Chapter Thirty-Four

THE KING'S ARCADIA

THE new king shared the beliefs but not the vices of his father. For Charles I the monarch was indeed a sacred being set apart, something which was emphasised by his austere and reserved manner and by his introduction of the rigid ceremonial he had seen at the Spanish court which he had visited to woo the Infanta. While his father had endured public appearances Charles rarely if ever made them, his court becoming a closed world from which he excluded those whose views did not coincide with his own. The result was gradually to cut the monarchy adrift from any popular support. The fact that Charles was shy and diffident with a stutter was no assistance either, to a man for whom the very fact that he was king endowed his every action and decision with a divine rectitude however wrong these actions and decisions might be. His Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, was to write of him that he 'neither knows how to be, nor to be made, great.' All of this boded ill in 1625, for his inheritance was far worse than his father's: royal credit was by then truly exhausted.

The country was still engaged in a war it could not afford. The distrust felt for the crown, and what was regarded as the malign influence of Buckingham, led to the first Parliament of the reign granting the customs dues known as tonnage and poundage for only one year. Every Parliament until then had automatically granted these for the lifetime of the monarch. The Commons then proceeded to attack Buckingham who was leading what proved to be a disastrous war. So the pattern began of Parliaments refusing to pay for mishandled wars over the course of which they had no control. On both sides this produced bitterness and recriminations leading to polarisation. In 1626 the crown jewels were pawned and, the following year, Charles made over to the City most of the remaining crown lands to pay off old royal debts and stave off the repayment of another loan. This act

Charles I with his queen, Henrietta Maria, and their two eldest children, the future Charles II at his father's knee and Princess Mary in her mother's arms. This huge picture was the first of the great series of portraits painted by the recently arrived court painter, Sir Anthony van Dyck, which were to immortalise the king and his court, The grandeur with which the artist endows his sitters was far removed from their physical reality. Both king and queen were unprepossessing in appearance, Henrietta Maria having protruding teeth.

represented the effective end of medieval kingship, for when the lands went the king no longer had anything 'of his own' by which to pay for government. The only way forward, if Parliament refused to co-operate, was to invoke the royal prerogative and raise taxes.

Once again Charles called Parliament. Those who were elected were hostile, and arrived from the shires with grievances against the war, which had lurched from one catastrophe to the next, and the means whereby the king had financed it. Charles had raised money by what were called forced loans. Five knights had refused to pay and been arrested. In short, by doing this they had challenged the king's actions, but Charles would not be drawn and refused to allow the legality of such loans to be tested in the courts. The judges supported him in so far as they agreed that the crown must have power of arrest. The result of all this was to drive the Commons to compile a list of grievances, the Petition of Right, condemning what they saw as the crown's innovatory methods of financing government. In their desire to return to the old Elizabethan status quo, they found themselves gradually taking on the role of defenders of what they saw as ancient liberties. The reality was that Parliament wanted government without paying for it. The crown was in fact more forward-looking in its policies. The tragedy was that the money raised by the crown was used to finance failure.

On 23 August 1628 Buckingham was assassinated. Both the populace and the Commons rejoiced, to the bitter grief of the king who had lost his closest friend. Far from resolving the tension between Charles and Parliament, it was to exacerbate it even more, for Buckingham, like James I, had shrewdly kept a foot in more than one camp. The king, with Buckingham removed, now pursued an unswerving path which allowed for no deviations. He was forced to accept the Petition of Right, which he did most ungraciously, and then promptly ignored it. Once more Parliament met and once again the result was an impasse. Charles realised that as long as he avoided war he could rule without Parliament. And that, in 1629, was what he decided to do, embarking on a decade known as the years of Personal Rule.

From the king's point of view the decision was a wise one. Seen through his eyes Parliament had become an irksome, old-fashioned institution which stood in the way of effective good government. It had failed to move with the times. Across the Channel similar representative bodies were disappearing as rulers ran their states far more efficiently without the encumbrance of dealing with meetings of elected representatives. In any case the English Parliament only existed by the grace of the king. Without him its actions had no binding legal status. Parliaments were called only in time of necessity and ten years of James's reign had passed without one. No one complained at the time for long sessions were expensive, calling for residence in London and

absence from dealing with business in the country. But for two things, Parliament could have fallen into abeyance and disappeared. The first was that because of the war, which had gone on for several years, Parliament had almost become an annual event so that members got to know each other and a corporate feeling had emerged. Further, the king's actions had forced them to formulate Parliament's rights for the first time. All of this was not easily forgotten, but it could have been. The second factor was the recurrence of war. What in the end brought Parliament back again was something the king could never have foreseen – war within his own kingdoms.

But for over ten years Charles successfully ruled the country in person without Parliament. He made peace with both France and Spain, henceforth confining British influence abroad to the field of diplomacy. Buckingham was replaced in his affections by his Catholic French queen, Henrietta Maria, and together they set out to make their court a model in terms of virtue and good order for the rest of the country to emulate. After the immoral court of his father, that of Charles was a monument to sobriety. The sale of offices, for example, was strictly forbidden. The old Privy Council was reinvigorated, the judges were cast as agents for royal reform as they toured the country, and the gentry were encouraged to remain on their estates fulfilling their local obligations. Peace brought commercial prosperity and with that, income to the crown through customs dues which Charles levied as his right. Financially the king stretched his prerogative dues to their limit: fines for not being knighted, the imposition of ancient forest laws, and of the royal right to tax in order to create a fleet and naval defences in time of danger, a tax known as Ship Money.

Government had never been so stable since the days of the Cecils. The king, moreover, had two able ministers, Thomas Wentworth, who efficiently administered the north and then Ireland as Lord Deputy, and William Laud, Bishop of London, and then Archbishop of Canterbury, who carried through the royal religious policy. Both, like the king, were obsessed with conformity and good order. The trouble was that conformity to such a vision made enemies and also led to exclusion for those who would not do as they were directed. Prior to Charles's reign there had been room for manoeuvre, especially in matters of belief where ambiguity embraced divergence. Now there was none, and that was to prove the major rock upon which the monarchy foundered.

Charles I did not share his father's stance on religion. For him the Puritans were an aberration to be rooted out. He saw the Church of England as the old pre-Reformation Catholic church reformed, purged of abuses and superstition. That position, which Elizabeth I had shared but never enforced, now came into reality. Its adherents were called Arminians after a Dutch theologian called Arminius, but overall this was

a specifically Anglican movement. The creed of the Church of England had been codified under Elizabeth in a document called the Thirty-Nine Articles. Although open to a Puritan interpretation they were by no means extreme in their Protestantism. This was an age of intense and passionate belief. As long as those who read the Thirty-Nine Articles in a different way were quiescent, no problems arose. But that began to change at the close of James I's reign when a new generation of clergy asserted the theological uniqueness of the English church as being independent not only of Rome but also of Geneva. There was a reassertion of the belief that what man did in this life actually contributed to the salvation of his soul, an attitude regarded with utter horror by the Puritans, who held that every human being was destined from birth either to heaven or hell. There was a reaffirmation also of the importance of the sacraments, in particular that of Holy Communion. To emphasise its sanctity the table which had been brought down into the nave for communion was now to remain in the position of the pre-Reformation altar, railed off in a sanctuary. The word 'altar' reappeared. As the movement developed, order and ceremony and the beauty of art were re-introduced into the churches: stained glass, crucifixes, candlesticks, bowing towards the altar, and vestments. In addition there was a commitment to stop the asset-stripping of the church and to restore its endowments.

The new Anglican movement mirrored the Puritan one, for it could also be not only fervent but aggressive. More important, it gained the support first of Buckingham and then of the king. Charles I changed virtually the entire episcopate and senior clergy, appointing only those who would carry through changes. His chief agent was William Laud who succeeded to Canterbury in 1633. Laud was tactless and querulous and pushed on relentlessly with the reformation, and the suppression of Puritanism. In the years before the king's Personal Rule, attacks in the Commons on the movement went hand-in-hand with those on royal finances. Members of Parliament were overwhelmingly Puritan. Without its meetings they had lost their mouthpiece.

On the surface, however, the king's long peace seemed like Arcadia. The country had changed greatly from the previous century. The south came to dominate more and more as London continued to expand as a port at the expense of the regional ones. As the home of the court (which no longer travelled), the government and the law, visits to London became obligatory for gentry from the regions who now began to acquire town houses. As a consequence, London became the great consumer of everything from food and coal to luxury goods. By 1640 it had some three hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants. Norwich, the country's second largest city, had a mere twenty thousand. Cities and towns elsewhere seemed little more than overgrown villages, whose streets quickly gave way to fields and country.

In spite of its appalling road system, England was a highly commercialised country in a manner only rivalled by northern Italy and the Low Countries. Although there had been a devastating recession many people were much better off, a fact reflected in their wills, which reveal that even quite humble families now ate off pewter and cooked in brass. The fluidity of the social structure inherited from the Tudors continued, something which set England apart from the mainland where the aristocracy became a caste. In England the nobility paid taxes, married commoners and engaged in commercial investment. The crown contributed to this fluidity by bestowing titles on those who had grown wealthy on account of their commercial endeavour. The aristocratic, gentry and yeoman classes followed the example of the crown in setting out to maximise profits from land. Their success can be seen in the proliferation of manor houses across the landscape. Merchants also prospered and set the pattern of turning that prosperity into land by setting up as country gentry. For the first time the professional classes, made up in the main of lawyers and clergy, took on an identity. The clergy now assumed the character of well-off yeomen, university educated and, being able to marry, founders of dynasties. Their rise in status was to make the rectory a fit residence for the younger sons of the gentry classes.

All of this formed a sharp contrast to what was an ever-widening gap between the classes which flourished and those doomed to swell the ranks of the migrant poor. Landless paupers grew and grew in numbers until it was reckoned that they made up one third of the population. More and more of them drifted towards the towns in search of work. Government became obsessed with seeing that the local poor rate was levied to cope with this burgeoning tide of poverty. So bad was it that it was to be the driving force which led to the earliest waves of emigration to New England during the 1620s.

This was the downside of early Stuart society which otherwise was remarkable for its volatility. People could move socially upwards if they were clever, and by 1640 about a third of the male population was literate. The educational drive sprang from Protestant and especially Puritan impulses, for a man needed to read in order to study the Scriptures. Puritanism was the religion of the literate. At the bottom of the social heap, access upwards was by way of apprenticeship and education in a grammar school. There was no lack of scholarships for the gifted. By the middle of the century most towns had a grammar school, many had several. The demand for education was not only driven by religion but by changes in business methods which now called for complex written contracts and book-keeping.

People were no longer static. Families, no longer tied to the land, moved around at every level of society either on account of marriage or the demands of work. Although

there was no such thing as birth control, due to the high infant mortality rate the family unit rarely exceeded five in number. It continued to be a male-dominated society in which women could only gain status as widows with property. A woman's role was to preside over and serve the household, and as a consequence the need for women to be educated was removed. Theirs was a circumscribed existence; apart from work their only outlet was religion.

Britain, however, was not a united state. Although James I had proclaimed himself king of Great Britain reviving the ancient Roman name, he and and his son ruled over three very distinct kingdoms each with its own equally distinct traditions. Both Scotland and Ireland were poor, backward and neglected countries, the victims amongst other things of distance from Whitehall Palace. Neither James nor Charles went to Ireland, and Scotland was only visited under duress. This status quo would probably have continued if Charles I had not extended his obsession with order and uniformity to his other kingdoms. In the case of Ireland the king was fortunate in Thomas Wentworth, who carried through such administrative and religious reform with efficiency. When, however, Charles turned his attention to Scotland he had no such ally and was rudely jolted out of his dream world.

The Scots rightly felt marginalised at every level of society. The country had an extreme Protestant tradition stemming back to Calvin and Geneva via the great Scottish reformer John Knox. In Scotland there was no theological ambiguity as in the case of England. Nonetheless Charles, never deviating for an instant from his chosen path of imposing uniformity in his kingdoms, issued, in 1637, a version of the English

Prayer Book for use in Scotland. It was not even a version of that of 1552 but of the far more Catholic one of 1549. It was introduced without any consultation either with the Scottish Parliament or the church assembly. The result was riot and rebellion. Charles succeeded in uniting both nobility and populace against him and a Covenant was signed by the Scots to defend their church. They looked southwards and saw what they believed was the introduction of popery by the back door. The queen practised her Catholicism openly, indeed converts were made and the king even received a papal agent in residence at court. The transformation of the Church of England under Laud signalled to the Scots that the age of Antichrist had indeed come. They took to arms and marched across the border.

Everything that the king had striven to achieve depended on avoiding war. And now it had come, not from without but within. The only way Charles could meet the invasion without calling Parliament was to resort to the old medieval summons-to-arms of a king to his tenants-in-chief. The resulting assembly bore no resemblance to a modern army. An ill-clothed, ill-armed and ill-trained motley crew marched north and disintegrated in the face of the Scots. In June 1639 Charles was forced to buy time, and he signed the Treaty of Berwick. The Scots had the advantage in more senses than one, for in the south a major crisis was looming, one which they realised could only work to their advantage. In the midst of the crisis Charles turned to the one man who might know how to handle it, Thomas Wentworth. Now ennobled as Earl of Strafford, he returned to England and told the king that he must do the one thing he had striven at all costs to avoid, call Parliament.

A series of ladies representing the four seasons provides a panorama of the 1640s with glimpses of the England of Charles I. Spring has a new country house with an elaborate garden laid out in the latest Italian style; Summer affords a view across St. James's Park to Inigo Jones's Whitehall Banqueting House; Autumn looks over the Thames towards a grotto, while Winter, a prostitute, plies her wares against the shops of Cheapside.