in order to produce more income and they also grew in size. When the king's younger brother, the Duke of Clarence, was condemned for treason, his lands passed to the crown. Edward's second son married the heiress to the Duke of Norfolk and when she died most of her lands came too. As Edward's rule brought peace, trade prospered, and he made certain that the large customs dues were collected by 'men of shrewdness'. And he did not stop at entertaining merchants, he was one himself, investing in both the import and export trade and making handsome profits. On the only occasion he set out to invade France and renew the war he allowed himself to be bought off by the French king for a pension of fifty thousand crowns a year. As a result Edward IV was the first king not to die in debt for nearly three hundred years.

A king had to have money in his coffers but he also needed to establish his authority over remote parts of the country, which he would rarely if ever visit. Firstly Edward sent his infant son, Edward, Prince of Wales, to Ludlow and set up a council there to govern the Welsh Marches in his name. His brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, went to his castle forty miles from York to represent the king in the north. Other members of the king's family were despatched elsewhere. Through this not only was order restored, but justice too. Indeed Edward himself sat from time to time as a judge.

His queen, Elizabeth Woodville, produced no less than ten children. These were valuable assets, for through marriages the king could enhance the position of the



King's College Chapel, Cambridge, one of the supreme achievements of the Perpendicular style. The College was founded by Henry VI in 1441, building works being interrupted first by the poverty of the crown and later by the hostility which Edward IV showed to what was a Lancastrian foundation. Building was resumed at the close of his reign and it was completed by Henry VII.

house of York through Europe. As a result one princess was to become queen of France, a second queen of Scotland, while others were destined to marry into the royal and princely houses of Spain and the Low Countries. Indeed it was during this period that England's relationship with the latter was at its closest, for the king's sister was Duchess of Burgundy.

Both the king and the queen patronised the arts and learning, regarded as important for adding lustre to the crown. St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, is Edward's most famous surviving monument. It was built to add greater splendour to the annual ceremonies of the Order of the Garter and also to act as a mausoleum for the dynasty. He was a lavish benefactor of Henry VI's foundations, King's College, Cambridge and Eton, while his queen, in her turn, gave to Queen's College, Cambridge. Edward delighted in books, especially histories and romances, creating a royal library filled with gorgeously illuminated manuscripts executed for him in Bruges, many of which can be seen today in the British Library.

There were, however, to be two fatal flaws to the brilliant success of Edward's rule, one which he could, and the other which he could not, have foreseen. No one could have predicted that he would have died in his fortieth year leaving a child of twelve to succeed, with all the problems that would entail. What he should have made provision for was the consequences of his marriage. This was an affair of the heart.

Elizabeth Woodville was the widow of a knight, Sir John Grey, and already had two sons. The match with the king was made in secret and only became public when there was pressure for the king to make a suitable dynastic marriage with a foreign royal princess. It was then that he was forced to admit that he was already married. The Woodvilles were not liked. They were regarded as 'low' and Edward was faced with providing for his queen's large and greedy family. This involved titles, estates and marriages to rich heiresses. The Woodvilles quickly came to be bitterly resented but, worse than that, they were actually hated by Edward's brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester. Edward must have known that and yet he made little effort to provide for the problems which could arise if he died early. When the king did so, on 9 April 1483, he therefore left the Yorkists divided amongst themselves with terrible consequences.

In spite of that, Edward IV saved the country, bringing it from dereliction and disaster to great prosperity. Although he led one campaign into France and was forced into a war with Scotland, all his instincts were for peace. As a result, for the first time in decades, the monarchy had become again the guarantee of order and justice in the land and the fount of political power. The tragedy that followed this triumph was to turn Edward into one of England's great forgotten kings.