

The Progress of the Peasants' Revolt

Article No. 2.

IN the "Political History of England," by Hunt and Poole, we are told that "If financial and military problems alone had been troubling the realm in 1381, there would have been no outbreak of rebellion, despite of all the irritation caused by the circuits of the Commissioners of the poll tax." This hypothesis seems reasonable. The problems of finance and war were the concern of the ruling classes alone. Whatever differences of opinion might exist in regard to the methods of administering propertied affairs could certainly be adjusted without precipitating a rebellion of such a magnitude, and fraught with such terrible possibilities.

But there were other problems. The whole social system was in a strained condition. The aftermath of the great plague was replete with changes. The relations existing between lord and serf could no longer be similar to those prevailing in the days of the Normans and Plantagenets. Industry, too, had developed considerably and merchant guilds and craft guilds had become but the shadow of what they once had been. The day of the journeyman and master was rapidly approaching. The wool which formerly was shipped to Flanders to be woven into cloth and re-shipped to England, was now, to a large degree, prepared and manufactured at home. Commerce had gradually penetrated the more important sections of Europe and the Orient, and was now a matter to be reckoned with.

In such unsettled conditions a social upheaval would naturally be expected and the short-sighted action of those in charge of governmental affairs materially hastened the impending catastrophe. The resentment against the poll tax, and the methods resorted to by the commissioners and collectors, were an incentive for the villein to launch his premeditated attack on the landlord; for the unchartered townsmen to try grips with the Abbott; and for the ruined tradesman to make a last desperate effort to evict the Flemish supplanter.

The spontaneous outburst in so many shires and towns, and among the members of so many different departments of activity, is sufficient proof of the unsatisfactory nature of the social base. On June 10th, 1381, the storm burst. The rural laborers were the first to rise in insurrection, and they marched to the citadel of master class power—London. East and West the same tale is told by the chroniclers of the time. Large masses of peasants rose in arms demanding that all grievances be speedily redressed.

Tyler, who in all probability had seen service in foreign wars, and who was apparently a man of outstanding ability, took his place at the head of the men of Kent. They liberated Ball from Maidstone gaol together with several others whom they considered to be unjustly imprisoned. Their military equipment was not up to the standard even of those days, but the intense enthusiasm prevailing prohibited a comparison between contending forces. In marching on London, Blackheath and Southwark were occupied, and a knight of the realm, Sir John Manley, was forced to communicate their terms to the king.

The fact that they were able to cross the bridge and enter London proves conclusively that even the rulers themselves within the city were far from unanimous in the desire to crush the movement and murder the leaders. Only a case of divided counsels could make possible such an entry as the rebels effected. A great struggle between the victualling guilds and the clothing guilds had been in existence for many years in London, and the wealthy on the side of the victuallers considered it to be in their interests to assist the insurgents. They had no particular love for the peasants and artisans, or the cause they represented, but political expediency directed their actions. Three aldermen of London were indicted for the part they played in the insurrection, and at York, Winchester, and other towns, there were similar results.

The advent of the peasant army in London was considered the propitious moment for the incensed

artisans and unskilled workers of the city to open the vials of their wrath on the hated Flemings. They had long been unpopular, both with the merchant and manufacturing classes, whom they were forcing out of business by their up-to-date and efficient methods on the industrial field, and by the workers, whom they managed to exploit to a greater degree. Many of the Flemish merchants were dragged from the churches, and their places of business, and summarily dispensed with.

In the ranks of the dominant ruling powers of London, consternation and confusion reigned. They had no time to deliberate. They must act and act quickly. A large and exasperated mob was in their midst, and there was no telling what atrocious crimes they were about to commit. Froissart, whose title was obtained from the crown, and who could always be depended upon to be the willing tool of his benefactors, in explaining the actions of the rebels says: "Thus these ungracious people demeaned themselves like people enraged so that day they did much sorrow in London." No doubt they did. But sorrow soon made way for anger, and anger for action.

The heads of the city, the lords, and the rich burghesses called a quick conference. Some of them were in favor of attacking the rebels at night while at their rest and asleep. It was thought that after their early successes the majority would be drunk, and could be murdered with ease. The heroism and gallantry of the British ruling class was manifested even at that date. Were it not for the fact that the residue of the commons might rise in revolt they would likely have counselled the king to attempt a massacre. To quote Froissart again: "The good men could have done this with ease, for they had in their houses their servants ready in harness." That the liveried lackeys, who attend to the personal wants of their masters, are never to be depended upon to assist in the struggles of the industrial workers is one of the unmistakable lessons of history. Their isolation from the remainder of the proletariat; their close intimacy with their employers, whose favors are essential to their success; make of the menial a practically hopeless slave both physically and mentally.

However, the chances of success attending such a venture as that contemplated looked none too bright. A safer method must be sought. Instead of a murderous assault, a conference was arranged with the rebellious peasants. After carefully reviewing the grounds for revolt, it was decided upon by the king and his counsellors that all matters in dispute should be rectified at once. Richard consented to serfdom being abolished all over the realm; that all feudal services should disappear; and that all holders in villeinage should become free tenants paying rent of 4d. per acre, per year, to the lord.

In addition to these drastic changes, others of a minor nature were also effected. All restrictions on buying and selling were to be eliminated, and market monopolies of all favored places were declared abolished. These latter concessions would seem to indicate that other sections of the community outside the peasantry had axes to grind, and deemed that the proper time and place to present their demands. A general amnesty was also conceded for all irregularities committed during the rising.

The king ordained more than thirty clerks to transfer to paper the conclusions of the conference, and letter patents, sealed with the king's seal were delivered to the embattled peasants. After gaining so decisive a victory, the mass left, but "the great venom remained behind." This, of course, included the leaders—Tyler, Ball and Straw.

What caused the reluctance of these rebels to depart is not easy to understand. The chroniclers would lead us to believe that intoxicated with success, they wanted to display their cruelty and brutality to the limit. A more probable reason, we think, was the fact that they fully realized the state of affairs, and felt certain that, without sufficient pressure being brought to bear, all the generous grants of a bewildered ruling class would be speed-

ily revoked.

Following the Mile End conference, the conduct of the insurgents began to appear so intolerable to the propertied classes, that everyone who had anything to lose saw that armed force must be brought into play to protect his life and property. The houses of several of the most despised rulers were burned, and many of the manor rolls sacked, but apart from a few detested officials of the realm, the number of murders committed was small. That ferocious antagonism towards the whole of the dominant section of society, displayed in France, during the horrors of the Jacquerie, a few years previously, was not manifested in England. As in the case of the Peasants' War in Germany, a little over a century later, bloody deeds of violence were resorted to on but few occasions.

On June 13th, John Ball in Blackheath preached that ever memorable sermon which has served as a platform for the Christian Socialists ever since. He recounted the story of creation, back in the Garden of Eden, when all men were created equal. Servitude of man to man was never introduced till wickedness made its hideous presence felt in the human family. If God had intended a distinction between peoples he would have started with one. The peasants of England now had an opportunity of gaining their freedom, and he strongly advised them to take advantage of the situation.

Ball undoubtedly wielded an enormous influence over the lower strata of English society. For over twenty years he had lived and worked amongst them in country and town. He well understood the division that existed in society and was sincere and fearless in his advocacy of economic redress. But the time was not yet ripe for class emancipation as the productive forces had not yet become social in character, and many changes had yet to take place before such were the case.

As the rebels refused to disperse, the problem of the ruling class was still far from being solved. A second conference between contesting parties was considered necessary. The appointment was made at Smithfield. Richard enquired as to the reasons for the insurgents' delay. Tyler informed him that many urgent matters had yet to be attended to. That all was not satisfactorily arranged at the time of their first meeting. There must, insisted Tyler, be no law above the Statute of Winchester. No man should be outlawed as the result of legal proceedings. The estates of the church should be confiscated after provision was made for present holders and divided up among the laity. All men should be legally free with no differentiation between them except in the case of the king.

To this new list of demands the king practically refused to comply. The growing strength of the law-and-order party, the propertied class, enabled the rulers of the realm to take a very different view of the situation than on the occasion of the first conference. The unlooked for opposition on the part of the state roused the ire of Tyler, who made a personal attack on one of the king's attendants. In the altercation Tyler was slain by Walworth, the Lord Mayor, and fearing a violent outbreak with the probable massacre of the royal retinue, Richard offered his services as leader in place of the murdered Tyler.

But the rebellion by this time had worked itself out. Gradually, the peasants and artisans wended their way back to their respective shires either through fear, hunger, or the thought that they had fully accomplished what they attempted to obtain. Day after day the forces of the state were becoming consolidated in London, and now it was merely a question of time till Richard should have at his disposal a body of troops larger in number, and better trained and equipped than those who meekly accepted his leadership when Tyler was killed.

With this formidable power at his back, Richard had no necessity to maintain his former compromising and conciliating attitude. He now possessed the requisite authority, and was prepared to act. What happened we shall see in our next.

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