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Now is the Time

Written by Melvyn Bragg

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Now is the Time

MELVYN BRAGG



SCEPTRE

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NOW IS THE TIME by Melvyn Bragg extract

As they turned the final bend, Richard stood up to catch a first view. Tyler saw the boy and raised his arm in welcome. Behind him the men, seeing their king, shouted as loudly as their lungs would tolerate, a hail of greeting that whipped up the Thames and seemed to add to the agitation of the waves. Tyler nodded at how well it was all going. How could the King not warm to such a reception?
'Those men are mad,' said Salisbury. 'Listen to them. Those are the cries of wild beasts. We must take care.'

The King smiled. He was back at his coronation four years before, when the whole of London had cheered him, just like these men, wherever he turned, whatever small gesture he made. Once more they were here, the common people who loved him without reserve. His spirit, so secretly nurtured, so closely guarded, was let loose by the cries and he soared. He wished he had wings to fly from the boat to the land and be among them.

'They are not controlled,' agreed the archbishop. 'Their order is merely an appearance of order.' Salisbury breathed deeply and held tightly to the side of the barge as it manoeuvred for space next to the shore and allowed the other barges to form alongside. There were several yards of water between boats and shoreline. The manoeuvres were accompanied by more cries, by whistling and the banging of one implement against another. Salisbury saw the longbows with apprehension. He also saw the pitchforks and sickles, which fed his need for
contempt. Tyler stepped forward, conspicuously, onto a small platform put up by his men. He commanded a lowering of the noise.

'My lord,' he said. 'We greet you as our king!' Those simple words triggered another round, almost a spasm, of welcoming noise.
'Let us help you to land. It is only you we want to meet us, not the traitors with you.' Tyler spoke solemnly, fittingly, he thought.
'We have them named here.' He held up a fistful of papers.
'They must be executed.'
'Be ready to pull away,' Salisbury said urgently, quietly, to the boatmen.
'Master Tyler?' The earl paused and saw that the formal address had worked. 'Allow me first to have some words with His Majesty.'
Consulted as an equal, Tyler nodded, man to man. He noticed that the royal barge pulled away, but only by a couple of yards, an understandable trimming in the search for stability in the choppy shallows of the river. Tyler knelt down, scooped cool water into his hand and splashed his face.

Salisbury cornered the King at the back of the barge, in the enclosed royal space. Man and boy stood apart from the others – one gesture from Salisbury achieved that. He spoke rapidly:
'My lord, I beg you to let me speak freely,' he began.
The boy listened closely. He was fine-tuned to moods and Salisbury emanated danger.
'My lord, you have a kind heart for your subjects and that is good. But they want you to themselves alone, my lord. They will not have you take your councillors or your guards.' For which, given the cries for the heads of some of those councillors on the royal barge, Salisbury was grateful.

‘You must know these peasants for what they are. Study them. My lord, as I speak to you, look over my shoulder at those who would have you surrender to them and be among them.’ Richard did as he was bade.
‘His grace the archbishop has told you what havoc these men made in Canterbury.’ And here Salisbury spoke most forcefully.
‘Those they robbed or executed included William Medmenham, Thomas Holte, from whom they took forty pounds, and Thomas Oferyngton, who was also assaulted. They broke open the castle and let the prisoners free. They burned the properties of Sir Richard de Hoo and Sir Thomas Foy, and stole goods to the value of a thousand pounds. John Tabbe was pulled off his horse and executed in the street. As were others. It was an inferno. My lord, look at these men carefully. Take off your gentleness. Do you want us to deliver you to them?’

He knew he had captured the King’s sympathy. But it was an unprepared remark that clinched it.
‘And think how they smell, my lord! How scabbed and ugly they are. More like animals than men. And look how they dress!’

Richard instinctively glanced at his own exquisite, fresh and unsoiled attire, and then at the splendour of the robes of Salisbury, the archbishop and the others. Finally he scanned the peasants. What common cheap smocks and pitiful cloaks, what filthy garments and faces. He shuddered, enough for Salisbury to pick it up.

‘Who knows? They may carry the plague,’ said Richard, adroitly giving himself an unimpeachable excuse.
‘That also,’ said Salisbury. ‘I fear that most of all.’
He held the King’s gaze, and the boy felt the power of the man’s skill. Salisbury turned, walked unsteadily but resolutely to the side of the barge, and to the barge commander, he murmured,
‘As soon as I have spoken, move away and speedily.’

He called to Tyler and, over him, to the men: ‘Sirs,’ he said, ‘you are not in such order or array that the King should speak with you. We will leave.’ He turned to the oarsmen.
‘Pull away.’ The earl walked briskly to the north side of the barge, leaned over and vomited.

As the rebels saw the barge turn and point upriver, a cry came that tightened the stomachs of the King and his councillors. It was a cry from the depths. Overwhelmed by disappointment, belittled, shamed before his men and distressed that the King had not trusted him, Tyler drew a deep breath and called, ‘We will come to London.’ He paused. ‘And we will meet the King on his own ground.’ He had not been angry until now.

The men parted as he walked up the rise, war drums beating in his head. First to Blackheath to collect their forces and then, this same morning, they would march on the capital.