X THE WAR OF THE USURPERS

The poet Pope, though a friend of the greatest of Tory Democrats, Bolingbroke, necessarily lived in a world in which even Toryism was Whiggish. And the Whig as a wit never expressed his political point more clearly than in Pope's line which ran: "The right divine of kings to govern wrong." It will be apparent, when I deal with that period, that I do not palliate the real unreason in divine right as Filmer and some of the pedantic cavaliers construed it. They professed the impossible ideal of "non-resistance" to any national and legitimate power; though I cannot see that even that was so servile and superstitious as the more modern ideal of "non-resistance" even to a foreign and lawless power. But the seventeenth century was an age of sects, that is of fads; and the Filmerites made a fad of divine right. Its roots were older, equally religious but much more realistic; and though tangled with many other and even opposite things of the Middle Ages, ramify through all the changes we have now to consider. The connection can hardly be stated better than by taking Pope's easy epigram and pointing out that it is, after all, very weak in philosophy. "The right divine of kings to govern wrong," considered as a sneer, really evades all that we mean by "a right." To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it. What Pope says satirically about a divine right is what we all say quite seriously about a human right. If a man has a right to vote, has he not a right to vote wrong? If a man has a right to choose his wife, has he not a right to choose wrong? I have a right to express the opinion which I am now setting down; but I should hesitate to make the controversial claim that this proves the opinion to be right.

Now mediæval monarchy, though only one aspect of mediæval rule, was roughly represented in the idea that the ruler had a right to rule as a voter has a right to vote. He might govern wrong, but unless he governed horribly and extravagantly wrong, he retained his position of right; as a private man retains his right to marriage and locomotion unless he goes horribly and extravagantly off his head. It was not really even so simple as this; for the Middle Ages were not, as it is often the fashion to fancy, under a single and steely discipline. They were very controversial and therefore very complex; and it is easy, by isolating items whether about jus divinum or primus inter pares, to maintain that the mediævals were almost anything; it has been seriously maintained that they were all Germans. But it is true that the influence of the Church, though by no means of all the great churchmen, encouraged the sense of a sort of sacrament of government, which was meant to make the monarch terrible and therefore often made the man tyrannical. The disadvantage of such despotism is obvious enough. The precise nature of its advantage must be better understood than it is, not for its own sake so much as for the story we have now to tell.

The advantage of "divine right," or irremovable legitimacy, is this; that there is a limit to the ambitions of the rich. "Roi ne puis"; the royal power, whether it was or was not the power of heaven, was in one respect like the power of heaven. It was not for sale. Constitutional moralists have often implied that a tyrant and a rabble have the same vices. It has perhaps been less noticed that a tyrant and a rabble most emphatically have the same virtues. And one virtue which they very markedly share is that neither tyrants nor rabbles are snobs; they do not care a button what they do to wealthy people. It is true that tyranny was sometimes treated as coming from the heavens almost in the lesser and more literal sense of coming from the sky; a man no more expected to be the king than to be the west wind or the morning star. But at least no wicked miller can chain the wind to turn only his own mill; no pedantic scholar can trim the morning star to be his own reading-lamp. Yet something very like this is what really happened to England in the later Middle Ages; and the first sign of it, I fancy, was the fall of Richard II.

Shakespeare's historical plays are something truer than historical; they are traditional; the living memory of many things lingered, though the memory of others was lost. He is right in making Richard II. incarnate the claim to divine right; and Bolingbroke the baronial ambition which ultimately broke up the old mediæval order. But divine right had become at once drier and more fantastic by the time of the Tudors. Shakespeare could not recover the fresh and popular part of the thing; for he came at a later stage in a process of stiffening which is the main thing to be studied in later mediævalism. Richard himself was possibly a wayward and exasperating prince; it might well be the weak link that snapped in the strong chain of the Plantagenets. There may have been a real case against the coup d'état which he effected in 1397, and his kinsman Henry of Bolingbroke may have had strong sections of disappointed opinion on his side when he effected in 1399 the first true usurpation in English history. But if we wish to understand that larger tradition which even Shakespeare had lost, we must glance back at something which befell Richard even in the first years of his reign. It was certainly the greatest event of his reign; and it was possibly the greatest event of all the reigns which are rapidly considered in this book. The real English people, the men who work with their hands, lifted their hands to strike their masters, probably for the first and certainly for the last time in history.

Pagan slavery had slowly perished, not so much by decaying as by developing into something better. In one sense it did not die, but rather came to life. The slave-owner was like a man who should set up a row of sticks for a fence, and then find they had struck root and were budding into small trees. They would be at once more valuable and less manageable, especially less portable; and such a difference between a stick and a tree was precisely the difference between a slave

and a serf--or even the free peasant which the serf seemed rapidly tending to become. It was, in the best sense of a battered phrase, a social evolution, and it had the great evil of one. The evil was that while it was essentially orderly, it was still literally lawless. That is, the emancipation of the commons had already advanced very far, but it had not yet advanced far enough to be embodied in a law. The custom was "unwritten," like the British Constitution, and (like that evolutionary, not to say evasive entity) could always be overridden by the rich, who now drive their great coaches through Acts of Parliament. The new peasant was still legally a slave, and was to learn it by one of those turns of fortune which confound a foolish faith in the common sense of unwritten constitutions. The French Wars gradually grew to be almost as much of a scourge to England as they were to France. England was despoiled by her own victories; luxury and poverty increased at the extremes of society; and, by a process more proper to an ensuing chapter, the balance of the better mediævalism was lost. Finally, a furious plague, called the Black Death, burst like a blast on the land, thinning the population and throwing the work of the world into ruin. There was a shortage of labour; a difficulty of getting luxuries; and the great lords did what one would expect them to do. They became lawyers, and upholders of the letter of the law. They appealed to a rule already nearly obsolete, to drive the serf back to the more direct servitude of the Dark Ages. They announced their decision to the people, and the people rose in arms.

The two dramatic stories which connect Wat Tyler, doubtfully with the beginning, and definitely with the end of the revolt, are far from unimportant, despite the desire of our present prosaic historians to pretend that all dramatic stories are unimportant. The tale of Tyler's first blow is significant in the sense that it is not only dramatic but domestic. It avenged an insult to the family, and made the legend of the whole riot, whatever its incidental indecencies, a sort of demonstration on behalf of decency. This is important; for the dignity of the poor is almost unmeaning in modern debates; and an inspector need only bring a printed form and a few long words to do the same thing without having his head broken. The occasion of the protest, and the form which the feudal reaction had first taken, was a Poll Tax; but this was but a part of a general process of pressing the population to servile labour, which fully explains the ferocious language held by the government after the rising had failed; the language in which it threatened to make the state of the serf more servile than before. The facts attending the failure in question are less in dispute. The mediæval populace showed considerable military energy and co-operation, stormed its way to London, and was met outside the city by a company containing the King and the Lord Mayor, who were forced to consent to a parley. The treacherous stabbing of Tyler by the Mayor gave the signal for battle and massacre on the spot. The peasants closed in roaring, "They have killed our leader"; when a strange thing happened; something which gives us a fleeting and a final glimpse of the crowned

sacramental man of the Middle Ages. For one wild moment divine right was divine.

The King was no more than a boy; his very voice must have rung out to that multitude almost like the voice of a child. But the power of his fathers and the great Christendom from which he came fell in some strange fashion upon him; and riding out alone before the people, he cried out, "I am your leader"; and himself promised to grant them all they asked. That promise was afterwards broken; but those who see in the breach of it the mere fickleness of the young and frivolous king, are not only shallow but utterly ignorant interpreters of the whole trend of that time. The point that must be seized, if subsequent things are to be seen as they are, is that Parliament certainly encouraged, and Parliament almost certainly obliged, the King to repudiate the people. For when, after the rejoicing revolutionists had disarmed and were betrayed, the King urged a humane compromise on the Parliament, the Parliament furiously refused it. Already Parliament is not merely a governing body but a governing class. Parliament was as contemptuous of the peasants in the fourteenth as of the Chartists in the nineteenth century. This council, first summoned by the king like juries and many other things, to get from plain men rather reluctant evidence about taxation, has already become an object of ambition, and is, therefore, an aristocracy. There is already war, in this case literally to the knife, between the Commons with a large C and the commons with a small one. Talking about the knife, it is notable that the murderer of Tyler was not a mere noble but an elective magistrate of the mercantile oligarchy of London; though there is probably no truth in the tale that his blood-stained dagger figures on the arms of the City of London. The mediæval Londoners were quite capable of assassinating a man, but not of sticking so dirty a knife into the neighbourhood of the cross of their Redeemer, in the place which is really occupied by the sword of St. Paul.

It is remarked above that Parliament was now an aristocracy, being an object of ambition. The truth is, perhaps, more subtle than this; but if ever men yearn to serve on juries we may probably guess that juries are no longer popular. Anyhow, this must be kept in mind, as against the opposite idea of the jus divinum or fixed authority, if we would appreciate the fall of Richard. If the thing which dethroned him was a rebellion, it was a rebellion of the parliament, of the thing that had just proved much more pitiless than he towards a rebellion of the people. But this is not the main point. The point is that by the removal of Richard, a step above the parliament became possible for the first time. The transition was tremendous; the crown became an object of ambition. That which one could snatch another could snatch from him; that which the House of Lancaster held merely by force the House of York could take from it by force. The spell of an undethronable thing seated out of reach was broken, and for three unhappy generations adventurers strove and stumbled on a stairway slippery

with blood, above which was something new in the mediæval imagination; an empty throne.

It is obvious that the insecurity of the Lancastrian usurper, largely because he was a usurper, is the clue to many things, some of which we should now call good, some bad, all of which we should probably call good or bad with the excessive facility with which we dismiss distant things. It led the Lancastrian House to lean on Parliament, which was the mixed matter we have already seen. It may have been in some ways good for the monarchy, to be checked and challenged by an institution which at least kept something of the old freshness and freedom of speech. It was almost certainly bad for the parliament, making it yet more the ally of the mere ambitious noble, of which we shall see much later. It also led the Lancastrian House to lean on patriotism, which was perhaps more popular; to make English the tongue of the court for the first time, and to reopen the French wars with the fine flag-waving of Agincourt. It led it again to lean on the Church, or rather, perhaps, on the higher clergy, and that in the least worthy aspect of clericalism. A certain morbidity which more and more darkened the end of mediævalism showed itself in new and more careful cruelties against the last crop of heresies. A slight knowledge of the philosophy of these heresies will lend little support to the notion that they were in themselves prophetic of the Reformation. It is hard to see how anybody can call Wycliffe a Protestant unless he calls Palagius or Arius a Protestant; and if John Ball was a Reformer, Latimer was not a Reformer. But though the new heresies did not even hint at the beginning of English Protestantism, they did, perhaps, hint at the end of English Catholicism. Cobham did not light a candle to be handed on to Nonconformist chapels; but Arundel did light a torch, and put it to his own church. Such real unpopularity as did in time attach to the old religious system, and which afterwards became a true national tradition against Mary, was doubtless started by the diseased energy of these fifteenth-century bishops. Persecution can be a philosophy, and a defensible philosophy, but with some of these men persecution was rather a perversion. Across the channel, one of them was presiding at the trial of Joan of Arc.

But this perversion, this diseased energy, is the power in all the epoch that follows the fall of Richard II., and especially in those feuds that found so ironic an imagery in English roses--and thorns. The foreshortening of such a backward glance as this book can alone claim to be, forbids any entrance into the military mazes of the wars of York and Lancaster, or any attempt to follow the thrilling recoveries and revenges which filled the lives of Warwick the Kingmaker and the warlike widow of Henry V. The rivals were not, indeed, as is sometimes exaggeratively implied, fighting for nothing, or even (like the lion and the unicorn) merely fighting for the crown. The shadow of a moral difference can still be traced even in that stormy twilight of a heroic time. But when we have said that

Lancaster stood, on the whole, for the new notion of a king propped by parliaments and powerful bishops, and York, on the whole, for the remains of the older idea of a king who permits nothing to come between him and his people, we have said everything of permanent political interest that could be traced by counting all the bows of Barnet or all the lances of Tewkesbury. But this truth, that there was something which can only vaguely be called Tory about the Yorkists, has at least one interest, that it lends a justifiable romance to the last and most remarkable figure of the fighting House of York, with whose fall the Wars of the Roses ended.

If we desire at all to catch the strange colours of the sunset of the Middle Ages, to see what had changed yet not wholly killed chivalry, there is no better study than the riddle of Richard III. Of course, scarcely a line of him was like the caricature with which his much meaner successor placarded the world when he was dead. He was not even a hunchback; he had one shoulder slightly higher than the other, probably the effect of his furious swordsmanship on a naturally slender and sensitive frame. Yet his soul, if not his body, haunts us somehow as the crooked shadow of a straight knight of better days. He was not an ogre shedding rivers of blood; some of the men he executed deserved it as much as any men of that wicked time; and even the tale of his murdered nephews is not certain, and is told by those who also tell us he was born with tusks and was originally covered with hair. Yet a crimson cloud cannot be dispelled from his memory, and, so tainted is the very air of that time with carnage, that we cannot say he was incapable even of the things of which he may have been innocent. Whether or no he was a good man, he was apparently a good king and even a popular one; yet we think of him vaguely, and not, I fancy, untruly, as on sufferance. He anticipated the Renascence in an abnormal enthusiasm for art and music, and he seems to have held to the old paths of religion and charity. He did not pluck perpetually at his sword and dagger because his only pleasure was in cutting throats; he probably did it because he was nervous. It was the age of our first portrait-painting, and a fine contemporary portrait of him throws a more plausible light on this particular detail. For it shows him touching, and probably twisting, a ring on his finger, the very act of a high-strung personality who would also fidget with a dagger. And in his face, as there painted, we can study all that has made it worth while to pause so long upon his name; an atmosphere very different from everything before and after. The face has a remarkable intellectual beauty; but there is something else on the face that is hardly in itself either good or evil, and that thing is death; the death of an epoch, the death of a great civilization, the death of something which once sang to the sun in the canticle of St. Francis and sailed to the ends of the earth in the ships of the First Crusade, but which in peace wearied and turned its weapons inwards, wounded its own brethren, broke its own loyalties, gambled for the crown, and grew feverish even about the creed, and has this one grace among its dying virtues, that its valour is

the last to die.

But whatever else may have been bad or good about Richard of Gloucester, there was a touch about him which makes him truly the last of the mediæval kings. It is expressed in the one word which he cried aloud as he struck down foe after foe in the last charge at Bosworth--treason. For him, as for the first Norman kings, treason was the same as treachery; and in this case at least it was the same as treachery. When his nobles deserted him before the battle, he did not regard it as a new political combination, but as the sin of false friends and faithless servants. Using his own voice like the trumpet of a herald, he challenged his rival to a fight as personal as that of two paladins of Charlemagne. His rival did not reply, and was not likely to reply. The modern world had begun. The call echoed unanswered down the ages; for since that day no English king has fought after that fashion. Having slain many, he was himself slain and his diminished force destroyed. So ended the war of the usurpers; and the last and most doubtful of all the usurpers, a wanderer from the Welsh marches, a knight from nowhere, found the crown of England under a bush of thorn.