

The Tragedy Of Richard II



— Arthur Hoppe

IN THESE trying times, there's no better way to forget your troubles than by curling up with some musty old tale of long-ago days before men and customs changed.

Shakespeare's "Richard II" is a good one. After all, it goes back half a millennium.

★ ★ ★

AS YOU KNOW, Richard was a vain, untrustworthy king, obsessed with power and surrounded by flatterers and intriguers. He ruthlessly persecuted his enemies, ignored the plight of his subjects for the glory of foreign adventures, and soon the economy was in ruins and the country had turned against him.

We can begin with honored John of Gaunt on his death bed speaking of "this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England . . . now bound in with shame, that England, that was wont to conquer others, hath made a shameful conquest of itself." And he goes on to warn Richard. "Landlord of England art thou, and not king: thy state of law is bondslave to the law; and thou . . ."

But Richard cuts him short, calls him a lunatic and goes off to arrange a detente with Ireland. When he gets back, his enemies are up in arms and his friends are deserting him.

"O villains, vipers, damn'd without redemption!" he cries. "Dogs, easily won to fawn on any man! Snakes, in my heart-blood warm'd, that sting my heart!"

But Richard finally realizes all is lost. "Let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings," he tells his few remaining followers. "With solemn reverence: throw away respect, tradition, form and ceremonious duty, for you have but mistook me all this while: I live with

bread like you, feel want, taste grief, need friends: subjected thus, how can you say to me, I am a king?"

And when his enemies demand he come down from the castle walls to the base court to surrender, he says, "Down, down I come like glistening Phaeton, wanting the manage of unruly jades. In the base court? Base court, where kings grown base, to come at traitors' calls and do them grace. In the base court? Come down? Down, court! Down, king!"

So they drag him off to Parliament to force him to abdicate. "What you will have, I'll give and willing, too!" he says. "For do we must what force will have us do."

Then he's paraded through the streets and "men's eyes did scowl on Richard; no man cried, 'God save him!' No joyful tongue gave him welcome home, but dust was thrown on his sacred head, which with such gentle sorrow he shook off. His face still combatting with tears and smiles, the badges of his grief and patience, that had not God, for some strong purpose, steeled the hearts of men, they must perforce have melted."

★ ★ ★

WELL, NATURALLY in the final act Richard's done in. But it's a great tale. You begin by hating this unscrupulous, power-driven leader who tries desperately to squirm off the hook of his fate. But in the end you can't help feeling sorry for him.

He was, after all, a victim of his own hubris, a product of the devious, deceitful times in which he lived, a very human human being.

And you can't ask for a greater tragedy than that — even if it is old hat.