

*The Magna Carta . . . nothing  
but a confirmation of existing customs*

# Runnymede—What Led To It

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Hatred, ambition, greed, unbridled lust for power sharpened into cruelty by the steady decline of the English provinces beyond the Channel sparked a series of chain reactions which culminated in the "Rebellion of the Rich," and which ended only in the signing of a written agreement, the *Magna Carta*. John was king of England, one of the worst that ever sat on her throne. Pronounced by some as a megalomaniac, his name will not die but will live on as a lesson for men to learn by.

1205—Archbishop Hubert of Canterbury, Primate of England is dead, and there is none to succeed him. John strives to thrust in his nominee; the monks of Canterbury in secret elect theirs. But Innocent III withholds assent, and instead consecrates one Stephen Langton, a learned theologian and scholar. No sooner is official word of the appointment received than John flies into a rage — his plans are foiled, his wrath knows no bounds. Persistence in John's refusal to acknowledge the Pope's candidate forces Innocent to announce his intention of laying England under an interdict. The bishops deputed to make this announcement

to the king implore him on their knees and with tears in their eyes to receive Langton into England. "Only dare publish an interdict," shouts John, "and I will make over every bishop and priest to the Pope and take their goods and chattel for myself."

The interdict is published and a shadow spreads over England. The churches are closed, no bells are rung, no services in public performed. The administration of the sacraments, save baptism, penance and marriage, is suspended. Sermons are preached in the graveyards; baptisms, confessions, marriages are administered in front of the church, or, in bad weather, on the porch of the church. Bodies of the dead are decreed to remain unblessed till the revocation of the interdict.

Nor is the king idle; swift and terrible is the revenge. Clerical lands are seized, bishops are forced to flee (only four remaining and submitting to John). Sheriffs are ordered to seize the property of every man who obeyed the papal sentence; priests executed and sometimes crucified. Oppressive taxation, cruel enforcement of forest laws, confiscations

weigh heavily on people high and low.

Meantime France is watching closely. Philip Augustus, the French king, is a seasoned politician, practical-minded, whose ambition is to drive the English from the continent, thus consolidating his own power in France. Ever on the look-out for a *casus belli*, the slightest provocation will find him ready to exchange blows with John.

Among other things, two baronial families, the Angoulemes and the Lusignans, claimed a certain countship. Each had a strong following, each was ready to fight for its rights. Philip, in his capacity as feudal lord and king, determined that the rival claims should be decided in his presence. Acting independently, however, the two parties settle their difficulties by arranging that Isabelle, the Angouleme heiress, should marry Hugh of Lusignan; in this way, the countship would revert to the Lusignans. But John, who was duke of Normandy besides being king of England, took advantage of the situation. Quickly and quietly, he married Isabelle. War broke out, John on the one side, the Lusignans on the other, the latter demanding the intervention of Philip. A truce was agreed upon; it was arranged that the dispute should be tried in the presence of the French king and his court. But John refused to appear before Philip. Declared guilty of felony, he was deprived of his continental fiefs in favor of his nephew Arthur, apparently the true heir to the English crown. A second major war followed; and in

this war Philip won. Normandy, Anjou, Gascony, Touraine, Maine — practically all the English possessions in the continent went to Philip. And in two years' time, the French king achieved his dreams of driving the English from France.

The loss of Normandy worked both ways. The more John needed revenue to defend his declining heritage, the more shrunken were the taxable areas remaining to provide that revenue. Hence, he had to raise every penny he could to increase the income of the still remaining territory. And so, once again, the higher feudal lords, including the clergy, found themselves with an unbearable burden imposed upon them.

John now makes a last attempt to recover his former provinces. A battle is fought near the town called Bovines, but the English forces are badly routed. Known in history as the Battle of Bovines, this victory secured to the French king the permanent dominion over Normandy and the other English possessions in France, with but a small portion of Southern France left to John and his successors.

The effect on England is electric. The bishops and barons have long sought for a constitutional safeguard against the mounting tyranny of the king, and the disaster of Bovines is the spark that ignites the flame. Supported by Archbishop Langton, the nobility rise. They demand guarantees from the king that they suffer this exorbitant taxation no longer. But then, if the king cannot levy the tax, neither can they hope to

fight the French, and so, they would lose all their continental possessions forever.

NOVEMBER 4, 1214 — the nobles meet the king at a place called Bury St. Edmunds. They refuse to pay the tax and threaten to withdraw allegiance from John, unless he would confirm their rights and liberties by charter. They swear to present their demands to the king again soon after Christmas; meantime, they are to prepare for war. From then on, events moved faster.

NOVEMBER 21 — John tried to win over his ecclesiastical opponents by issuing a charter to the Church in which he promised freedom of election.

JANUARY 6, 1215, FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY — the barons put before the king general demands that a charter be issued incorporating administrative reforms. They were by now more eager for war, although the Archbishop and the earl of Pembroke were seeking to avoid war. Through these two men, the king obtained a truce till Easter.

JANUARY 15 (a week later) — John reissued the charter to the Church, ordered his sheriffs to take oaths of allegiance to his person (possibly a precautionary measure). Both sides appealed to the pope.

EASTER WEEK, END OF THE TRUCE — the barons again meet, this time at Stanford, to force the charter from the king. Contemporary records emphasize the fact that the backbone of resistance was a group of northern barons. It must be re-

membered, however, that the king had enemies everywhere, thanks to his genius for alienating people around him. On the other hand, he also had certain supporters among the greatest barons of the land.

Meantime, the archbishop had created a situation which he could no longer control. War was inevitable; the king was as stubborn as usual, determined not to give way unless forced.

MAY 5 — the barons renounced their oath of allegiance to the king and chose a certain Robert Fitz Walker as their new leader. The title he took, "Marshal of the Army of God and Holy Church," emphasizes the righteousness of their cause.

MAY 9 — the king issued a charter to London, granting the privileges of an annually elected mayor. This came too late to win him support. Besides Fitz Walker was lord of Baynard's castle on the outskirts of London, and so, dominated city politics.

MAY 10 — the king offered in vain to submit his quarrel with the barons to arbitration. They enter London, easily quelling opposition. Only then did the king realize he had to come to terms.

On JUNE 15, 1215, King John met the nobility and the clergy at Runnymede, a town east of London. The barons came with a document which survives as the *Articles of the Barons*. It was signed and sealed on the first day of the council, and became the basis for further discussion. The more elaborate charter which the conference produced, con-

tained amendments from both sides. This was the *MAGNA CARTA*.

Estimates have varied as to the true character of the *Magna Carta* and in many cases its importance has been vastly exaggerated. As a matter of fact, it was nothing but a confirmation of existing customs, particularly desired as a safeguard against the exceptional and irregular increase of burdens due to the extremities to which John was reduced. And so, after all allowance has been made for the mistakes due to cen-

turies of indiscriminating admiration, the charter remains as an impressive example of what perhaps is a united and national capacity of resistance to arbitrary government. Drawn up long before the so-called reformation, it is worth nothing that this blow for freedom — such in effect was the Rebellion of the Rich — was struck, not by Protestants or infidels, but by Catholics; and that, not in the "glorious age of enlightenment," but in the supposed darkness and ignorance of the Middle Ages.

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### THREE LITTLE DROPS

Look....!

*Three little drops of water  
Drip into a pool of wine;  
The scarlet 'sea winks welcome*

Then....!

*In the timeless silence  
Of a universe at hush;  
Angelic legions hover  
In anticipation — tense.*

Hark....!

*Priestly lips are trembling  
Words of might and power;  
Heaven's Lord Himself is hast'ning  
To the summons of a whisper.*

Now....!

*The scarlet Blood of Christ  
Brimms the hollow cup;  
And lost in the throbbing purple —  
Three little drops of men!*

Gregorio Binuya, Jr.