Chapter Thirty-Five

THREE KINGDOMS IN CRISIS

IN A SENSE a civil war of a kind had already begun. Ostensibly it was the revolt of one kingdom against the policies of a king it shared with two others. But the Scots knew that they had allies south of the border. Grievances had been piling up with no means of voicing them, above all those of the Puritans, who shared the Covenanters' view that the king's religious policy was that of Antichrist. They saw in the new ceremony and beauty of Anglican worship the forerunner of a surrender to Rome. Saturated in the Bible, it needed little imagination for the aggrieved to believe that they were living through a fulfilment of the prophecies of the Book of Revelation.

So, when Parliament met in April 1640, the king was taken aback by the sheer deluge of complaints. They were not only religious, but also fiscal, bitter attacks on the king's use of his prerogative powers to raise taxes by what they regarded as devious means with no legal basis. They objected strongest of all to Ship Money. In the same year that the Scots rebelled, 1637, the king's right to levy this tax had been challenged in the courts but the majority of the judges declared in favour of the king. Five, however, did not: but what seemed a victory for the royal prerogative was to provide three years later the ammunition the opposition required to attack it.

So overwhelmed was Charles by the torrent of complaints that within three weeks he rashly took the decision to dissolve a Parliament which became known as the Short Parliament. No subsidy had been granted. The dissolution proved to be an incredibly short-sighted move, for this action only fuelled distrust at a time when, with a few concessions, the king could have gained the subsidy he needed to meet the challenge of the Scots. As it was, he was reduced once more to a feudal call-to-arms and a second even more ill-armed group assembled at Selby. The men en route had given vent to their Puritan sympathies by sacking any church which had been reordered in the manner prescribed by the archbishop. A wave of anti-popery swept through the army which was fed with fears of Catholic plots. When, in August, the Covenanters crossed the border the English army disintegrated for a second time.

The king, in yet a further attempt to bypass Parliament, revived from the Middle Ages a meeting of the Great Council of peers. This assembled at York and peace was made with the Covenanters but at a price: £850 a day. The crown was bankrupt and the peers insisted that Parliament was called. This time the king had no alternative.

No one on 3 November 1640 could have predicted that they were to be members of the longest Parliament in English history, the Long Parliament. When its members assembled they were interested in one thing only, achieving a return to what they now viewed as the golden age of Gloriana when ruler and country had been one. They wanted Laud's innovations swept away, along with Ship Money. There was no way that they were

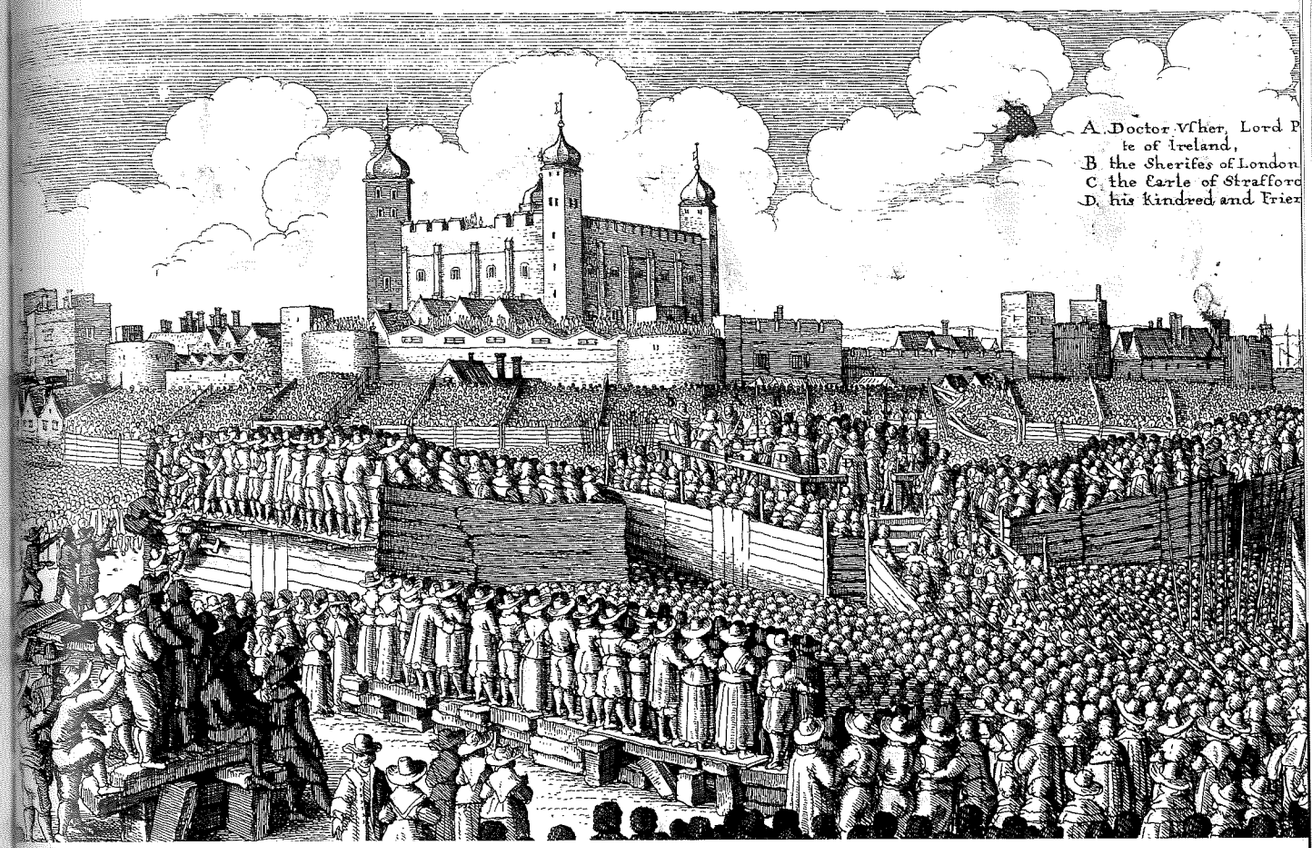
A portrait by Lely of the shipbuilder, Peter Pett, with the *Sovereign of the Seas*. This magnificent vessel was launched in 1637 and was the largest and finest ship in the world at that date, the pride of the fleet paid for by the unpopular Ship Money tax.

going to grant Charles one penny with which to pay the agreed price to the Scots until he had met their demands. The king had not only alienated the Commons but also the Lords who were now united as one.

The Commons, led by John Pym, lived at fever pitch, its fears of Catholic plots fanned by Puritan preachers. A statute was passed decreeing that there should be no more than three years between Parliaments. The Triennial Act ensured no repetition of a decade of Personal Rule. Impeachment was then invoked to sweep away the agents of prerogative rule: Strafford, Laud, and the judges who declared for the king. In the face of this onslaught the king's Council virtually collapsed and, in an attempt to stave off retribution, Charles began to fill any gaps in government with nobles whom he had excluded from the court because their views failed to coincide with his own. The king, however, was still imbued with a deep belief in his own rectitude and his cause justified any means to which he might resort. He sought to raise money abroad and then attempted to use what was left of the army to release Strafford, who was imprisoned in the Tower. On 3 May news of this plot reached Parliament. Outrage against the king was unleashed on a scale not seen before. The Puritan London mob advanced on Whitehall Palace and the king began to fear for his own life and that of the queen. Going back on a promise he had given Strafford, he signed the warrant for his execution. On 12 May Strafford was beheaded.

The fact that the king had planned to use force, and would clearly do so again if he had the opportunity, opened the floodgates. Now the acts of Parliament came in a mighty surge, sweeping away everything which the decade of Personal Rule had stood for. Ship Money, forest rights and knighthood fines were abolished, then Parliament turned its attention to the organs whereby prerogative rule had been sustained. The Court of Star Chamber and the Court of High Commission were abolished. Religious fervour ran amok as the Puritans saw the Apocalypse loom: the Commons swept away every vestige of Laud's religious policy and then began to agitate for the abolition of the bishops.

These moves epitomised revolution and directly challenged the existing social order. The Lords drew back in support of the bishops who sat in the upper house alongside them. They stood by the Prayer Book. Although this defence of the bishops and the Prayer Book sent up a flare that there could be a potential split in the ranks, Lords and Commons continued united for the time being. The king announced his intention of going north. Once more fear seized the House as to what he might do, but northwards he went in August. Any form of royal control had already collapsed and Parliament, from merely passing statutes, now moved on towards actual control of the government.



The execution of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford on Tower Hill on 12 May 1641.

By late October, when Parliament reassembled after a recess, reaction against these events began to set in. The mob disorder seen in London had spread across the country, where there were violent sackings of churches. For a brief moment it seemed that affairs could turn in the king's favour as the established classes looked on in dismay at the drift towards anarchy. Charles was not to be so fortunate, however, for, although the Scottish army had been paid by Parliament and disbanded, a Catholic rising erupted in Ireland against the Protestant settlers. Nothing could have been more fatal. Rumour once again ran riot. Here was a second kingdom in revolt and an army needed to quell it. In view of recent events Parliament had no intention of voting the king money for an army which he would almost certainly use against them. Parliament therefore decided to take on itself the executive role.

Once this borderline had been crossed a very different kind of polarisation began to happen. Pym and his followers in Parliament pushed on regardless, drawing up a long indictment of the ills of the king's reign, the Grand Remonstrance. It was passed by only a narrow majority. Charles rejected it, and took his stand by the Church of England as it was enshrined in the Prayer Book. The king almost welcomed confrontation and continued to look towards ways of escape, by force if need be. London was wholly against him, its government given over to Puritan radicals who viewed Charles as untrustworthy and the court as a hotbed of popery.

In response to what the king saw as Parliament's violation of his sacred rights, on 3 January 1642 he sent down charges for the impeachment of the five most revolutionary members of the Commons, headed by Pym. The next day Charles himself came, attended by soldiers bent on securing their arrest but, as he said, the birds had flown. With this melodramatic encounter the king reached a point of no return. On 10 January he rode out of Whitehall Palace never to return until his execution seven years later. He went first to Hampton Court and then to York, endeavouring to gain control of arms and raise troops. Those moderates left in the House were in despair as the extremists mobilised the militia against what they saw as a 'popish malignant' enemy. Religious hysteria set in, leading to a total breakdown of the traditional role of Parliament as a mediator and bridgehead between crown and people. The moderates naturally turned towards the king while the Puritan sectarians who remained cast Parliament into a role it had never before occupied – as God's instrument with which to usher in the rule of the saints.

An unbending king who had violated any attempts to build bridges and who had refused to take one step towards the middle ground had contributed greatly to his own downfall. For those caught up in them, it seemed that these were events of the cataclysmic kind associated with the Second Coming. A bewildered population who had never wanted war was gradually forced to take sides as their consciences dictated. The printing presses, now out of government control, poured forth pamphlets casting these happenings as a struggle of light against dark, of true religion against false and of Christ versus Antichrist. No one who had lived through the mirage of the king's Arcadia could have anticipated such a terrifying retribution. The world was indeed upside down.

The Duke of Buckingham, like the king, was a patron of the arts and commissioned the greatest painter of the age, Rubens, to decorate the ceiling of his study at York House, his London residence, for which this is a sketch. Rubens was an exponent of the new baroque style with its use of light and movement to achieve illusion. He uses these to apotheosise the duke who is lifted heavenwards towards the Temple of Virtue by Minerva and Mercury.