Mutiny on the Manor

By RAYMOND E. CRIST

For this is the law of the feudal days,
The law for one and all,
That whoso lives on the baron's land
May feed as he will at the baron's hand,
But whoso feeds at the baron's hand,
Must answer the baron's call.
Thomas Francis Woodlock—"The Law."

The men who settled along the Hudson River after the first land grants were made found awaiting them there the institution of the manorial system, precisely the institution many of them had come from Europe to escape.

The adjustment to the new physical environment kept the first settlers from being too keenly aware of the harsh economic conditions in the new land, but their descendants found galling in the extreme the yoke of New World feudalism, which became more firmly entrenched each year. The struggle for freedom was a long one, lasting well over two centuries; each generation in turn stoically took up the task of the destruction of feudalism with all its injustices. The story of the abolition of this system along the Hudson is a real thriller for those who believe that there is a "middle way," that the democratic way of life is a reality to be cherished, that evolution is preferable to revolution, that ballots are a consummation more devoutly to be wished than bullets.

In 1609, Henry Hudson, in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, in the attempt to find the Northwest Passage to China, sailed up what is now the Hudson River. During the next few years an occasional Dutch ship visited the river and returned to Holland loaded with skins of beaver, mink, otter, and wildcat. The New Netherland Company, organized in 1614, obtained a monopoly on the river trade and sent out fur expeditions so successful that two years later its sponsors asked for continuance of its charter. But the Dutch government decided to leave the river open to competition for a few years while it planned a powerful monopolistic stock company to handle the American trade—the West India Company.

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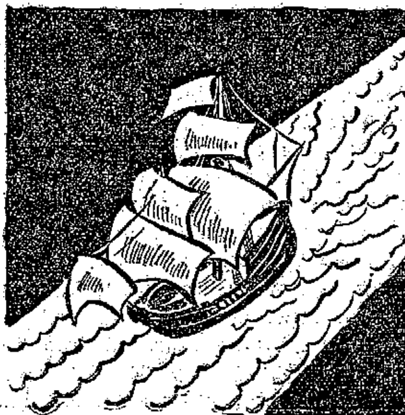
That organization was founded in 1621, and in April of 1624 thirty families of Walloons embarked on the ship "New Netherland," bound for the mouth of the Hudson. They were mostly Protestant refugees, farmers from the South Netherlands where they had felt the pressure of Roman Catholic Spain. They were enjoined to obey orders, be loyal Reformed Calvinists, and convert the heathen. They must live where they were told for at least six years, lending a hand at all communal enterprises, selling all materials for export to the Company, recognizing the company's rights to all mining properties and pearl fisheries. They must not sell for profit the products of their handicraft (so as not to compete with the industries of Holland). They must plant only what they were ordered to plant.

But agriculture did not thrive along the Hudson under the West India Company although that company was committed to colonize its "sphere of influence." The fur trade was so profitable that it absorbed the interest of the Company. It was easy to encourage petty traders to come out from Holland, for they reaped a great deal of profit without actually making the New World their home; but it was far less easy to get worthy Dutch peasants to leave their prosperous homeland to settle on the wild shores of the Hudson.



However, many stockholders of the Company wanted to participate as individuals in the virgin land; accordingly, in 1629 the directors of the Company, by a "Charter of Freedom and Exemptions" established the patroon system. This charter permitted grants of great river estates to members of the Company who within four years would settle at least fifty persons on the lands granted them. The patroonships might extend sixteen miles along one shore of the river or eight miles along both shores, and "as far inland as the situation of the occupants will permit." The patroon had to secure the title to his lands from the Indians, but once he had obtained it he might hold the land as a "perpetual fief of inheritance." This last factor was of utmost importance because it meant the creation of a feudal sort of tenant system along the Hudson River which was destined to be at the root of many of the unhappy developments along the valley for the next two hundred years.

One of the first patroons, Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, never set foot on his great Hudson River estate which he named Rensselaerswyck, but he did figure out various ways in which to make a paying business out of his absentee landlordship. He even tried to enforce an edict prohibiting any trader not under contract to him from sailing into the waters of his patroonship! As for his tenants, he cheated and bulldozed them at every turn. He had his own store where supplies were sold to his tenants at enormous profit to himself.

But these great estates were held as a "perpetual fief of inheritance," and remained in the hands of one family for centuries, just as the haciendas of Mexico. A farmer might be granted a perpetual leasehold by which he could live in a house and till fields for his lifetime, provided that he agreed to give each year a share of his crops and his increase of livestock to the owner of the land. As early as 1650 the secretary of Pieter Stuyvesant wrote to the Lords of the Dutch States-General that in Rensselaerswyck "no one down to the present time can possess a foot of land of his own but is obliged to take upon rent all the land which he cultivates."

In the late 1670's Robert Livingston married the widow of Nicolass Van Rensselaer, and started on the road to property accumulation on a large scale. By his marriage—his wife had been born Alida Schuyler —he was connected with two of the most powerful up-river families, and he at once set out to gain control of other lands along the river. Nor was he deterred by scruples which might have been acquired as a result of his religious upbringing. He became the purveyor of supplies to the military of the province, and in this capacity was able to "pinch an estate out of the poor soldiers' bellies." The huge estate comprised more than 160,000 acres of land, and the Van Rensselaers lived very comfortably off the rents of the permanent leases. But the large grants to single families meant slow development of the country. Settlers preferred to live where they could own their own land. Livingston had on his great grant but four or five cottages in which lived poverty-stricken vassals too poor ever to become independent farmers. And with the years it became even more impossible for free farmers to gain a foothold. A year or so of bad crops and the farmer's leaseholds were cancelled and they found themselves ejected for debt. Dispossessed tenants then took over their acres—people with even less chance of voicing grievances if or when there were any.

About a century after the consolidation of the vast domains along the lower Hudson, such as those of Frederick Phillipse, Stephen Van Cortlandt or Captain John Evans, conditions were ripe for a revolt of the feudal serfs against harsh conditions. One of the most spectacular revolts was led by William Prendergast, who had taken his land in perpetual lease from Frederick Phillipse. He could not even will his land to his wife or heirs without the consent of the manor lord, and even if the consent was granted, his heirs must pay the lord a third of the value of the farm in order to keep it. Furthermore, whoever held the lease must each year pay the manor lord, for the privilege, a portion of his crop, poultry and labor. And the manor lord felt secure in his aristocratic belief in the superiority of the few. He was the judge in his own manorial court, where he

sentenced recalcitrant tenants to corporal punishment and imprisonment. He himself paid the British Crown for his vast domaine an annual quitrent of four pounds, twelve shillings—exactly the same amount which William Prendergast was obliged to pay each year for his few acres. . . The injustice of it rankled and he decided to right it.

Hundreds of farmers rallied to the cry of "Pay your honest debts—but not a shilling for a rent." They raided Justice Peters, dragged him through the mud, gave him a flogging and a ducking as well. The manor lords in vain denounced the "Levelers," who marched into the manors of the Hudson Highlands and declared manor rents abolished, and who put dispossessed farmers back on their land. And the army of vengeance under William Prendergast grew as it moved southward on New York. The city was in a panic, on the verge of hysteria. General Gage sent three hundred troops to restore law and order; but such precautions proved unnecessary because, persuaded by his Quaker wife that by so doing needless bloodshed would be avoided, Prendergast gave himself up. She stood by him "without indecorum," at his trial, heard the judge pronounce the sentence of high treason against his majesty, and immediately galloped off to interview the Governor, Sir Henry Moore. Within six months William Prendergast was back on his farm with his wife and children, but the farmers had not won their battle. There were many years of struggle before them. The process of increasing their holdings was carried forward by the manor lords, which meant futher impoverishment of the tenantry. By the time of the war of the Revolution nearly five-sixths of the inhabitants of Westchester County were poor manor tenants, practically serfs, bound to the soil.

The second installment of Dr. Crist's article will appear in the October issue.