*Chapter Forty-One*

# THE SEARCH FOR STABILITY

On 29 May 1660 a spectacular procession approached the City of London. It opened with a dozen gilded coaches which jolted their way forwards, escorted by horsemen wearing silver doublets. Then came a thousand soldiers followed by the City sheriffs in gold lace, and trumpeters in black velvet and cloth of gold. On it pressed, a seemingly never-ending cavalcade, numbering in all some twenty thousand and culminating in the solitary figure of a man whose thirtieth birthday it was, Charles II. Slim in build, with dark hair and saturnine features, Charles was soberly dressed, apart from the crimson plume waving in his hat which he raised 'to all in the most stately manner ever seen'. It took seven hours for the procession to pass through the London streets and reach Whitehall Palace. The diarist, John Evelyn, who stood in the Strand to see it pass, wrote: ' . . . it was the Lord's doing, and such a restoration never mentioned in any history, ancient or modern, since the return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity.'

But not everyone who looked on shared his state of euphoria. 'A pox on all kings,' yelled one woman as the king rode by.

And that dissenting voice caught a reality which was also reflected in the king's remark to the crowds of fawning lords who awaited him at Whitehall: 'I doubt it has been my own fault I have been absent so long, for I see nobody that does not protest he has ever wished for my return.' The truth of the matter was that Charles II's return was a last-ditch attempt to re-establish an equilibrium, this time going backwards to 1642, and trying to wipe out the previous eighteen years, which had been so tumultuous in terms of events and ideas. It was not to be long before people realised the impossibility of such a task. Republicanism, and religious radicalism in particular, could not be blotted out. They either went underground or had to be tolerated, either outside or within the system. Nonetheless the deep-seated desire by the gentry classes for peace and social order after years of anarchy, chaos and military rule was such that a veneer of stability was achieved by what was known as the Restoration



On May 29 1660 Charles II made his entry into London, the climax of which was his reception by both Houses of Parliament in Whitehall Palace. The House of Commons received him in Inigo Jones's Banqueting House, towards which this procession rides, the very building from whose windows his father had stepped to be executed in 1649. May 29 was the king's birthday; it was to be made into an annual national festival celebrating the restoration of the Monarchy.

Settlement. But it was extremely fragile, so much so that within a decade king and Parliament were again at serious loggerheads in an encounter that had much in common with the one which had precipitated the civil war.

But in 1660 the king, the government, and the social élite joined forces to reassert their hold on political power. Once again the character of the monarch was to be an important contributory factor in ensuring its success. Charles II was an exception among the Stuarts in possessing the common touch, of the kind which had endeared the Tudor dynasty to its people. He was an affable, charming and easy-going man, a lover of women, for he was to have a notorious string of mistresses, and a devotee of the good life, anxious never again to go into exile. And, in spite of laziness, he was

politically astute, if cynical, and a shrewd judge of men. Beneath the surface, however, lurked more mysterious thoughts which were only to surface as the reign progressed. How much they were there from the very beginning it is impossible to know. Some of Charles's years of exile had been spent in France, where Louis XIV ruled over the greatest state in Western Europe as an absolute monarch. His most famous remark sums up this position: 'L'etat c'est moi' or 'I am the state'. To see that his will was enforced there was a huge bureaucracy of paid royal officials and a mighty standing army. Hand-in-hand with Louis' absolutist rule, made manifest in his magnificent court at Versailles, went an unswerving devotion to the Catholic faith. Charles admired his French cousin and the system. His sister, Henrietta, was soon to be married to Louis' brother. In comparison Charles found himself ruling over a state which, apart from the Netherlands, was an exception in the Europe of his age, one whose officials were unpaid amateurs, where there was no adequate standing army, where the crown was impoverished, where there was not one faith but many, and where a representative assembly, Parliament, still existed to irk effective government.

But in order to regain the throne Charles had to accept these limitations, and forge ahead with the acts which made up the Restoration Settlement. This was to be the major work of his first two Parliaments, the Convention Parliament, which met in April 1660 and which had invited him to return, and the Cavalier Parliament of May 1661, which was to sit for most of the reign and more than half of whose members had fought or suffered for the Royalist cause. Together they forged, or rather failed to forge, the settlement.

Many of the acts that were passed were both pragmatic and prudent, those, for instance, which recognised the validity of legal decisions during the interregnum or pardoned all republicans except the actual regicides, but on the broader issues there were failures. Parliament, which for almost two decades had taken on the role of the executive, now reverted to its old advisory capacity and was made up once more of Lords and Commons. But the experience of the previous eighteen years could not so easily be forgotten, and the notion of semi-organised opposition to government was to resurface eventually in the precursors of our modern political parties. Looking back to 1642 meant a return to all those unresolved grey areas over which king and Parliament had fought. The royal prerogative returned, with its right to conduct foreign policy, control the executive, act in the interests of the security of the state, and prorogue or dissolve Parliament. Only a Triennial Act, decreeing that there must be no more than a three-year gap between Parliaments, offered any check on the sovereign ruling without it, but by the closing years of the reign Charles was able even to ignore that.

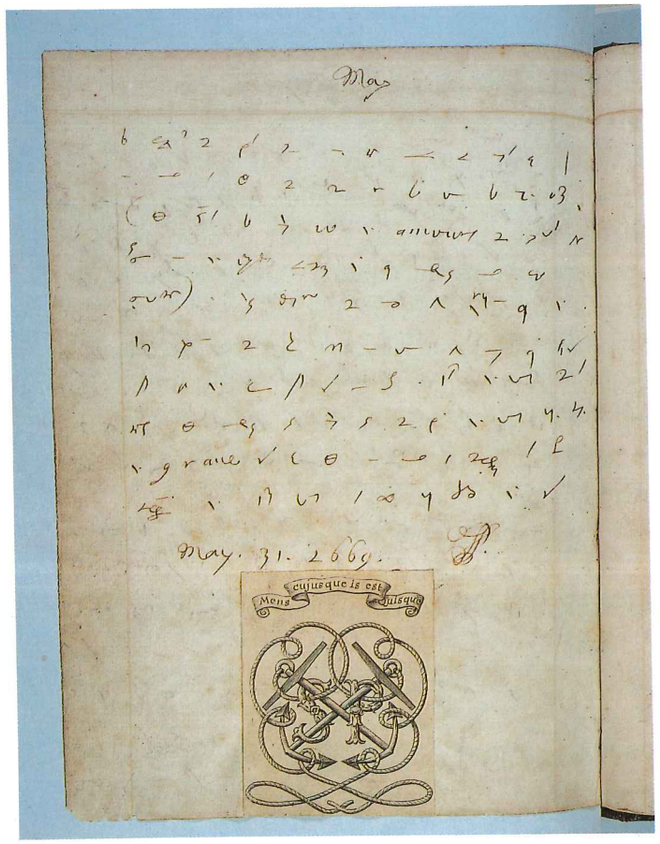


Nor was the financial settlement any better. Indeed finance had been one of the main causes of the civil war, the inability of Parliament to recognise that government had to be paid for. Although Parliament now assessed that cost, they failed to meet it. Even with the addition of the old excise tax and a new hearth tax (one paid by every householder) the amount fell drastically short of what was needed. Parliament feared making the king financially independent, in fact, for it would erode their own power. The result was mushrooming debt, eventually forcing Charles to become the secret pensioner of Louis XIV, in this way demeaning the country's status within Europe.

Both crown and Parliament were united in effecting the disbandment of the New Model Army, feared as the seedbed for radical social ideas. But it was replaced by an anachronism, a return to the locally raised militias under the control of the gentry, a hopelessly outmoded means of defending the realm. Reluctantly, as a result of a minor insurrection, Parliament agreed to a small standing army but it was minute compared with the military machine of the French.

Religion remained the most intractable problem of all. The king himself was liberal in outlook, anxious to achieve a compromise in which those of a Presbyterian persuasion (who had been instrumental in his return) might be accommodated within a revived Church of England. Once again the result was failure. The Presbyterians and the Anglicans could reach no agreement and all over the country loyalty to the old Anglican form of worship reasserted itself in a tidal wave. The Cavalier Parliament, which was full of Royalist Anglicans, passed an Act of Uniformity re-introducing the *Book of Common Prayer*. All ministers refusing to conform to its practice were to be deprived of their livings. As a consequence, over nine hundred left. They joined the ranks of the dissenters, the various sects against which Parliament passed a series of acts, known after the name of the king's chief minister, the Earl of Clarendon, as the Clarendon Code. The religious settlement bore no resemblance to 1642. For the first time an official split within Protestantism in the country was recognised. In spite of the efforts of the more tolerant bishops either to retain the Presbyterians within the Church or maintain an open door for their return, a new religious underclass was created, one which joined the Catholics, suffering persecution, harassment and social disabilities, such as exclusion from all public offices and the universities.

In this way the higher-ranking country gentry reasserted their old position as mediators between crown and people, occupying once more their accustomed roles as unpaid servants of the government in the shires, the officers who kept peace and order, administered justice, and controlled the militia. In return they received honours, offices and favours at court, besides gaining privileges for their local




The last page of Samuel Pepys's Diary, 31 May 1669. Pepys kept his diary from the closing months of 1659 using a system of shorthand, the key to which was only rediscovered in the last century, thus unlocking a unique source of both information and delight. To his contemporaries Pepys was an able and reforming naval administrator. To posterity he is known as one of the greatest of all diarists, providing a vivid and scintillating record of the England of the 1660s. He ceased to keep it in the mistaken belief that he was losing his sight.

communities. But what kind of society was it? England after 1660 likewise could not go back in time, for the country was about to embark on a major period of change which would leave it unrecognisable compared with the England of the 1630s.

That change was largely to stem from what has been called the Commercial Revolution, something which was to be of far more consequence than the Restoration itself. It led to a new prosperity which was founded largely on the Navigation Acts, setting limits on foreign shipping in English ports, which had been revived during the Commonwealth. By the close of the 1660s, England was rapidly developing the largest merchant fleet in Europe and was also emerging as the continent's *entrepôt*, that is, the centre for the re-export trade. The produce of the developing North American and West Indian colonies together with produce from the East, in particular India, was brought to England in return for home manufactures. Goods imported were then re-exported across Europe. Metals or textiles were exported to Africa in return for slaves who were taken to Barbados or Jamaica to



work the plantations whose sugar then came to England. The American colonies of Virginia and Maryland produced tobacco, which was traded again via the mother country. The cloth industry too was to search out new markets in Asia Minor and in Spain and Portugal and their colonies in the New World. As the century drew to its close, no other country in Western Europe could rival England in terms of capital resources and potential investment. The wealth of its merchants and of the great trading companies, such as the East India, the Royal African and the Levant, was prodigious. By the 1680s cloth formed only about sixty per cent of the country's exports, something unthinkable in 1600.

In the countryside there was increased activity. Agricultural methods were improved to meet the needs of the developing towns for supplies of fresh meat, vegetables and fruit. There was a huge expansion in the coal industry, again to meet the demand for heating the homes of town dwellers. Protestant refugees from abroad brought new skills and techniques, which not only broadened the range of textiles but introduced whole new areas of manufacture: porcelain, lace, silk, fine linen, clocks and instrument making.

Even those deemed 'the poorer sort' were soon ob-

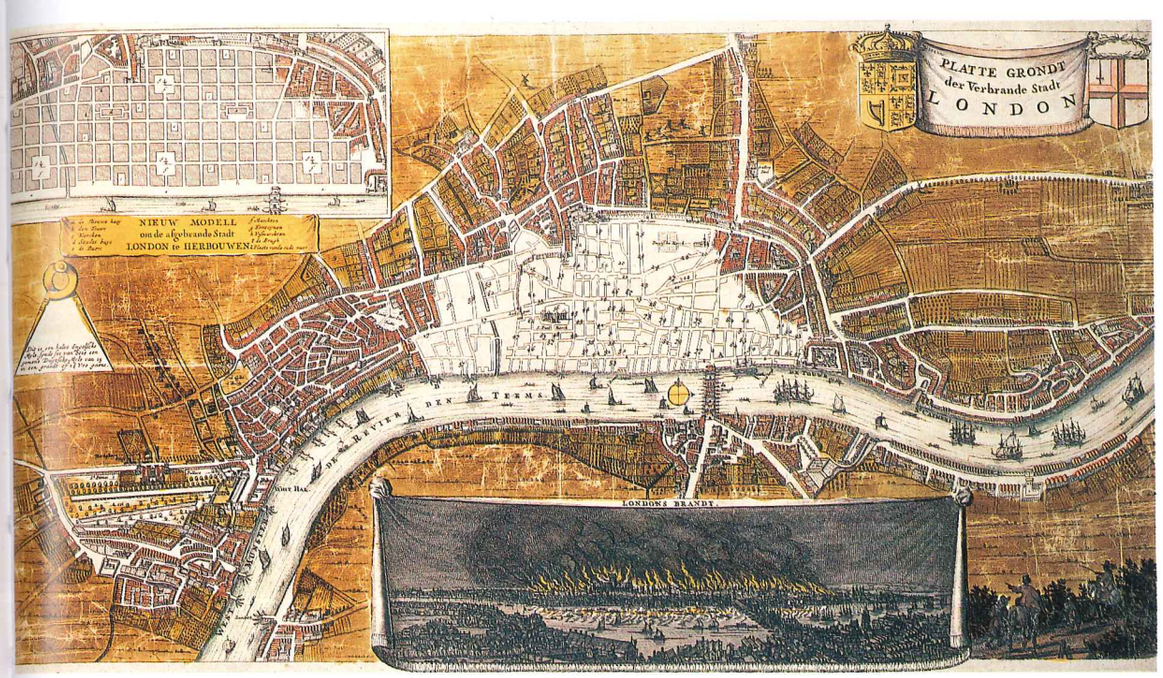
This picture, painted in 1670 and traditionally known as *The Tichborne Dole*, provides a unique panorama of rural society in the reign of Charles II. It depicts an event held annually on Lady Day, March 25, at Tichborne in Hampshire when the lord of the manor, in this case Sir Henry Tichborne, distributed bread to the poor. Before the old Tudor manor house stand assembled the family, their servants and retainers together with tenants and villagers providing in one image the whole social hierarchy of Restoration England. Sir Henry was a loyal supporter of the Stuarts.

served to have buckles on their shoes and ribbons on their hats. The standard of living of most classes rose steadily in the late seventeenth century. England was rapidly developing into a consumer society, with a huge growth in the domestic market, as more people than ever before had the comforts of life and could follow fashion. As a consequence, the social pyramid flattened. Although Charles II created forty new peers, around fifty per cent of all land belonged to the gentry classes whose number multiplied to include new forms such as the 'urban gentry'. As a class they became far more stratified, with baronets at the top, a title introduced by James I in 1611 recognising that a new title was called for, midway between a lord and a knight. After the baronets came knights, and then untitled gentlemen, some of whom could be far wealthier in terms of land than their titled superiors.

More important for the future was the emergence in a clearer form of the professions: law, medicine, the army, the church, the universities and teaching. For the first time those who passed their entire working lives in the service of government, later to be called civil servants, emerged as an identifiable group, men like the famous diarist, Samuel Pepys. In addition musicians, painters, architects and even men of letters attained a new standing. All of these professions became ways of social advancement for those from below. Their arrival was a reflection of a far more complex and highly literate society which had need of the services they could provide. And if we move down the social ladder a rung, there was an equal burgeoning of 'the middling sort', craftsmen, shop- and inn-keepers, vivid reflections of the reality of the Commercial Revolution as all shared in the new found prosperity.

All that is except, initially, the crown. As the 1660s progressed the government's position steadily worsened. England could not afford a foreign policy. The wars with the Dutch were renewed in 1665 and 1672 but with no real success. Then there were the twin disasters of the Great Plague of 1665, (the last echo of the Black Death of the fourteenth century) which killed thousands, followed, the year after, by the Great Fire of London which effectively destroyed the City. In the context of Britain's commercial endeavours the main enemy was the Dutch and their destruction was the prime objective of any foreign policy. In 1670 Charles signed the secret Treaty of Dover, the first of a series with France whereby he became a pensioner, albeit a modest one, of Louis XIV and, in the words of the treaty, sought jointly 'to humble the pride of The States General'. Few in 1670 could have foreseen that within twenty years France was to become Britain's enemy in a power struggle lasting over a century. The secret part was to be toleration for Catholics and the announcement of his own conversion. No one has been able to explain precisely the king's motives for this and even Louis XIV had reservations. Charles was in fact not to convert until his deathbed.






A Dutch engraving shows the extent of the City wiped out in the Great Fire of 1666. Effectively the London of Chaucer and Shakespeare went up in flames. Inset is a scene of the conflagration. Pepys wrote in his Diary: 'God grant mine eyes may never behold the like, who now saw above ten thousand houses all in one flame.'

Such a foreign policy ran counter to an increasingly anti-French sentiment and a hostility to the flaunting of Catholicism at court, both by the queen, the king's mistress, and some of his ministers. Parliament viewed all of this with increasing suspicion. In 1672, as a step on the path to alleviating the position of Catholics, the king issued a Declaration of Indulgence, suspending the penal laws, including the notorious Clarendon Code against all non-Anglicans, allowing Catholics to hold services in private and Protestant dissenters to worship in places under licence. So strong was the reaction of the Anglican Royalists in the Cavalier Parliament that when they met in the following year they threatened to curtail the royal finances. The king was forced to withdraw the Declaration. Parliament then went on to pass the Test Act, which laid down that everyone holding any form of public office should swear loyalty to the Established Church and affirm their abhorrence of Catholicism. The effect of that was not only an exodus of Catholics from office but the revelation that the king's brother, James, Duke of York, was a convert. As Charles's wife, the Portuguese Catholic Catherine of Braganza, had failed to produce a child, James was the heir to

the throne. Although Catholics formed only one per cent of the population, fear distorted that into a popular belief that what had been going on at court was part of some international plot whereby the country would be converted, if need be by force of arms, and a French style rule introduced.

And it was this atmosphere of hot-house intrigue which provided the fruitful ground upon which those who concocted what was called the Popish Plot built. Such a plot never existed outside the mind of its inventor, a devious and deceitful ex-Anglican cleric called Titus Oates. The political consequences of his fantasy were to be appalling, for they awoke in the English consciousness all of the irrational fear of Catholicism which stretched back to the burnings of Mary's reign, on through the Armada and the Gunpowder Plot, to the fears of Rome engendered by the dealings of the court of the king's father. Oates worked in tandem with another disreputable cleric, Israel Tonge, and together they fabricated the details of a plot which included firing the City of London, England being invaded by French and Irish forces (who would put to the sword anyone who refused to convert), and the murder of the king so that his Catholic brother might take over. The plotters claimed the whole scheme was financed by the pope and engineered under the auspices of the Jesuits.

Charles II, and many in the government, realised from the start that all of this was pure fantasy, and indeed it would not have led to anything but for two strokes of fate. Sir Edmund Godfrey, the magistrate to whom Oates had sworn the truth of his story, was found skewered by a sword, a death immediately attributed by the populace to the Jesuits. Next, letters were discovered by a former secretary to the Duke of York looking forward to the Catholic revival which would follow James's accession. Unfortunately, that man's name had been among those listed by Oates as being party to the plot.

No concurrence of events could have been more catastrophic for they seemed to confirm the truth of what Oates and Tonge had outlined. The Popish Plot unleashed anti-Catholic hysteria on a grand scale and led to the campaign by the Earl of Shaftesbury to exclude the Duke of York from the succession. This in turn precipitated the emergence within Parliament of recognisable parties. Already government had cultivated a group sympathetic to its interests known as a 'court' party, as against members who were opposed, a loose association of gentry making a 'country' party. But now in the face of the crisis these groups were to harden along far more definite lines and gain names, the Tories, those Anglicans who regarded the crown as sacred and inviolate, and the Whigs, who believed that sovereignty was a trust from the people which would be betrayed if a Catholic were ever allowed to succeed.



What was known as the Exclusion Crisis dominated the years 1679 to 1681. If Shaftesbury and the Whigs had won, it would have meant that Parliament could dictate the succession to the throne, in effect establish a form of elected monarchy. It implied, too, a limitation on regal power. When the Cavalier Parliament met in 1679 it began by attacking the king's chief minister, the Earl of Danby. Charles met the onslaught by dissolving Parliament and summoning a new one. That action was his greatest mistake, for the Parliament returned was elected when anti-Catholic sentiment was at fever pitch. For three years Charles weathered the assault by the only weapon in his armoury, the royal prerogative whereby he had the right to prorogue or dissolve Parliament. Every time Parliament came near to passing an Exclusion Act, this was what happened. In addition, he attempted to weaken the opposition inviting into the government as many Whigs as he could accommodate. The third and final attempt to exclude James took place in a Parliament deliberately summoned to sit in the Royalist stronghold of Oxford. Within a week the king dissolved it and Parliament was not to meet again in his lifetime.

The king had ostensibly won, but this encounter was to leave a significant legacy. The battle had given rise to organisation on a scale which constituted the creation of a political party. The Whigs had their leader, Shaftesbury, who, along with a committee, directed from the centre and organised propaganda not only in the metropolis but also in the shires. The alliance stretched across country, setting out to secure the election of members who would more or less support their political programme. To the Tories the royal prerogative was sacred, sovereignty in their view was vested in the crown, kingship came from God and not the people, whose only role was to obey or, at the most, passively resist. To the Whigs, in contrast, sovereignty was vested in the people (by which they meant some 200,000 adult males who had the right to vote), it rested in the final resort on consent embodied in a pact or agreement between governor and governed. If that pact was violated then the people had a right to resist.

For the moment this challenging ferment of ideas was to go into abeyance, because for the first time the royal finances, thanks to the commercial boom, a renewal of the French pension, and reforms at the Treasury, gave the king unprecedented independence. Many of the Whigs went abroad into exile. Indeed, Shaftesbury himself fled to Holland, and was to die there. Meanwhile, the monarchy in England embarked on precisely the path many had feared.