Chapter Twenty-Five

RETURN TO ORDER: THE TUDORS

WHEN, in August 1485, the twenty-eight year old Henry Tudor stood as victor on the field of Bosworth it was by no means the dawn of a new age. For men at the time it merely marked yet another twist of fate in the long struggle of two rival dynasties to gain the throne. Half-a-century later, in the reign of his son, Henry VIII, the perception of that event had radically changed. By then the accession of the Tudors was accepted as the beginning of a new era. That transformation had been brought about by two things. The first was the success of Tudor rule, son had succeeded father without bloodletting, and the second was the promotion by the family itself of the idea. Those who wished to flatter them naturally vilified Richard III, glossed over the achievements of Edward IV, and magnified the horrors of the Wars of the Roses. In this way there was created the legend of the Union of the Roses, the red of Lancaster with the white of York, to form the one Tudor Rose.

The truth was very different, for the reign of Henry VII, and the first twenty years of his son's, were in reality a continuation of what had gone before. Henry VII was a reversion to Edward IV, a king who knew how to work and adapt the existing system to his advantage. But, unlike Edward, he was devoid of personal vices rendering him as a consequence a somewhat colourless monarch, one wholly devoid of the sexual bravura which made Edward IV and Henry VIII such compulsive personalities. Henry VII, however, was endowed with qualities which made for successful kingship: industry and application, patience and powers of organisation, and a firm belief in the splendour of the crown. Under him that conviction was to increase as it compensated for what he lacked most, a good claim to the throne. Henry's was extremely remote, dependent on one side on the marriage of his grandfather to the widow of Henry V and, on the other, descent from one of the children of John of Gaunt by his mistress, a line which had specifically been excluded from succession to the crown.

That sense of dynastic weakness was to haunt Henry VII for the greater part of his reign making it essential for him to establish the Tudor family as the rightful rulers of

England, recognised not only at home but also abroad. At the same time he had to ensure ordered government and a revived respect for royal power. On his accession he was all too well aware of this weakness; shrewdly, he never even argued his case for the crown, telling Parliament that it was his by inheritance and by divine judgment in battle. He then began the long task of eliminating rival claimants. These had arisen because of the intermarriage in the previous century of the royal family with members of the aristocracy. A great change takes place therefore, under the Tudors. Gradually, there is a deliberate distancing of the monarchy from the nobility. But it did not happen at once.

Henry began by marrying the Yorkist heiress, Edward's daughter Elizabeth. In September 1486 she gave birth to a son, who was named after the legendary British king, Arthur. From this moment the theme was that of the Union of the Roses of York and Lancaster. The problem was that there were several other white Roses, both genuine and spurious, who, for the next seventeen years, would attempt to gain the throne. One such claimant, Edward, Earl of Warwick, son of Edward IV's brother Clarence, was already held in custody in the Tower. Henry thus had under his control the one eligible male of age, which meant that the Yorkists had to fall back on impostors. The first of these was a harmless youth called Lambert Simnel, passed off by an Oxford priest first as one of the murdered princes and then as Edward, Earl of Warwick. Henry VII paraded the real earl through the streets of London, but to no effect. Simnel was taken to the Netherlands where he was supported by John, Earl of Lincoln, a son of Edward IV's sister, Elizabeth. The pretender sailed to Ireland and was crowned Edward VI in Dublin, after which both he and Lincoln landed in Lancashire. On 16 June 1487 they were defeated at the Battle of Stoke. Lincoln was killed and Simnel, a victim of the king's sardonic humour, was relegated to the royal kitchens as a scullion.

More dangerous was the second pretender, Perkin Warbeck, who for eight years maintained a role as the younger of the two princes in the Tower, Richard, Duke of York. Warbeck, the son of a Tournai boatman, was persuaded to take on the role in the autumn of 1491. He was enormously assisted by the diplomatic situation, for it suited foreign rulers at odds with Henry to entertain and recognise a rival claimant. The first to do so was the king of France but, when France wished for peace with Henry, Warbeck was forced to move on to the Netherlands where he was taken up by the ruler of the Low Countries, the Archduke Maximilian, who paraded him

Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey, built in 1503-1512 to house the tombs of the new Tudor dynasty. It represents the final flowering of the Middle Ages with its magnificently vaulted Perpendicular ceiling. The king's tomb within it, however, was to be the work of an Italian sculptor in the new Renaissance style, the first signal of a massive change of taste.

around Europe and, in 1495, financed a feeble invasion of England. A few hundred followers landed near Deal in Kent and were promptly massacred, Warbeck moving on to Ireland, where he failed to take Waterford, and then to Scotland. James IV received 'Prince Richard of England' and gave him an aristocratic bride. There was another attempted invasion of England from the north which was a disaster and, in 1495, yet another, this time from the south-west. Once more it was a catastrophe. On the advance of the royalist army towards Exeter Warbeck fled and sought sanctuary, later throwing himself on the king's mercy. Warbeck joined Warwick in the Tower. The story did not quite end there. Two years later fear of yet another plot led Henry to execute both of them.

Focus then shifted to the remaining sons of Edward IV's sister Elizabeth, Edmund, Earl of Suffolk and his brother Richard. Suffolk fled the country fearing the worst and was eventually handed back to Henry VII in 1506. Seven years later Henry VIII had him executed. Suffolk's brother Richard was to fall at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. Although this ostensibly wiped out all claimants, the Tudor family remained obsessed by anyone with a claim to the throne, however remote. Henry VII's grandchild Elizabeth was to reign for forty-five years refusing to recognise or even name a successor.

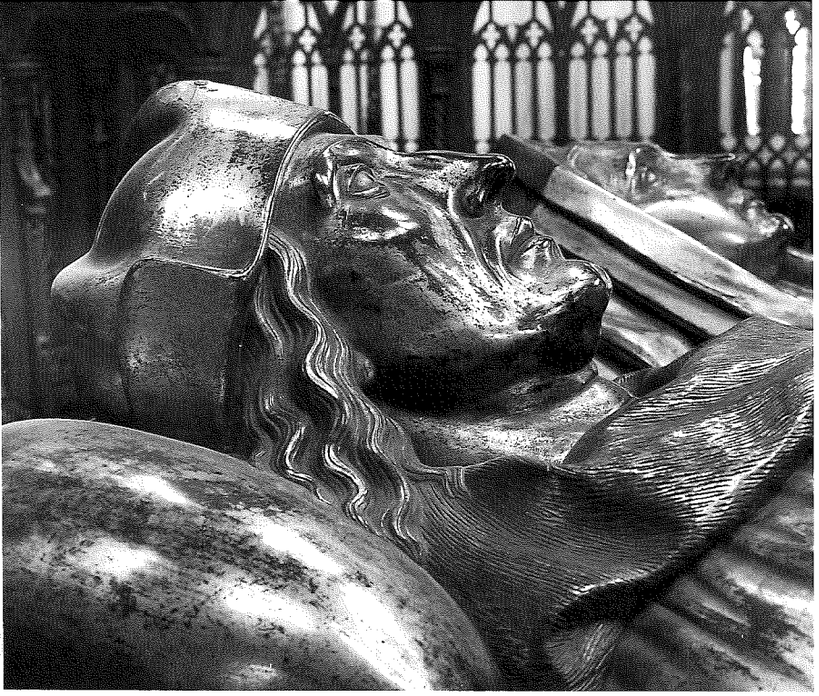
Henry VII followed Edward IV in sharing a firm belief that sound finances were one of the keys to successful rulership. When the king died after a reign of twenty-four years, an Italian wrote that he was 'the richest lord that is now known in the world'. That was an exaggeration for the truth was that he had died only just solvent, but that in itself was a major and rare feat, achieved through capitalising on what was his due as monarch in the way of income from crown lands, customs, and fees paid in connection with feudal rights. As the victor of Bosworth, Henry was able to pass acts of attainder against his enemies and thus take over their estates. What was unusual was that he held on to these estates, so that the income from them more than trebled. His avoidance of expensive foreign wars meant that trade flourished, and the amount which came in through customs went up. He also insisted on all his feudal dues, which made those who rigorously collected them very unpopular. Like Edward IV he saw that these revenues did not go into the cumbrous Exchequer but into his Chamber. There he himself took part in auditing the accounts, carefully putting his initials at the bottom of each page.

The monarchy needed to be rich, very rich, to rule successfully. It also needed good advice drawn from a broad spectrum of people, and it was during Henry's reign that the centre of regal power became based in the Council. This consisted of up to a hundred and fifty councillors in all, peers, lawyers, household officials and ecclesiastics. They rarely met all at once but formed a fluid group of support available to the king, embodying expertise covering every aspect of government. As time passed, some of these groups began to fulfil specific functions, such as the councillors who dealt with poor men's petitions, and gradually became known as the Court of Requests.

The monarchy also needed support throughout the country and many of the councillors occupied key posts outside London, in the north or on the Welsh Borders, for example. But far more important was the enhanced status given to members of the gentry, who were appointed by the crown to fill the role of Justice of the Peace. Through the century of Tudor rule they were fundamental instruments for the execution of royal policy in the countryside. The only weakness in the system was that they were unpaid. But the Tudors were brilliant at sensing the pulse of grass roots opinion, rarely asking officials to carry out a policy to which there was overwhelming opposition.

All of these things signalled what was to be the keynote of Tudor rule, the concentration of power in the hands of the dynasty. This changed the nature of power which became something no longer supported by armed retainers but exercised instead through wealth and political influence at court. Men now attached themselves to a great lord who enjoyed the king's favour, seeing this as the only way to preferment. Attendance at court and an office in the household therefore became the summit of ambition for the aristocracy. The Tudor kings saw this as a means of control and elaborated the role of the king, one already mystical in the Middle Ages, so that by the close of the sixteenth century the ruler enjoyed almost semi-divine status. What was known as the royal prerogative, an indefinite reserve of power vested in the will of the king, was universally accepted as sacrosanct and crucial to the working of the state. All of this was achieved by means of a steady escalation in the ceremonial and spectacle of the monarchy, whose every manifestation gradually took on an outward surface of unmatched magnificence. Under Henry VII the king became 'his Grace' but under his son the king became 'his Majesty'.

Henry VII's later years were overshadowed by the tragic death of his eldest son, Arthur, whose marriage in 1501 to the daughter of a newly-united Spain, Catherine of Aragon, had set the seal of international recognition on the dynasty. When Henry died at the age of fifty-two on 21 April 1509, he was succeeded by his second son, then aged only eighteen, who promptly married his brother's widow. On the surface no change could have seemed more dramatic, for Henry VIII had all the out-going characteristics his father had so singularly lacked. He was a handsome golden-haired youth, educated to be both an academic as well as an athlete. He was a talented musi-



Henry VII's tomb in Westminster Abbey was by a Florentine sculptor, Pietro Torrigiani. His work signalled the tentative arrival in England of the renaissance in Italy.

cian, could hold his own in a theological debate, and loved both the arts and learning. At the same time he was a skilled horseman, imbued with a devotion to chivalry, determined to shine as a man-at-arms not only in the pageantry of the tiltyard but on the field of battle. Henry had one fatal flaw: he disliked the business of government. For most of the first twenty years of his reign he found a solution to his disinterest in a person of exceptional application and brilliance, Thomas Wolsey. Wolsey was to rule England for the king, able to fulfil his every whim, taking from him the unwelcome burden of running the state, so that he could indulge in one long festival.

Behind the scenes, the system remained untouched but instead of being directly controlled by the king it was worked by his great minister. That soon bred resentment, especially among the older noble families. Wolsey was the son of an Ipswich butcher and cattle dealer and had risen rapidly through the church. He entered Henry VII's service in 1507 and in the new reign ascended with the speed of a meteor: Bishop of Lincoln and Archbishop of York in 1514, Lord Chancellor and Cardinal the year after. As the Archbishop of Canterbury refused to die Wolsey got himself appointed by the pope *legatus a latere*, that is, a special residential legate whose powers extended over the whole English church. No previous prelate had ever held such extensive powers or had such a devouring passion for work. But Wolsey was proud, and his splendid style, which included building Hampton Court, aroused envy in those who looked on. His gentleman-usher, Thomas Cavendish, gives a memorable impression:

> 'There was . . . borne before him, first the great seal of England, and then his cardinal's hat, by a nobleman or some worthy gentleman, right solemnly, bareheaded . . . Thus he passed forth with two great crosses of silver borne before him; with also two great pillars of silver, and his sergeant-at-arms with a great mace of silver gilt. Then his gentlemen-ushers cried and said: "Oh, my lords and masters! Make way for my Lord's Grace!"'

Wolsey's prime task was to fulfil the king's wish to make England a major player on the stage of European politics, where the position was very different from that of the preceding century. Everything on the mainland had come to focus on the great struggle between the Valois kings of France and the Habsburg rulers of most of the rest of Western Europe. In this confrontation, Wolsey believed that England could play a crucial role as peacemaker. Alas, that was to prove to be an expensive delusion. It was, however, to provide the *raison d'être* for a succession of spectacular diplomatic meetings. The most famous of these, known as Field of the Cloth of Gold, was held in 1520 between Henry and the French king, Francis I, an event whose extravagance has passed into legend. Over five thousand persons attended Henry and his queen, and over six thousand laboured on constructing a small temporary town of gorgeous tents and pavilions, whose centrepiece was a glittering palace of painted canvas and wood. England was virtually emptied of precious fabrics and jewels to decorate this palace.

As usual, Wolsey took care of every detail, right down to worrying about whether there would be enough beer and wine, green geese, rabbits, storks, quails and cheese to feed everyone. This was typical of the relationship between king and minister which was to remain undisturbed until Henry VIII's whims took a more dangerous direction, one which Wolsey could not follow. In the spring of 1527 Henry decided that his marriage to his brother's widow was sinful and sought for it to be annulled. That single decision was to precipitate the greatest changes England had undergone since 1066. It was also to bring about the fall of Wolsey.

The famous meeting of Henry VIII and Francis I, the Field of Cloth of Gold, in 1520 was one of the most spectacular pageants of the age. Here its splendour is evoked by a painter later in the reign who brings together in one picture several of the events. To the left the king makes his entry into Guisnes with Cardinal Wolsey at his side. To the right is the fantastic temporary palace which was built to accommodate the royal party, its walls of wood and painted canvas. In the centre above, the two kings meet while, to the right, they watch a tournament. One of the spectacles was a firework dragon, seen top left, which flew across the sky during mass on 23 June. To the right a small army of kitchen staff apply their skills to feeding the vast assembly of people.