

# The Effect of the Peasants' Revolt

WE have noticed in previous issues that the Peasants' Revolt was a secular rather than religious movement. It was the culmination of an effort on the part of peasant and artisan to wrest certain privileges from the ruling class of England. Still, the circumstances of the case forced the movement to assume a religious phase. There was no possibility of the workers organizing in any other than a religious manner.

In feudal England there was not that great migration of workers from one section to another that we find today. Most of the inhabitants residing in a manor had been born and reared in the same locality. Manufacturing industry had not yet developed to the stage where a large influx of workers, skilled and unskilled, was imperative. As the whole social group was confined practically within the boundaries of the manor it can easily be understood that the business of every individual would be well known to all his neighbors. There would be no opportunity for effecting a combination of interests along political or industrial lines.

Though the lord of the manor might, himself, be absent from his domain for lengthy periods, his affairs were always carefully attended to by his agents who were left in charge. They would detect, with little difficulty, any organized attempt on the part of the workers to overthrow the power of their owners and rulers. The bands of armed followers possessed by the feudal lords would soon make known as **Lollardy**, which was founded by the serfs, as the latter would be poorly equipped and trained in a military way.

An organization making use of religious weapons, however, would not be subject to the same scrutiny. Such was feasible. For many years previously religious divisions had existed. All sections of the ruling class had not accepted the same plan of salvation. From the rising manufacturing and trading classes bitter hostility to the Church of Rome was becoming apparent. This antipathy had its incentive in the wealth possessed by the church rather than in the doctrines preached, and the schemes formulated, for entering the kingdom of heaven. The established church by relegating to itself the right of specifying what should, and should not, be investigated and explained had become a decided brake on progress and, in consequence, incurred the enmity of those who found it compulsory to understand the ways in which nature worked, as well as the physical properties of the materials they used, before production and exchange were at all possible.

The direct result of this clash between those economic interests was the religious movement known as **Lollardy**, which was founded by the famous ecclesiastic Wiclif. There was nothing proletarian about this religion. The fact that some of the greatest dignitaries of state, persons of power and affluence, aligned themselves with this attack on papal authority is a pretty fair indication of whose interests were best conserved.

But out of the ranks of the Lollards emanated a force unseen by the leaders of church and state. The "poor priests" whom Wiclif commissioned to carry the new doctrines into the midst of the populace carried them to a greater extent than their masters desired. Those priests, coming in contact with the peasantry and artisans of the town, were not slow in seeing the identity of interests existing between all members of the lower orders, and the necessity for combining their forces in opposition to lord and manufacturer. Those, then, were the agents chosen by the discontented serfs to further their cause and present their demands in a formidable manner. Thus, through the channel of a religious movement, the secular interests of a class were presented and advanced.

Just what followed the fateful day at Smithfield

is still problematical. Young Richard, mounted on a fiery charger, receiving from the Mayor the head of the rebel Tyler, and triumphantly dictating terms to a broken and beaten mob would surely indicate that the whole rebellion was a dismal failure, and the conditions of the peasantry rendered doubly unbearable. But such a conclusion is scarcely warranted by the facts. The immediate victory lay with the heads of the state. The rebels were dispersed. The Mayor — Walworth — was knighted and given dictatorial powers over the city, while the insurrections that still lingered or threatened were suppressed by drastic measures. A number of ring-leaders met their doom at the executioners block.

The Essex insurgents sent a committee to the King to arrange affairs in an amicable manner. They were told that the pledges made during Tyler's regime counted for nothing, as they were extorted by force. Anyway they did not conform with the law of the land, and could not be binding. The charters were soon declared invalid. The king himself was greatly incensed. His reply to the committee that "Villeins ye are and villeins ye shall remain," shows that no sentimental sympathy, as told by some modern historians, was fostered by the head of the realm. Now, with the conditions favorable, he was doubtless anxious for vengeance. His first step was to issue a proclamation which formally revoked all the charters issued at Mile End. Both those of manumission and those of amnesty for crimes done in the early days of the revolt were consigned to the flames. But, authoritative and arbitrary as were the measures devised by Richard, it must not be concluded that he possessed, even temporarily, the power to exact vengeance in whatever manner he desired. The victory was at no time so decisive as to warrant the annihilation of the opposing forces.

Neither was London the exclusive scene of revolt. In Kent, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Cambridge they had outbreaks following that of London. The means of communication in those days were crude and unreliable. When the news of Tyler's revolt reached the outlying shires, these in turn resumed the attack, which was continued till several days later, when the news leaked through of Tyler's defeat and death.

There is one thing we cannot fail to notice in the course of the revolt. This is the fact that the most violent outbreaks, and the most determined onslaughts, occurred in those shires where the conditions of the peasants were relatively good. In Kent and Norfolk—the richest shires in England—the greatest attempts at securing freedom were made. The stage they had already reached in their development was sufficient to whet their appetites for a larger measure of freedom even though they had to secure it by armed force. Nowhere either in England of 1381, or in Germany of 1525, do we find those sections on which the feudal yoke pressed heaviest taking any active or stubborn part in the rebellion. They were beyond the stage of asserting themselves.

When parliament met in the following autumn the legislators were in an angry mood. They were not in any degree the representatives of the enslaved class. The interests of their masters—the landlords and manufacturers—were uppermost in their minds. The illegality of the pledges and charters granted by the king was explained. The repeal of the charters was endorsed. They decided that no manumission of serfs could be decided upon without the consent of all who had an interest in the matter. Still regardless of their partiality to the owners, and animosity to the owned, they were compelled to act with caution and deliberation. Harsh measures would only lead to another out-

break. Their experience in the last one was sufficient to convince them of the desirability for peace. Another insurrection and all property rights might collapse. With this in mind they applied the soft pedal. The king was advised to grant amnesty to all with the exception of a few of the most violent and outspoken leaders. No obstacle was placed in the way of manumission.

In examining the authorities for a general summary of the revolt and its results we are unable to find an unanimous verdict. Rogers and Stubbs are convinced that though the formal victory lay with the masters the real victory was with the workers.

Rogers, in particular, draws a rosy picture of the results from the standpoint of the peasants. He claims that all the demands of the landlords were dropped, and that such terror was caused in their ranks by the attack of the peasants that the latter gained all the redress they demanded without delay. The English labourer, he asserts, became virtually free and constantly prosperous for a century or more succeeding the revolt.

On the other hand Reveille, who probably examined more minutely than any other authority the manorial records of the period, is not nearly so confident concerning the rebels' success. In this connection it may be noticed that access to documents of several centuries previously does not necessarily imply that the conclusions arrived at are always sound, or the records properly studied. In many cases two impartial judges might easily arrive at altogether different decisions after viewing the evidence. Maillard, Cunningham and Powell seem to lean to the side of Reveille.

Oman probably sums up the situation as best as such could be done in one paragraph when he says that "Neither villeinage nor all the manorial grievances in the country-side nor the class wars within the towns, were in any sense brought to an end by the popular outbreaks that we have been investigating. The problems were settled so far as they were ever settled, by the slow working out of economic changes."

To the student who makes use of the materialist conception, to explain the cause, origin, and existence of social and political events, the path is clear. The Peasants' Revolt is one of those inevitable manifestations of discontent and violence that class society engenders. There is nothing to be gained either by lavishing sentimental eulogies on the rebel peasants of '81, or by deploring the judgment of a class who made a move to right wrongs that they little understood. A moment's reflection suffices to show that there are periods in the course of class society when the economic conditions make imperative an outbreak on the part of the oppressed. Such spasmodic clashes are inherent in a system of slavery. Regardless of how little or much they may accomplish, so long as the social structure is built on a class foundation, rebellions and revolts are a logical sequence.

The Peasants' Revolt did not terminate, any more than originate, the conflict between landlord and peasant, or merchant and wage laborer. The strife continued afterwards as it had before. Villeinage had started to make way for a new system long before the revolt. Gradually, changing conditions enabled the serfs to commute all liabilities for money payments. The old system died from natural causes over a period of several centuries. When it ceased to function properly there remained but one alternative—it must cease to exist. This villeinage did. It vanished away almost imperceptibly as social and economic changes demanded its removal. The Peasants' Revolt remains as one of the landmarks, or decisive points, in a gradual change.

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