

Chapter Twenty-Three

VIOLENT INTERLUDE: RICHARD III

WHEN Edward IV died he left a son aged twelve. The usual arrangements were set in motion by the Council to govern the kingdom during the king's minority. Conflict amongst members of the Council there certainly was but no one anticipated that the late king's brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, would stop at nothing to seize the crown. No one guessed this at first, and only gradually did it dawn on people what Gloucester had in mind. At what exact moment the duke took his final decision is not known, but by the time he did, it was already too late to stop him, for he had arranged the deaths of anyone who stood in his path.

Richard was a man of delicate build and athletic, despite having shoulders which were slightly uneven. He had his brother's charm but much more energy. He was hugely able, generous to his friends, pious indeed, but none of those characteristics could quite conceal a man who was also ruthless, ambitious, and wholly treacherous. He had been loyal to his brother while he was king, holding the north for him. At the same time he had built up huge estates by exerting pressure on heiresses and persuading frightened old ladies to part with their inheritances. But none of this would have made anyone suspect quite what was to happen after his brother died.

To achieve the crown Gloucester needed to eliminate his enemies and secure allies. He had support especially in the north and could equally rely on all those who had been out of favour in the previous reign, particularly those who resented the queen's family, the Woodvilles. Gloucester's allies were headed by the Duke of Buckingham, by John Howard soon to be Duke of Norfolk, and the Duke of Suffolk who was married to Gloucester's sister. Their first objective was to gain control of the king.

As Gloucester rode south, the king left Ludlow with his uncle and guardian, the queen's brother, Lord Rivers. On his journey Gloucester joined the Duke of Buckingham, and together they met Lord Rivers and the king. That was on 30 April 1483, when the three noblemen passed the evening in revelry. What happened the next morning was something very different. Richard took control of Edward V, and

arrested Lord Rivers and others sending them to be imprisoned in the north. This was his first great strike. When news of it reached the queen she and her daughters and youngest son, the Duke of York, sought sanctuary in the Abbey of Westminster.

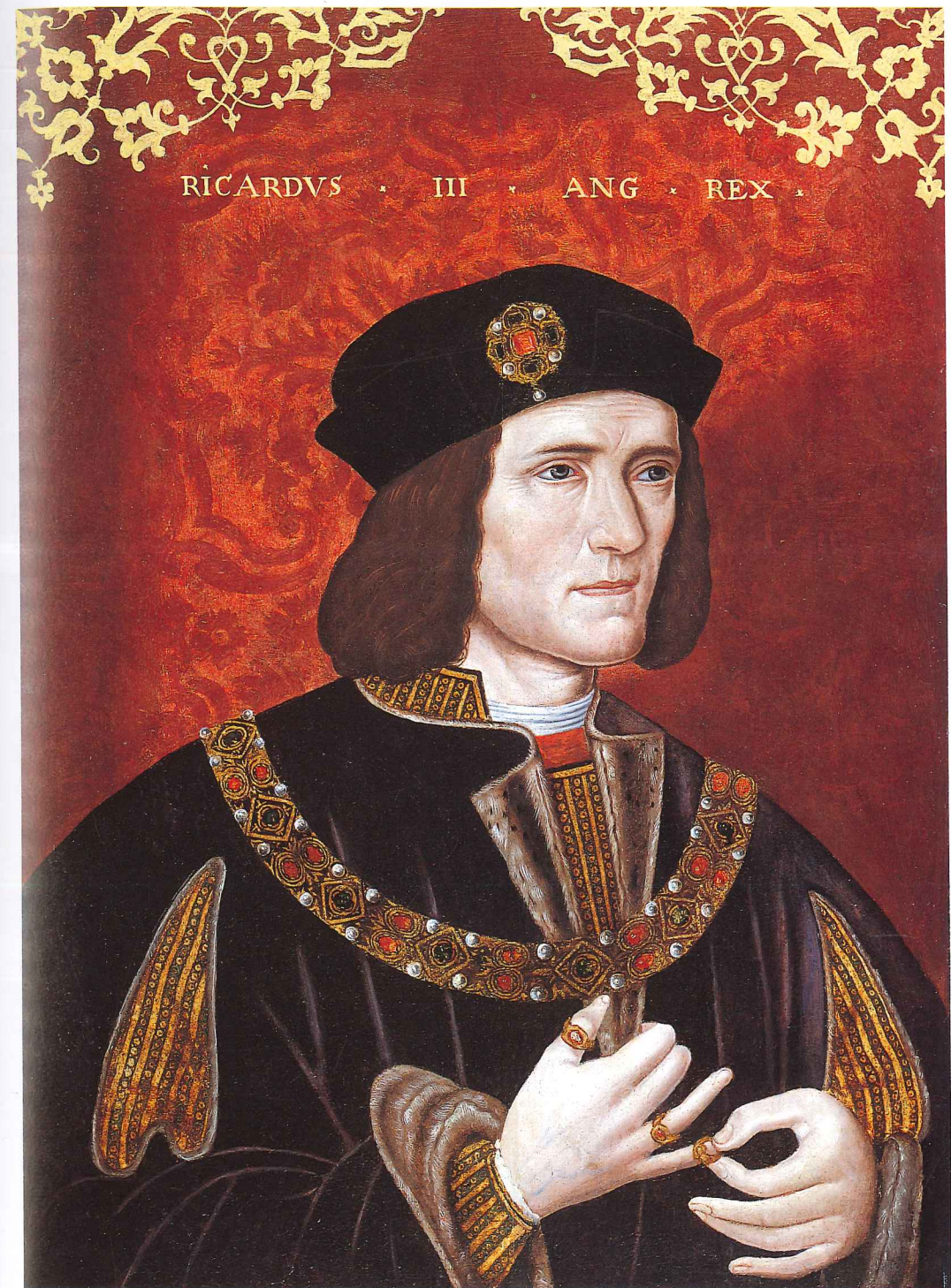
Gloucester had got rid of the Woodvilles. Outwardly there was no sign yet that the young king was to enjoy the same fate. On 4 May the two dukes escorted him into London, and between a week and a fortnight later he was taken to the Tower, the normal place of residence for a monarch prior to his coronation. Pending that event the Council made Gloucester Lord Protector of England.

Then came the second strike. The queen wisely refused to leave sanctuary, but she was then accused of plotting against Gloucester. This was used as an excuse to arrest three of the late king's most important ministers, executing without trial Lord Hastings, whom Gloucester up until that moment had cultivated as a friend. Some have argued that this was the moment when the duke had definitely made up his mind to usurp the crown. What happened next confirms this view. Three days later the infant Duke of York was taken from Westminster to join his brother in the Tower. They were never to be seen alive again, murdered at some unknown date it seems on the instructions of Gloucester after he became king. It is believed that they were suffocated to death in their beds.

In order for Gloucester to become king, however, he still had to prove that he had a better claim to the throne than the princes in the Tower. On 22 June a sermon was preached at St. Paul's telling the Londoners that the princes were not legitimate because, it was falsely claimed, Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville was not valid. Two days later Gloucester struck again, ordering the execution of those whom he had imprisoned in the north. It would appear the opposition had been wiped out, and Buckingham publicly urged Gloucester to take the throne. On 26 June those who had assembled for Parliament duly elected Gloucester as Richard III. A few days later he was crowned.

Richard III came to the English throne by way of a pathway soaked with the blood of his victims. He succeeded because no one suspected his real motive until it was too late, and each and every one of his victims had walked like lambs to the slaughter. He was a master of cunning and deceit. But he made one fatal mistake. What he had not reckoned with was that as people recovered from the appalling shock of these events they would begin to draw together to form a united opposition. The revulsion against the new king was widespread in the south leading to rebellions in the autumn. By then Richard had fallen out with the man who had

Richard III. A late sixteenth century portrait which is based on one painted during the king's lifetime. Even at a later remove the intelligence of the man is captured.





helped him to the throne. Buckingham rebelled and he too was executed.

Richard III had done two things which everyone then regarded with deep abhorrence as utter wickedness; the first was to violate inheritance and the second to commit child murder, infanticide. He was seen as Herod who had ordered the Massacre of the Innocents. Richard had been the princes' protector and yet he had had them killed. Everyone was outraged.

From then on nothing went right. Richard toured areas of England hoping to win popular support but failed. Northerners were brought south and given positions which caused widespread resentment. He lost the support of the Yorkists in the south of England with results which were fatal. His queen died and so did his heir. It was even believed that he had murdered his wife so as to be able to marry his niece, Elizabeth of York. As a result all through 1484 a new alliance was formed, one which saw the way forward as a marriage between Elizabeth and the minor claimant of Lancastrian descent, Henry Tudor.

Henry was in exile in Brittany, where everyone had flocked who wished to see the overthrow of Richard III. In August 1485 Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, landed at Milford Haven in Wales and marched via Shrewsbury to meet the royal army near Leicester at Bosworth. The Battle of Bosworth on 22 August was to be one of the decisive battles in the history of England. Richard III's army was much larger, but

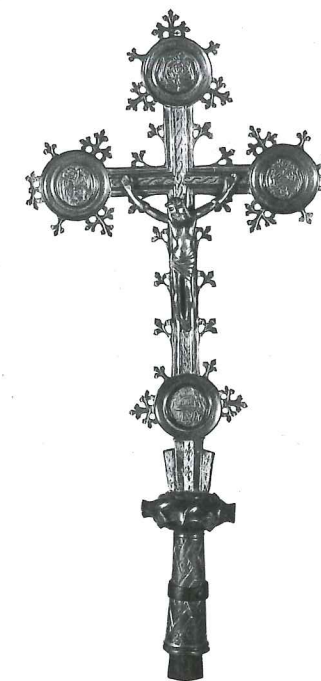
The royal arms of England supported by Richard III's badge of a boar from a charter of 1484.

many who fought were reluctant and some even went over to the other side. The king fell on the field of battle and the victor was proclaimed Henry VII.

Richard III remains a unique figure whose crimes at the time were considered so repugnant that even the customary respect for his dead body was absent. This is how he ended:

'In the mean time the body of king Richard naked of all clothing, and laid upon an horse back with the arms and the legs hanging down on both sides, was brought to th'abbey of monks Franciscan at Leicester, a miserable spectacle in good sooth, but not unworthy for the man's life, and there was buried two days after without any pomp or solemn funeral.'

His death was to usher in the Tudor age. Over a century later, in the reign of the last Tudor, Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare was to write his play *Richard III*. By then the king had been transformed from the heartless criminal of his own time into the evil hunchback we recognise on stage today. Richard III, however, is one of the rare characters in British history who still arouses strong passions both in his condemnation and defence. Like the fates of Edward II and Richard II no one knows precisely what happened to the two princes while they were in the Tower. How long they actually remained alive and how they were done away with continues to attract lively debate which for many leaves open the option that Richard was in fact not responsible. The finger has even been pointed at his successor, Henry VII. What remains unchallenged is the fact that Richard failed to build up enough support to maintain himself in power. Even if one day he were proved to be innocent of infanticide he would remain a failed monarch.



A bronze processional cross, which had been in the possession of the Comerford family for about 70 years, and is reputed to have been dug up on the field of Bosworth in 1778.