

Concluded from Last Month:

Mutiny on the Manor

By **RAYMOND E. CRIST**

Many men of the Hudson valley fought valiantly against the British in the War of the Revolution because they believed that once the Revolution was won, not only would the feudal system of the patroonships be abolished by a new democratic government but that the large estates formerly owned by the Tories would be confiscated and divided up into small farms for independent farmers. They were tired of paying toll to the manor lord for the privilege of working manor lands—a tribute due the lord only because an ancestor had been lucky enough to be first on the river land. And by May, 1775, two hundred and twenty-five Hudson River men signed their names to a sheepskin parchment on which it had been written that they were resolved "never to become slaves," and that they would not consent to be ruled

save by themselves. They were ready to fight valiantly for their riverside land and their liberty, and this they did under George Clinton, a burly country lawyer, son of a farmer. He lived on a hill farm and knew what he was fighting for, and the other farmers knew he could be trusted.

At the end of the war these farmers were exultant. There were thousands of acres along the Hudson that had belonged to the Tories and these were to be divided up. But the men of small means did not get the slices of Tory land they had expected. Land speculators fell upon the confiscated properties like vultures upon carrion and even the landed families who had favored independence did not hesitate to grab what they could of the estates stripped from those who had sympathized with the British. The Liv-

ingstons, the Gouverneurs, the Roosevelts and the Beekmans managed to get the bulk of the James De Lancey estate into their possession; with this substantial economic backing these families were able to play an important role in the social, political and business life of the new republic.

But the condition of the farmers remained much the same. On the hundreds of thousands of acres of the Van Rensselaer Grant, on the Livingston Manor the farmers still lived on land first taken on perpetual lease by their ancestors. If they sold that land they were bound to pay a quarter of the price to the manor lord who had forced them into feudal servitude, which consisted not only of sharing crops with the proprietor, but of rendering menial service to him as well. The feudal barons refused to sell their

lands because they could live very comfortably on the poultry and crops due them annually, and their operating costs were low because of the days of labor each tenant must render them. There was no use to point out that the American Revolution had been fought to free men from just such tyranny; the manor lords, or their agents, replied blandly that the Livingstones and the Van Rensselaers were heroes of the American Revolution, and would continue to have officers of the law of the land collect rents from farmers in arrears.

The last act in the great drama to abolish feudalism in the Hudson Valley was a most exciting one. In 1844, Dr. Smith Boughton moved into Columbia county from Rensselaer county, and in a short time it was rumored that the young physician's calls on his neighbors were not merely professional. He was said to be telling the tenants that the titles to the vast land grants were not secure and that he planned to discredit these titles in the courts. He began organizing the farmers who flocked to his standard, and he dressed them in long calico skirts. He harangued them wherever possible: "Down with the rent! The manor lords have taken from us and our fathers in rents many times what our land is worth. Do not pay these robbers who refuse honest citizens the right to own their own homes." The men became known as the "Calico Indians."

There was trouble when Sheriff Henry Miller was about to auction the farms of Steve Decker and Abe Vosburgh, who had gotten behind in paying their annual tribute of chickens and wheat to the Van Rensselaers. The Calico Indians appeared, took the papers from the sheriff at the point of a gun and threw them into the flames of a blazing tar barrel to the wild shouts of a large crowd of tenants. But a few days later Dr. Boughton was arrested and lodged in the jail in Hudson. The inhabitants of the town were nervously tense. Troops were called out, and soon the inns were packed with militia. But there was no bloodshed. Boughton was tried in March, but since not enough

witnesses could be found to swear that he was chief of the Calico Indians, the jury disagreed, and the defendant was out on bail in July. He was to be given a new trial in September, 1845.

Feeling grew bitter during the summer; the courthouse was crowded when the new trial began on September 3. In his opening address, Judge John W. Edmonds denounced in the severest terms the lawbreakers who had taken part in the violent outbreaks against the manor lords. Nevertheless, said the Judge, he had frequently noted that the men who owned their own land seemed to be superior in intelligence, morals and industry to those men who held leases from the manor lords. But violence would be of no avail, nor could they expect the legislature to pass laws impairing the obligations of contracts. Only public opinion and a sense of justice might bring about an amicable settlement of their grievances. But the farmers complained that they had waited for more than a hundred years for public opinion and a sense of justice to do something.

It took two weeks to complete a jury. Desperately the defense tried to get at least one south-county down-renter" accepted, but in vain. Once the jury was completed, John Van Buren, attorney general of the state, turned eight hours of oratory upon them. Counsel Jordan, knowing that he was fighting a losing battle against the great manor lords, against a prejudiced court, and against the letter of the law itself, made the speech of his life—full of disillusion and bitterness. Judge Edmond's charge to the jury ended at eight in the evening and the jury retired.

All that night the roads leading to Hudson were choked with wagons as the down-rent farmers rode to town with hope in their hearts, and in the morning they stood in a great crowd about the courthouse. At last there was the sound of a bell, which signified that the jury had agreed. The Judge returned to the courtroom. The prisoner, when asked if he had anything to say why sentence of the law should not be pronounced upon him, replied

simply that he had never done anything forbidden by the country's institutions as he understood them. The Judge then said that the prisoner had been convicted of the crime of high treason — armed rebellion against a lawful government. He had come as a volunteer agitator into the county, where the tenantry had been quiet, orderly, and law-abiding. He had been the first to introduce disguise for the purpose of evading the law. "In imitation of your example, peaceable inhabitants have been driven from their homes at night. Houses have been torn down, farms laid waste, the law forcibly resisted, and the officers of justice fired upon and wounded while in the discharge of their official duty.

"The sentence of the court is that you be confined in the state prison in the county of Clinton at hard labor, for the term of your natural life."

The down-rent farmers fully realized once more that they had lost in the century-old struggle with the up-rent manor lords. The best leader the farmers had ever had was taken away. In the heart of a free land a man might not own a home without paying tribute. Feudalism and crop-sharing still held sway in the up-river counties. The institution seemed to be proving that man was made for it. But institutions grow out of the ideas of men. Men change. So do their ideas, ideologies, and institutions.

But would feudalism cling permanently to the banks of the Hudson? Public opinion may become a powerful weapon, and even a century ago the means of influencing it were many. One of the most spectacular mediums in this process was the showboat. When the trial of Dr. Boughton already had the people of the Hudson valley seething with rage, the owners of the showboat, "Temple of the Muses," pulled a play out of their repertoire called "The Rent Day." Although the author, Douglas Jerrold, portrayed the terrible condition of the English peasantry, the audience at once visualized the debt-ridden tenantry along the Hudson. Hence the showing of "The Rent Day" did for the

conditions along the Hudson what "Tobacco Road" did almost a century later for conditions among the hill people of Georgia. The hero was an honest farmer whom the landlord's agent swindled and bullied. Thousands of farmers and farmers' sympathizers identified themselves with the hero in his sad plight. The manor lords of the Hudson did not greet with enthusiasm the climax of the play, when the landlord released his tenant from further rents:

"This farm has, I hear, been in your family for sixty years. May it remain so while the country stands! Tomorrow shall give you a freeholder's right to it."

The enthusiastic applause from the audience was a broad hint that similar action on the part of the Hudson valley landlords would be greeted with even heartier response by their poverty stricken tenants.

The down-rent farmers did not know that their defeat represented by the imprisonment of Dr. Boughton was in reality a victory. The doctor, as he entered Clinton Prison, had claimed that he represented "two hundred thousand honorable men." And these, with hundreds of thousands more, at the next year's election swept John Youngs into the governor's chair. As a result the pardon of Boughton and other imprisoned down-rent rioters was obtained, and the state constitution of 1846 was adopted, which finally did away with feudalism in the Hudson Valley. Thus a major change was effected without benefit of revolution. Democracy was proving that it could work. And though the people of the Franklin Community and the Vegetarian Colony, the Owenites, and the Jews in the refuge of Sholam, all saw their utopian democracies on the Hudson fail of survival, democracy itself was proving that it was resilient and long-lived.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give
the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all
cannot have their counterpart of on
the same terms.

Walt Whitman,
"Song of Myself"