# Rebellion

Consider...

The room is dark, a fire guttering in the corner, the stone flagged floor uneven and dirty with the beer slops and pork rinds. In a corner a young man sits, flaxen haired, a jug of cider in his hand, surrounded by a group of older men.

“How’d your first day go, young ‘un, not like reading books eh.”

Jake smiled wearily at this comment. His notoriety as a scholar followed him like a shadow. The village provided a rough schooling for these country folk, enough it was thought by Winchester, to equip with them the rudimentary knowledge required for a labouring class. Teachers were sent down, black gowned and severe in their *francaise,* and ruled over the country children with cane and rod, instilled the mathematics and French needed to understand the harvest demands. Most children were quickly cowed by this alien environment, learned to bow their head, and save their English for when they walked out of the door to chase each other over the heather. Jake though was different. He excelled so clearly in his French that he was perfectly fluent after his first year of studies. Mathematics came so easily to him that he was quickly promoted to a class four years his senior, and soon outstripped even them. The instructor, a young man on his first posting, applied for one of the bursary positions that, in theory, existed in small numbers for the exceptional to attend the great houses of learning in Cambridge or Oxford. His first letter was ignored and, when he wrote for a second time, the terse reply simply stated that all the positions had been filled for this year.

Jake remembered the day the *professuer* told him this. He remembered the look on his face. “Je suis desole Jake”. And then, remarkably, in English, “Here I have something for you, a....erm, a *cadeau”* and there, in his hands, was a book. “Here. This is in French but it is of your people.” Jake looked at the title, ‘Le Morte d’Arthur’. King Arthur.

Look...

The house is a modest one, stone built with a thatch roof set amongst rough pasture, the sea so close you can hear it breathing. A few pigs nose around in a fenced off patch of mud. Inside, a peat fire is smouldering. A girl, in a clean yellow dress, is stood near the window having her long red hair tended to by her mother, who is cooing to her as she brushes, “Ah you look so pretty my love. Ah yes the master will be very pleased”. Suddenly, the girl spins to face the older woman.

“No, mother I won’t. I don’t care. I won’t.” Her voice is strained. She seems unstable, like a leaf in the wind.

Her mother stops brushing and steps back. The blood drains from her face.

“What is this Rebecca? What is this?”

“Mother I can’t. To that old man. This is wrong.”

“But, but, this is madness. You cannot refuse him now. He is on his way. He would be shamed. It would ruin us. Or worse.” And she sank back into the chair and put her face in her hands.

Rebecca paces around the room before finally sinking next to her mother where they embrace. She is an only child, her father died long ago, so long that he is not even a shadow in her memory. Their life has been hard but she has been loved, by her mother, her friends, the village who all pulled around to look after the young mother alone with a girl. A simple life of quiet evenings in the dark cottage listening to the roar of the sea, harvest time where all the villagers came to the fields and sang as they laboured. A life that changed last May when the Master, Sir Percy, on a tour around his estates, took a fancy to the young girl in the fields and selected her as a ‘tithe’ wife. Of age old right and custom, the lords of the estate could select local girls as his tithe wives and, for the young girls and parents in the area, this was a prize so esteemed it was beyond dreaming, for it would mean a route out of the mindless drudgery their adult lives consisted of. Rebecca though, was different.

A short while later, a tall man, in his silk finery, can be seen approaching the house on a fine grey mare. Behind him a retinue of followers, with one of them carrying his standard, a golden eagle stooping on its prey against a blood red backdrop.

He knocks and enters the house and a short while later emerges with the pretty young maiden. She is helped onto the ceremonial white stallion and they turn and leave. Her mother watches as her only child slowly disappears into the heather and furze.

The first rumblings of discontent were heard in the rather isolated settlement of Manchester. When the news finally filtered out, this struck people as strange that it would be here, a ramshackle place, hardly a town, stranded amongst miles of barren sheep cropped moor to its east and north, bog to its west, that the first blows of the rebellion would be landed. In retrospect though, it was not so strange as Manchester was, although such an insignificant town in many ways, a very unusual place in *Angleterre.* For it was here, that some unknown genius had decided to mechanise the yarning trade that most of the locals were engaged in. How Manchester had managed to go undetected so long with this unprecedented venture is unknown but, for a short while, spinning and weaving was conducted in a large hall with machines at speeds and efficiency beyond dreaming. When Winchester finally heard of this, that some locals were gaining an independence and even a power over the landed estates by virtue of these *machines*  the response was immediate. A message was sent to dismantle the machinery immediately and revert to the previous ways. When this was rebuffed a local regiment were sent from Chester, a day’s ride to the south west. On their arrival however, the Major found, not the desultory bunch of peasants with pitchforks he was expecting, but a massed rank of townsfolk blocking their road. When their demands to advance were politely but firmly refused the Major, hopelessly outnumbered and outflanked, had no choice but to withdraw. It was a shocked *Capitaine* who received the Major’s note a few days later, alluding to this retreat and requesting more troops. This time the decision was made to crush this ungrateful little town. A whole battalion was sent and, for two days, the battle raged. When victory was finally won it was at a cost that shocked the country for Manchester had been razed to the ground at the cost of hundreds of lives. But what perhaps was even more shocking, was the battle that the inhabitants had fought was one that had nearly overwhelmed the army. Out of the 3000 men sent to Manchester perhaps 1 in 3 emerged unscathed. For the Mancunians had ignored the request to line up in rows outside the town in the designated field but retreated and lay in wait in the town itself. Rooftops became missile launching areas. Whole lines of men had been lured down streets then ambushed viciously. An area was thought to be secured by the army but then, suddenly, locals (including children!) would emerge from the buildings behind, where they’d lain hidden, and suddenly attack them from the rear. And when defeat was inevitable there had been no surrender. The decision was finally taken to burn the place to the ground and when the few survivors lurched, black faced, out of the smoke and flame of what had been Manchester, the soldiers who had witnessed it, had not felt any glow of victory.

If Winchester had thought this action would quell this rebellion they were wrong. Whole regions were overrun in a seemingly unstoppable tide of anger, and red flags fluttered over entrances to the towns. Some thought the red was symbolic of the blood that was spilt, others of the flames that had consumed Manchester. Perhaps it was only the isolation of the North that saved *Angleterre* then, for when the first advances of the revolutionaries arrived in Derby and Chester the *gouvernement* forces were more prepared. And so the lines were drawn, the roads constantly watched.

But the summer passed and still no attack came. The roads remained silent. Autumn came and went with scarcely a drop of rain, then, in late November the wind shifted to the east and then died. Two weeks of hard frost followed then, on the 7th December 1956, came the biggest winter storms ever known. Communities that were newly used to contact and trade were plunged back into isolation again, an isolation that was to last all winter. And all the food stores, normally filled by trade from the south, stood totally empty. For the North was a labouring class, of poor mines, and rough agriculture, hunting estates and sheep, but very little grain and crops. And this year no carts of barley or wheat had been sent on the long roads to the north.

That winter was a miserable one and when the troops of the King’s men clattered along the cobbles through the melting snows of March, they met little resistance. Children looked at them blankly with swollen bellies; men sat miserably, all bones, hardly moving. And with that the rebellion was over.

Or so it seemed.

But that summer, new troubles flared up. Not in the North, a cowed place now, where cavalry regiments paraded their strength. No, this time it was the South and the West, and the revolt was always strongest where the land was poorest, the sea at its closest. There was to be no siege this time. Penzance was burnt to the ground in September, with most of the other centres of resistance falling soon after. Again though Winchester was frustrated in its attempts to revert to the status quo for reports kept coming in of roving bands of men who would attack and then disperse into the night. By the end of winter though, only a few bedraggled groups remained.

See...

A tower of grey stone against a grey sky. Corfe castle, with its flag, a badger rearing upwards, claws flashing. It stood on a hillock of stones and dominated the land for miles around. For centuries, since the invasion itself, the Percy’s had ruled these lands. During the unprecedented troubles of the last few months, troops had sallied forth from its stronghold to deal with one insurrection after another. Now however, there were only a few locals skulking in the woods that caused problems.

Watch...

Where the rough pasture of Corfe met the thick woods of the coast. A movement? Closer. A covey of men and women, in browns and greens, sheltered in the woods, Jake amongst them, hair golden in the new day. His voice now, as the sun rose, pink streamers of cloud trailing over the wild blue sea.

“This is it lads. Where they least expect it. Our lady tells us his highness always takes an early walk over the grounds. We’ll get him, take him prisoner if we can, kill him if we must, then overpower the castle. The lady tells us that the bulk of the soldiers are on patrol to the West. The servants are ready to rise with us. The red flag will be flying over Corfe castle by noon boys. It’ll reignite the West. And when the news reaches the North good luck on the soldiers based there, they’ll not hold it!”

The men knew this already but appreciated Jake’s words after a cold night, on a morning which, who knows, might yet see their blood spilt. This young lad, seemingly frail, had come into his own last Autumn when the first trouble erupted. He had the gift of putting into words what all of them stumbled towards in their minds. And during the cold months, his words had kept them together. And now, here they were, close to their greatest prize.

There...

A tall man stood at the entrance of the castle. He is at ease with himself as he strides down the steps. Yes the winter had been delicate at times but that was all over now. Just a few dirty peasants here and there. They’ll be captured and killed and things will finally go back to normal. He was troubled though as he walked. The girl, his tithe wife, Rebecca irked him. Formally obedient yes, but there was something always hidden, something in her eyes that seemed to mock him. He had tried everything. Treated her to all the luxuries at his disposal. Fine clothes from Paris. Diamonds from Antwerp. Taken her by coach to Winchester itself where they had danced in the great hall. In bed she gave herself yes, but never seemed, no matter how much he exerted himself, to surrender to him. Always seemed elsewhere. All this should be no matter, he had other tithe wives (and of course not forgetting, no matter how he tried, the Lady Percy). He could, should, simply house her on one of his estates, forget about her, visit her for her *obligation* now and again. But something about her had bewitched him. Damn her, he had taken her from her dirty hovel into his life! Where was her gratitude? It was then, lost in his thoughts, that he heard the rustling from the nearby woods. From out of the trees, a line of men emerged.

A young blond man approached, not twenty yards away now.

“Surrender Percy and we’ll spare your life.”

The Lord forced himself to respond in the ugly native tongue. It muddied and dirtied his mouth as he spoke it.

“I surrender. You have me outnumbered I see.”

Men approached him and grasped his arms.

“Where are your guards?”, Jake asked.

“Guards, ah yes. Why there, and there, and there”.

It was then, as in a dream, Jake saw the Lord’s archers appear. On the roof of the castle. From behind them. From the woods where they themselves had been hiding. How? What?

“You see your rebellion is made of mice, and mice squeak when they are pressed. Everyone talks. Cooks. Cleaners. People always want favour, money.”

Anger flared in Jake as he saw that now, suddenly, everything was lost. He grabbed the Lord and pulled out his sword. The archers raised their bows.

“What if I kill you? That will be a signal. The West will rise again. And the North.”

“Hmm perhaps. I’m not sure. But what I do know is that if you do kill me, within the next minute you and all your friends here will be dead. And by nightfall, your village, with all your friends, all your family, will be razed to the ground with everyone killed.” The Lord paused. Let his words sink in. He could see that already Jake and his men were beat. He just had to let them realise that, so they wouldn’t do anything hasty.

“Now...”, Percy stepped away a few paces. ”Now. Drop your weapons and your men and your village will be saved. You of course, will have to face justice you realise.” That was the card to play with this man, heroes always liked to play the martyr.

Jake looked at the ground. Beaten. What had gone wrong? He was broken out of this reverie by a whirring noise and a cry from a man nearby, wild eyed, a feathered arrow protruding from his chest. Then a sudden flurry of noise as arrows took his ten companions, men he had known from children, men he had fought and lived with all this winter long.

Jake whirled on the Lord, twenty yards away from him now, above him on the steps.

“You promised!”

“Did I?” Percy looked around. “Well I don’t think anyone heard apart from you. And now, now you are dead.”

Jake gasped with pain as the shock of the arrows thudded into him. ‘Not like this’ he thought, and then he fell into the dark.

Sir Percy walked into the room overlooking the gardens. Rebecca was still stood at the window overlooking the gardens where men were now collecting the bodies.

“I am sorry you had to witness that *mon petit*. An ugly business. But a lesson needed to be learnt.”

She remained with her back to him. Silent.

“I respect you in a way for this. Such spirit. But, of course, it cannot persist. It is over now. You realise this”. She turned on him then, pale, tear stained.

“Who?”

“Ah, it does not matter who*.* There is always someone. Now, *mon amour*, I feel...”. The Lord, seated on the bed, started to strip.

Rebecca, walked to him, pulled her shawl over her head. He smiled at her then and reached out for her and it was then that she stabbed the hair pin she had been carrying into his eye. He screamed with pain and was still surprised moments later as his life drained out of him as the young woman beat him with an iron poker.

Stories circulated for months after the event. How the body of Sir Percy had been dumped from the window. How the red flag had fluttered outside the window till the soldiers had beat down the door.

The rebellion though, spluttered back into life. Spread across the south, to Essex and Kent. Then that summer, the first contingent of Highlanders arrived, surprising the border guards, to a riotous welcome in Carlisle. “Are we also not men of the same island?”, their leader asked the cheering crowds.

Winchester skulked and growled. It was to be a bloody year.