Chapter Thirty-Three

AN UNTRUSTWORTHY DYNASTY

A BARREN virgin queen gave place to a king with a queen and three children. For the first time in half-a-century the succession was to present no problem. The population received the king with adulation, keenly anticipating changes after years of stagnation. Elizabeth had nominated James VI of Scotland, son of Mary Queen of Scots, as her successor on her deathbed. Her minister Robert Cecil, during the last years of her reign, laid down all the lines of communication necessary to ensure a smooth succession. James I of England, as he became, was thirty-eight in 1603. He had been king of Scotland almost from birth and had learnt his statecraft in the rugged school of Scottish politics during the late sixteenth century. For years his eyes had been cast longingly southwards to the promised land. As he journeyed into England from his backward, poverty-stricken northern kingdom the contrast cannot have been anything other than dramatic, as the aristocracy vied with each other to receive him in houses of a splendour unknown to him. When he came into possession of the late queen's many magnificent palaces James must have pondered on his good fortune. He had inherited all Elizabeth's glories but in reality they were a mirage, screening a flawed legacy. What the country desperately needed was a reforming monarch. What it got was one content to enjoy the many creature comforts which had so fortuitously come his way after years of spartan deprivation.

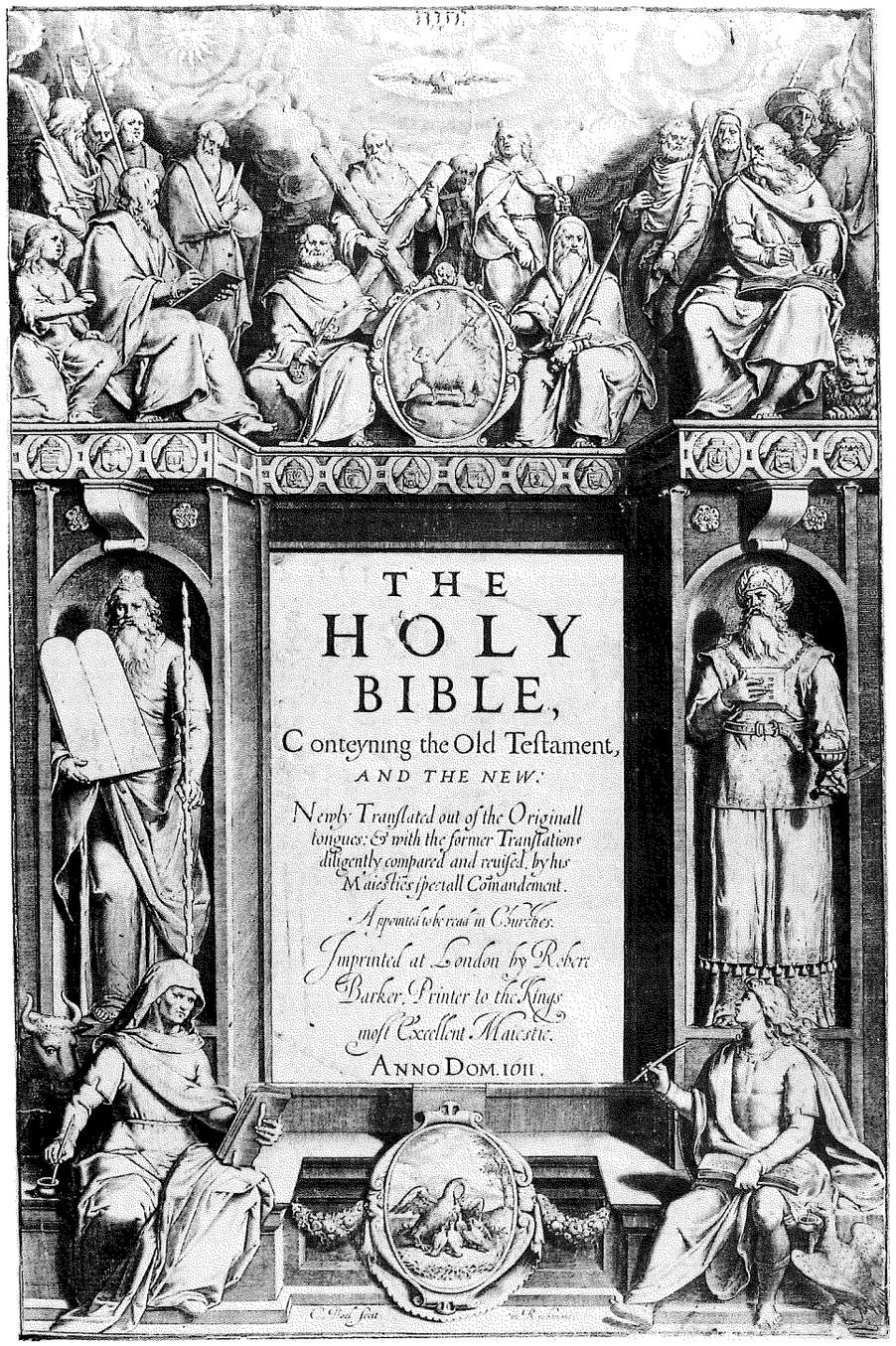
The biggest problem James inherited was how to pay for the government. Running the kingdom was becoming more and more expensive. The king was still expected to live 'of his own', that is, on the revenues from crown lands and other dues settled in the main hundreds of years before during the feudal ages, asking for money from Parliament only to meet the expenses of

James I in robes of state, crowned and bearing the orb and sceptre as monarch by Divine Right. The picture records an architectural revolution for through the mullioned windows there is a view of the new banqueting hall of Whitehall Palace designed by Inigo Jones in the classical style which was still being built when the picture was painted. The king hated sitting for his portrait.

war. This system was already under severe strain by the close of Elizabeth's reign. During that of James and his son, Charles I, the strain was to reach breaking point. Money to run government could come from two sources and both were to be explored during the forty years that preceded the collapse. One way forward was for Parliament to recognise the need for regular taxation in time of peace, in order to pay for the daily running of government, the salaries of officials and the costs of the great organs of state, the law courts, the treasury, the army, the navy, as well as the expenses of the royal court. In return for such recognition the king would cease to raise money by way of the many outmoded and unpopular ways which were hangovers from the Middle Ages, such as fining people of a certain income if they refused to be knighted or if they infringed forest laws made centuries before. The second way forward was to dispense with Parliament, something which would have been in tune with what was happening all over the rest of Europe at the time, and develop to the full the royal Divine Right to impose various taxes and dues. There were precedents for each method in the past, so that king and Parliament could both equally claim that right was on their side.

With goodwill a resolution could perhaps have been reached. The fact that it was not reflects the one big change that did come with the new dynasty, the progressive erosion of trust between the monarchy and the people. All of the Tudors, even Mary at the outset, had enjoyed the deep trust of the majority of the nation. Even during the difficult last decade of Elizabeth's reign, when troubles were gathering thick and fast, that had not faltered. But now that trust gradually began to be eroded. That it was can be attributed to the characters of the first two Stuart kings.

Of the two kings James I was by far the less disastrous, although even under him significant cracks began to appear. He was a shambling, ungainly man, a pedant with a brilliant if sometimes wayward and prickly brain. His passions were theology, the hunt, and handsome young men, for he was basically homosexual. He had a deep dislike of public appearances. The contrast with the Tudors, virtually all of them superb actors on a public stage, could not have been greater. But there was a worse canker. Although by the close of the century the Tudors were accorded virtually semi-divine status, they never claimed it. James I, in sharp contrast, stated both in his writings and public speeches that kings were God's lieutenants on earth, a belief enshrined in what

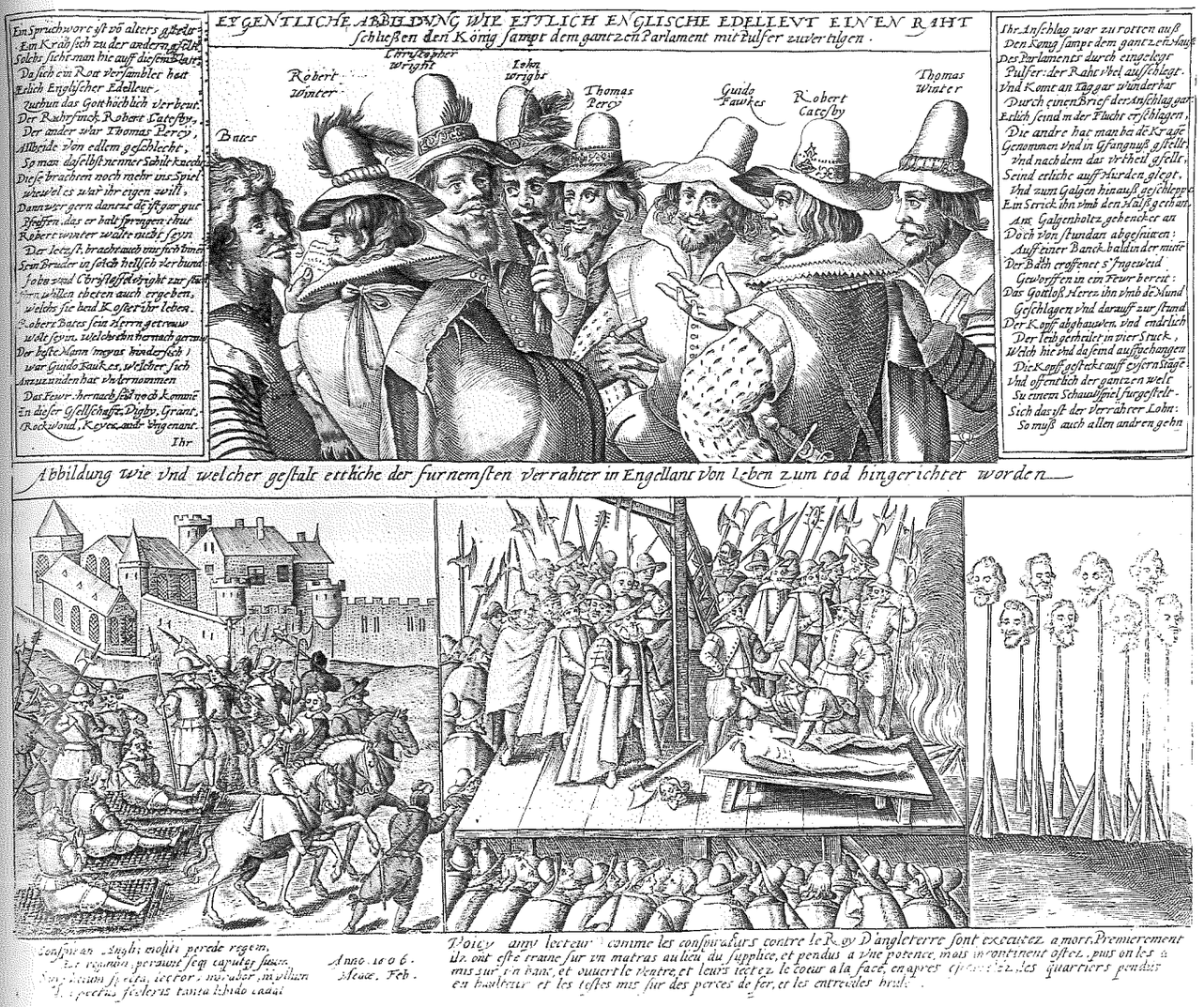


The title-page to the *Authorised Version of the Bible*, the new translation instigated by James I and published in 1611. This was to have an enduring impact wherever the English language and Anglican Church spread, until the second half of the twentieth century. Two prophets, Moses left and Aaron right, stand within the wall of the Old Testament which supports the four Evangelists above, behind whom stand the Apostles. At the top the radiance of the Tetragrammaton, the four-lettered Hebrew name of God, outshines both the sun and the moon.

was referred to as the Divine Right of Kings. Such an exaltation would not have been so bad if James had not kept lecturing Parliament on this fact, or if his court had retained his predecessor's splendid sobriety. Instead the court became a byword for extravagance and corruption as the king showered offices, titles, lands and money on his favourites. Such prodigality made it difficult to persuade Parliament to vote regular taxation when all they saw was money seemingly being frittered away. More serious was the relationship of the court to the country as a whole. Elizabeth had always retained around her officers whose views were widely differing. She had favourites, but she was always careful to advance only those with real abilities. Under James that changed. He too had favourites, beautiful certainly, but politically inept. Nonetheless he advanced them to office and power, and thus did lasting damage. What he did retain, however, was Elizabeth's balance of varied interests around him, thus preserving a wide network of support and communication across the country.

So in spite of it all, the old machinery of Tudor government creaked along into the new century. James opened his reign by making peace with Spain which immediately brought a much needed surge of economic activity. In the same year, 1604, he summoned a theological conference at Hampton Court, so that the Puritans could voice their demands for further reformation of the Church of England. Although the event itself was a failure James, like Elizabeth, maintained the comprehensive nature of the national church. Indeed the situation under him was in some ways easier, for he had been brought up a Calvinist, that is a follower of the reformer John Calvin whose extreme Protestantism as practised in Geneva had been the basis of the Puritan movement in England. During James's reign more and more clergy were university graduates equipped to be active 'godly ministers', preaching, reading and expounding the Scriptures. The Puritan life was one of the faith in action, with a strong line on public morality and order. There were few pressures to upset its ability to exist side by side with an Anglicanism whose focus was very different, and which retained many beliefs and practices from the medieval Catholic church, such as regarding the church as an institution with a hierarchy, in particular, bishops, and maintaining the importance of decent ritual in worship with a faith whose mainspring was the contemplation of Christ as exemplar. Only towards the close of the reign was this peaceful coexistence to be disturbed.

The Catholics went on as before in spite of what would seem to have been an enormous set-back, the consequences of the Gunpowder Plot. In 1605 a group of Catholics plotted to blow up Parliament at the very moment it was being opened by the king. In one huge explosion the Lords and Commons and most of the royal family were to have been wiped out; then one of the king's children was to be put on the



A Dutch view of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Above, the conspirators, depicted as country gentlemen, converse, while below they meet their savage fate. Several of the conspirators, including the most famous Guy Fawkes, were dragged from the Tower to Westminster, where they were hanged, drawn and quartered.

throne and married to a foreign Catholic prince. The fact that this conspiracy was betrayed by a loyal Catholic peer is indicative that the scheme did not have the support of the broad mass of those who remained loyal to the old religion. For a time Catholics were fined and imprisoned and then the clouds blew over and there was a reversion to the norm. Peace with Spain, and James's passionate wish to act as a peacemaker in Europe by marrying one child to a Protestant and another to a Catholic, made it easier for them. What was unfortunate about the Gunpowder Plot was the king's decision that it should be turned into an annual commemoration each 5 November with a special service in every parish church, a practice which continued until the middle of the reign of Queen Victoria. This annual event fixed in the minds of most of the population what had begun in Mary's reign and been consolidated with the Armada: the rudimentary interpretation of public affairs in terms of king versus pope and Protestant versus Catholic. It bred an atmosphere of fear and suspicion which it was to prove easy to play upon.

James was fortunate in inheriting Robert Cecil, whom he ennobled as Lord Salisbury. Salisbury set about the only major attempt to put the government's finances in good order via Parliament. He started with a reform of the crown lands where rents which had remained fixed for decades were surveyed, and new leases introduced at a higher price. But he went beyond this to propose to Parliament the sweeping away of all the old feudal sources of revenue. The 1610 Parliament was offered the abolition of these in return for £600,000 to wipe out the existing royal debts plus the guarantee of a regular income of £200,000 p.a. In the end, negotiations for what was called the Great Contract broke down. Parliament refused to come to terms with the reality of paying for running government. The crown now had no other choice but to look elsewhere for revenue. Already the ground had been prepared when, in 1606, the courts ruled that duties imposed for the regulation of commerce were part of foreign policy, and anything to do with foreign policy pertained to the royal prerogative. And it was on that decision both James and more particularly Charles were to build.

Salisbury died in 1612, the same year in which the king's eldest son, Henry, died. After these two deaths there was a lurch downhill. No one of Salisbury's calibre replaced him and James's second son was no substitute for the dynamic Henry. The court began to be tarnished with scandal, above all with the notorious case of the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, political adviser to one of James's early favourites, Robert Carr, whom he created Viscount Rochester. In 1611 Rochester began his affair with Frances Howard, wife of the young Earl of Essex. She was beautiful, with innocent childlike features masking an evil malignity within. Frances was a member of the Howard family whose members held the most important offices at court. They saw

The king that never was. James I's eldest son, Henry, died of typhoid fever in his nineteenth year in 1612. He was a young man of exceptional promise with a passionate interest in the arts and a commitment to revive the vanished glories of the previous reign. His death was a tragedy. Here, attended by the Earl of Essex, he is about to slay the stag at his feet in a picture painted in the first year of his father's reign, 1603.

her as a means to secure further their influence over the king. In order to marry Rochester, Frances had to obtain a divorce from her husband, Essex, something virtually unheard of at that period. Frances, however, had an enemy in Overbury, who opposed her. James also disliked Overbury, who was consigned to the Tower where he died shortly after. This freed the way for the divorce and in December 1613 Rochester married Frances amidst a blaze of courtly spectacle. The triumph was to be short-lived, for soon afterwards it emerged that Overbury had been poisoned and the lines of accusation and evidence all led to Frances and her accomplices. As a result she and her husband were the subject of a sensational trial. Although her accomplices were hanged, Frances and Rochester, thanks to the king, were sent to the Tower and then allowed to live in seclusion. But the whole sordid saga had exposed the court as rotten and the king as abetting a perversion of justice.

Rochester's fall, was hastened deliberately by the faction at court opposed both to him and to the Howards. They knew that the only way to dislodge them was to replace Rochester in the king's affections with another man, and alighted upon an impoverished younger son of a Leicestershire gentleman, George Villiers. He was

reckoned to be the handsomest man of his age. The opposition deliberately groomed him to attract the king's eye and they succeeded. Villiers's rise was meteoric: Viscount Villiers in 1616, Earl of Buckingham in 1617, Marquis in 1618 and, finally, Duke in 1623. Buckingham was more dangerous than his predecessors, for he combined political aspirations with political ineptitude. But James gave him office, indeed as he grew older became so besotted with him that he could take no decision without him. Buckingham was astute enough to realise that the king was old, and that if he was to survive he needed also to capture the heir to the throne with his charm. In this he was successful, and Buckingham therefore came to dominate the decade, uniting the two reigns until his death in 1628.

Buckingham's tragedy was the same as the king's. He was not a reformer but like James, he knew how to keep the existing system creaking along, although he made far more enemies along the way. This was due to the fact that he was one of a large family, each member of which had to be rewarded with titles, splendid marriages, grants of money and lands, which only added to people's perception of the court as a sink of iniquity. Something could have been salvaged from the wreckage if James had not embarked on war with all the appalling financial problems that entailed. He had begun his reign with every intention of pursuing conciliation. His daughter Elizabeth had been married to the leading Protestant in the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick, Elector Palatine. Frederick had been elected king of Bohemia, thus threatening the Catholic Habsburg domination of Central Europe. An army was sent into Bohemia; Frederick was defeated and forced to flee into exile, an event which triggered off the European conflagration called the Thirty Years' War, an horrendous and bloody politico-religious power struggle involving at one time or another virtually all the European powers.

Many in England, particularly the Puritans, wished to join the Protestant cause, but James believed that a settlement could be reached by means of diplomacy. He continued his policy of conciliation, negotiating with Spain for the marriage of his son to an Infanta, a wildly unpopular proposal. James was forced to summon Parliament to ask them for a subsidy to make war. The Commons agreed on condition that the war was against Spain and that the marriage negotiations were broken off. James was furious, informing the members that they existed by his grace alone. The behaviour of the king led the Commons to define their own status in the form of a Protestation which stated that an elected Parliament was 'the ancient and undoubted birthright' of every Englishman. So enraged was the king by this that he tore the document out of the Commons' journal in which they recorded their proceedings. In the same Parliament, the House of Lords, responding to what they saw as corrupt ministers, revived the fifteenth century practice of impeachment, in order to purge the Lord Chancellor, Francis Bacon from the government. If James had been wiser both developments could have been averted. As it was they left a dangerous legacy for the future.

A popular print captures the public rejoicing at the return of the Prince of Wales from Spain without a Spanish Catholic bride in 1623. Hats are thrown into the air with joy and bonfires blaze.

The Spanish marriage project ended in disaster, with the consequent desire to appease the damaged honour of the heir to the throne by making war on Spain. This meant asking Parliament for money when the country was in the grip of the worst economic depression of the century. War on the Continent had contributed to a huge slump in the export of broadcloth. At home there were failed harvests, followed by famine. Nonetheless Parliament, which met again in 1624, voted some £300,000 towards a joint land and sea attack on Spain with the Dutch.

Parliament, suspicious of James and even more of Buckingham's influence over him, laid down that the money was to be accounted for by treasurers of their own appointment. James, in fact, ignored what had been promised, and spent the money on subsidising foreign armies who might have re-established Frederick and Elizabeth in the Palatinate. But they failed.

James died on 27 March 1625. In one sense his demise caused no break in the flow of events under the dominating but fatal influence of Buckingham. In another sense it did, for it was his son's characteristics which were to accelerate even more significantly a breakdown of relations with Parliament. Under James the ship of state may have become progressively leakier but it just about managed to remain on course. Under his successor, it was to sink amidst a sea of recriminations.