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Chapter Eleven

Sc. 47

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ML: 1. 3 The English army did not head for Cherbourg, which was a heavily fortified port. You mention that his destination was a closely guarded secret and so it was, but what was guarded was the Normandy destination. Edward had good specialist knowledge about good and bad places to land in Normandy and the bay at St-Vaast-la-Hogue must have been carefully chosen.

l. 9 St Marco? Is this a reference to Sante-Marcouf? If so, the name La Hogue is the more usual name for this location in contemporary sources.

l. 13 Burgesses would be a better word than burgers (which has German connotations).

l. 15 *Fat Sal* is an unusual name for a ship at this time. All of the ones I have run across have had saints names or names such as *Grace Dieu*. Also, the master would have been paid a fee for himself and his men and a rent for his ship (hiked up to a war-time premium) and whatever they could seize during the coastal raids, rather than a share in plunder as such.

SC: Caris and Mair arrived in Portsmouth=can nuns just scoot off? far-fetched? they need subterfuge as boys at the beginning to escape the nunnery, or a false pretense perhaps of going on a pilgrimage, but a pilgrimage to a war zone? KF: They have not escaped, they have gone with the blessing of their prioress.

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What is the date in Sec. 44?

In July of 1346, King Edward III assembled the largest invasion fleet England had ever seen, almost a thousand ships, at Portsmouth. Contrary winds delayed the armada, but they finally set sail for France on 11 July, headed for Cherbourg in Normandy.

Caris and Mair arrived in Portsmouth two days later, just missing Bishop Richard who had sailed with the king. They were unable to follow immediately, because every seaworthy vessel on the south coast of England had been commandeered.

Would he be going as a fighting man or as a clergyman?
Answered later.

The king's destination was a closely guarded secret, for he wanted to catch the French unprepared; but Caris learned later that the army disembarked the next day on a broad beach at Saint-Marco. However, the fleet did not return immediately. Instead, the ships followed the coast eastward for three weeks, tracking the invading army as far as Caen; while Caris and Mair fretted with impatience at a nunnery just outside Portsmouth.

At Caen the ships loaded their holds with booty: jewellery, expensive cloth, and gold and silver plate looted by King Edward's army from the prosperous burgers of Northern Brittany? France. Then they returned. Do all readers know that Brittany is in N. France?

One of the first back was the *Fat Sal*, which was a cog—a broad-built cargo ship with rounded prow and stern. Her captain, Rollo Black, was full of praise for King Edward. Rollo's pay for his part in the invasion was a generous share of the plunder.

Also let's see him
Caris in her habit

"Biggest army I've ever seen," Rollo said with relish. He thought there were at least fifteen thousand men, about half of them archers, and probably five thousand horses. "But you'll have your work cut out to catch up with them. They must be about a week ahead of you."

Caris and Mair went aboard the *Fat Sal* with two sturdy ponies, called Blackie and Stamp. They could not travel any faster than the army's horses, but the army had to stop and fight every so often, Caris reasoned, and that should enable her to catch up.

When they reached the French side and sailed into the estuary of the Orne, early on a sunny August morning, Caris sniffed the breeze and noticed the unpleasant smell of old ashes. Studying the landscape on either side of the river, she saw that the farmland was black. It looked as if the crops had been burned in the fields. "Standard practice," Rollo said. "What the army can't take must be destroyed, otherwise it could benefit the enemy." As they neared the port of Caen they passed the hulks of several burned-out ships, presumably fired for the same reason.

The king had continued east from Caen. "No one knows his plan," Rollo said. "He may turn south and advance on Paris, or swing north to Calais and hope to meet up with his Flemish allies. But you'll be able to follow his trail. Just keep the blackened fields on either side of you."

Before they disembarked, Rollo gave them a ham. "Thank you, but we've got some smoked fish and hard cheese in our saddlebags," Caris said to him. "And we have a little money—we can buy anything else we need."

"You may find the king hasn't left much food for you to buy," the captain replied. "An army is like a plague of locusts, they strip the country bare."

Ralph's
horse was
called
Blackie

well,
incidentally
has
happened
to him?

ML: 1. 3 Caen was a city, not a town; it had a cathedral and other attributes of cities (size etc).

1. 12 Locals would simply know that they were foreign and that would likely be enough to make people hostile. Most French people would not be able to tell the difference between accents in a foreign language.

1. 17 How long is this after the battle? If Caris was at Portsmouth for three weeks from the 13th July, then they arrive on about the 4th August. The battle was on the 26th and the English army left on the 31st; burial would have been long over by this time (especially in high summer). There is also the issue of travel time. Edward III's armada did make the journey overnight from the Isle of Wight to La Hogue, but that is a shorter trip than Portsmouth to Caen, which would have taken longer.

1. 22 The well-dressed survivor. The total of those killed at Caen was 2,000-2,500. Edward II puts the population of the city at 30,000, but that is likely to be too high and 20,000 seems a better total.

SC: Caen pop =1000hsh? I'd say more: it had a population of between 7 and 10k

KF: Population of about 12,000. The old town securely walled. Two great abbeys outside the town. Bridge with gatehouse between old and new towns. River can be forded at low tide. (Like Kingsbridge, the old town walled, a newer suburb on the other side of the river.) See Mortimer p228.

“You’re very kind.”

“Pray for me, if you would. I’ve committed some heavy sins in my time.”

Caen was a large town of about a thousand houses, not quite as big as Kingsbridge. The two halves, Old Town and New Town, were divided by the River Odon, spanned by St Peter’s Bridge. On the river bank near the bridge, a few fishermen were selling their catch. Caris asked the price of an eel. She found the answer difficult to understand: the fisherman spoke a dialect of French she had never heard. When at last she was able to make out what he was saying, the price took her breath away. Food was so scarce, she realised, that it was more precious than jewels. She was grateful for Rollo’s ham.

They had decided that, if they were questioned, they would say they were Irish nuns travelling to Rome. Now, however, as she and Mair rode away from the river, Caris wondered nervously whether the local people would know from her accent that she was English.

There were not many local people to be seen. Broken-down doors and smashed shutters revealed empty houses. There was a ghostly hush—no vendors crying their wares, no children quarrelling, no church bells. The only work being done was burial: small groups of grim-faced men were bringing corpses out of buildings and loading them on to carts. It looked as if the English army had simply massacred men, women and children. They passed a church where a huge pit had been dug in the churchyard, and saw the bodies being tipped into a mass grave, without coffins or even shrouds, while a priest intoned a continuous burial service. The stench was unspeakable.

A well-dressed man, who evidently had survived the massacre somehow, bowed to them and asked if they needed assistance. His proprietorial manner suggested that he was a

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SC: Norman French not French

ML: Desertion of the countryside; if Caris is a week behind the army, then it is likely that people would have begun to return to their properties - in summer there would be crops to get in. (See below for comments about crop burning)

l. 15 Nuns would be likely to know the names and places of their own order, perhaps, but they would need advice on how to get there from locals. The roads east of Caen are not straightforward and there were a number of routes across this countryside. They would follow the line of destruction, but this would necessarily have taken them to the nunneries.

leading citizen concerned to make sure no harm would come to religious visitors. Caris declined his offer of help, noting that his French was no different from that of a nobleman in England. Perhaps, she thought, the lower orders all had their different local dialects, while the ruling class spoke with an international accent.

The two nuns took the road east out of town, glad to leave the haunted streets behind. The countryside was deserted, too. The bitter taste of ash was always on Caris's tongue. Fields and orchards either side of the road had been fired. It had been a dry summer, and the devastation was comprehensive. Every few miles, they rode through a heap of charred ruins that had once been a village. The peasants had either fled before the army or died in the conflagration, for there was almost no life: just the birds, the occasional pig or chicken overlooked by the army's foragers, and sometimes a dog, nosing through the debris in a bewildered way, trying to pick up the scent of its master in a pile of cold embers.

Their immediate destination was a nunnery half a day's ride from Caen. Whenever possible, they would spend the night at a religious house: nunnery, monastery, or hospital—as they had on the way from Kingsbridge to Portsmouth. They knew the names and locations of fifty-one such institutions between Caen and Paris. If they could find the places, as they hurried in the scorched footprints of King Edward, their accommodation and food would be free and they would be safe from thieves—and, Mother Cecilia would add, from fleshly temptations such as strong drink and male company.

Cecilia's instincts were sharp, but she had not sensed that a different kind of temptation was in the air between Caris and Mair. Because of that temptation, Caris had at first refused Mair's request to come with her. She was focussed on moving fast, and she did not want to complicate her mission by entering into a passionate entanglement—or by

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ML: 1. 11 Water would probably taste of ash, or effluent, more than cinders at this point, especially if they were following directly in the wake of the army.

refusing so to do. On the other hand, she needed someone courageous and resourceful as her companion. Of all the nuns, Mair was the only one who had the guts to go chasing the English army through France. So, in the end, Caris had brought Mair.

She had planned to have a frank talk before they left, saying that there should be no physical affection between them while they were away. Apart from anything else, they could get into terrible trouble if they were seen. But, somehow, she had never got around to the frank talk. So here they were in France with the issue still hanging unmentioned, like an invisible third traveller riding between them on a silent horse.

They stopped at midday by a stream on the edge of a wood, where there was an unburned meadow for the ponies to graze. Caris cut slices from Rollo's ham, and Mair took from their baggage a loaf of bread bought early yesterday in Portsmouth. They drank the water from the stream, though it had the taste of cinders.

Caris controlled her eagerness to get going, and let the horses rest for the hottest hour of the day. Then, as they were getting ready to leave, she was startled to see someone watching her. She froze, with the ham in one hand and her carving knife in the other.

Mair said: "What is it?" Then she followed Caris's gaze, and understood.

Two men stood a few yards away, in the shade of the trees, staring at them. They looked quite young, but it was hard to be sure, for their faces were sooty and their clothing was filthy.

After a moment, Caris spoke to them in French. "God bless you, my children."

They made no reply. Caris guessed they were unsure what to do. But what options were they considering? Robbery? Rape? They had a predatory look.

Whatever else they might want, they must be starving, she calculated. She said to

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CM: I think the horse on which Ralph escaped was called Blackie as well, and this is clearly not the same one.

Mair: "Quickly, give me two trenchers of that bread."

Mair cut two thick slices off the loaf. Caris cut corresponding slabs from the ham. She put the ham on the bread, then said to Mair: "Give them one each."

Mair looked scared, but she walked across the glade with an unhesitating step and offered the food to the men.

They both snatched it and began to wolf it down. Caris thanked her stars that she had guessed right.

She quickly put the ham in her saddlebag and the knife in her belt, then climbed on to Blackie. Mair followed suit, stowing the bread and mounting Stamp. Caris felt safer seated on a horse.

The taller of the two men came towards them, moving quickly. Caris was tempted to kick her pony and take off, but she did not quite have time; and then the man's hand was holding her bridle. He spoke through a mouthful of food. "Thank you," he said in the heavily-accented local French.

Caris said: "Thank God, not me. He sent me to help you. He is watching over you. He sees everything."

"You have more meat in your bag."

"God will tell me who to give it to."

There was a pause, while the man thought that over; then he said: "Give me your blessing."

Caris was reluctant to extend her right arm in the traditional gesture of blessing—it would take her hand too far away from the knife at her belt. It was only a short-bladed food knife of the kind carried by every man and woman, but it was better than nothing.

Then she was inspired. "Very well," she said. "Kneel down."

The man hesitated.

"You must kneel to receive my blessing," she said, raising her voice a fraction.

Slowly, the man knelt, still holding his food in his hand.

Caris turned her gaze on his companion. After a moment, the second man did the same.

Caris blessed them both, then kicked Blackie and quickly rode away. Mair was close behind.

Caris mulled over the incident anxiously as they rode through the afternoon. The sun shone cheerfully, like a fine day in Hell. In some places, smoke was still rising fitfully from a patch of woodland or a smouldering barn. The countryside was not quite deserted, she realised gradually. She saw a pregnant woman harvesting beans in a field that had escaped the English torches; the scared faces of two children looking out from the blackened stones of a manor house; and several small groups of men, usually flitting through the fringes of woodland, moving with the alert purposefulness of scavengers. The men worried her. They looked hungry, and hungry men would do anything. She wondered whether she should stop fretting about speed and worry instead about safety.

Finding her way to the religious houses where she planned to stop was also going to be more difficult than she had thought. She had not anticipated that the English army would leave such utter devastation in its wake. She had assumed there would be people around to direct her to the nunneries where she and Mair were going to stay. It was hard enough in normal times to get such information from men and women who had never travelled farther than the nearest market town. Now her interlocutors would also be elusive, terrified or

predatory.

She knew by the sun that she was heading east, and she thought, judging by the deep cartwheel ruts in the baked mud, that she was on the main road. Tonight's destination was a village named, after the nunnery at its centre, Hôpital-des-Soeurs. As the shadow in front of her grew longer, she looked about with increasing urgency for someone whom she could ask for directions.

Children fled from her approach in fear; and she was not yet desperate enough to risk getting close to the hungry-looking men; so she hoped to come across a woman. There were no young women anywhere, and Caris had a bleak suspicion about the fate they might have met at the hands of the marauding army.

At last they found a wrinkled old woman sitting under an apple tree next to a substantial house that had somehow escaped burning. She was eating small apples wrenched from the tree long before they were ripe. She looked terrified. Caris dismounted, to reassure her. The old woman tried to hide her poor meal in the folds of her dress, but she seemed not to have the strength to run away.

Caris addressed her politely. "Good evening, Mother. Will this road take us to Hôpital-des-Soeurs, may I ask?"

The woman seemed to pull herself together, and answered intelligently. Pointing in the direction in which they were heading, she said: "Through the woods and over the hill."

Caris saw that she had no teeth. It must have been almost impossible to eat unripe apples with your gums, she thought with pity. "How far?" she asked.

"A long way."

All distances were long at her age. "Can we get there by nightfall?"

“On a horse, yes.”

“Thank you, Mother.”

“I had a daughter,” said the old woman. “And two grandsons. Fourteen years and sixteen. Fine boys.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“The English,” said the old woman. “May they all burn in hell.”

“What were the boys’ names, Mother?”

“Giles and Jean.”

“I will pray for the souls of Giles and Jean.”

“Have you any bread?”

Caris looked around, to make sure there was no one lurking nearby ready to pounce, but they were alone. She nodded to Mair, who took from her saddlebag the remains of the dinnertime loaf and handed it to the old woman.

The woman snatched it from her and began to tear into it with her gums.

Caris and Mair rode away.

Mair said: “If we keep giving our food away, we’re going to starve.”

“I know,” said Caris. “But how can you refuse?”

“We can’t fulfil our mission if we’re dead.”

“We are nuns, after all,” Caris said with some asperity. “We must help the needy, and leave it to God to decide when it’s time for us to die.”

Mair was startled. “I’ve never heard you talk like that before.”

“My father hated people who preached about morality. We’re all good when it suits us, he used to say: that doesn’t count. It’s when you want so badly to do something wrong—

when you're about to make a fortune from a dishonest deal, or kiss the lovely lips of your neighbour's wife, or tell a lie to get yourself out of terrible trouble—that's when you need the rules. Your integrity is like a sword, he would say: you shouldn't wave it about until you really need to use it. Not that he knew anything about swords."

Mair was silent for a while. She might have been mulling over what Caris had said, or she might simply have given up the argument in disgust: Caris was not sure.

They passed through a patch of woodland then breasted a rise, as the old woman had forecast. Looking down on a shallow valley they saw another burned village, the same as all the rest but for one thing: a small cluster of stone buildings. "This must be Hôpital-des-Soeurs," said Caris. "Thank God."

She realised, as she approached, how fond she had become of nunnery life. She looked forward eagerly to the ritual washing of hands, a meal taken in silence, bedtime at nightfall, even the sleepy peacefulness of Matins at three o'clock in the morning. After what she had seen today, the security of those grey stone walls was alluring, and she kicked the tired Blackie into a trot.

There was no one moving around outside the place, but that was not really surprising: it was a small house in an out-of-the-way village, and you would not expect the kind of hustle and bustle seen at a major priory such as Kingsbridge. Still, at this time of day there should have been a column of smoke from a kitchen fire as the meal of compline was prepared. However, as she came closer she saw more ominous signs, and a sense of dismay slowly began to engulf her. The building nearest to her, which looked like the church, appeared to have no roof. The windows were empty sockets, lacking glass. Some of the stone walls were blackened, as if by smoke.

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ML: The burning of the nunnery is certainly possible on this campaign, as goodness knows the English army had a fondness for arson, but the French chronicles were not reluctant to accuse the English of such atrocities and comparatively few were mentioned on this campaign (the level of destruction was much greater on later campaigns). Edward hanged men at Beauvais for attacking a monastery at a time when he was racing to stay ahead of the French army. The murder of nuns would have made a tremendous stink in the chronicles, and there are no such incidents recorded by the writers of this time. This is not to say that the army were nice gentle souls, just that the level of atrocity was lower on this campaign than subsequent ones.

The place was silent: no singing, no bells, no cries of ostlers or kitchen hands. It was deserted, Caris realised as she reined in her horse. And it had been fired, like every other building in the village. Most of the stone walls were still standing, but the timber roofs had burned and fallen in, and the windows had shattered in the heat.

Mair said unbelievably: "They set fire to a nunnery?"

Caris was equally shocked. She had believed that invading armies invariably left ecclesiastical buildings intact. It was an iron rule, people said. A commander would not hesitate to put to death a soldier who violated a holy place. She had accepted it without question. "So much for chivalry," she said.

They dismounted and walked, stepping cautiously around charred beams and scorched rubble, to the domestic quarters. As they approached the kitchen door, Mair gave a shriek and said: "Oh, God, what's that?"

Caris knew what it was. "It's a dead nun." The corpse on the ground outside the kitchen was naked, but Caris knew that the woman had been a nun by the cropped hair. The body had somehow survived the fire. The woman was about a week dead. The birds had already eaten her eyes, and parts of her face had been nibbled by some scavenger.

Also, her breasts had been cut off with a knife.

Mair said in amazement: "Did the *English* do this?"

"Well, it wasn't the French."

"Our soldiers have foreigners fighting with them, don't they? Welshmen and Germans and so on. Perhaps it was them."

"They're all under the orders of our king," Caris said with grim disapprobation. "He brought them here. What they do is his responsibility."

They stared at the hideous sight. As they looked, a mouse came out of the corpse's mouth. Mair screamed and turned away.

Caris hugged her. "Calm down," she said firmly, but she stroked Mair's back to comfort her.

"Come on," she said after a moment. "Let's get away from here."

They returned to the horses. Caris resisted an impulse to bury the dead nun: if they delayed, they would still be here at nightfall. But where were they to go? This was where they had planned to stay the night.

"We'll go back to the old woman with the apple tree," she said. "Her house is the only intact building we've seen since we left Caen." She glanced anxiously at the setting sun. "If we push the horses, we can be there before it gets dark."

They urged their tired ponies forward, and headed back along the road. Directly ahead of them, the sun sank all too quickly below the horizon. The last of the light was fading when they arrived back at the house by the apple tree.

The old woman was happy to see them, expecting them to share their food, which they did, eating in the dark. Her name was Jeanne. There was no fire, but the weather was mild, and the three women rolled up side by side in their blankets. Not fully trusting their host, Caris and Mair lay down clutching the saddlebags that contained their precious food.

Caris lay awake for a while. She was pleased to be on the move after such a long delay in Portsmouth, and they had made good progress in the last two days, but she was worried about their safety. Her assumption that soldiers would leave nuns alone had been quite wrong: what she had seen at Hôpital-des-Soeurs convinced her of that. They needed a new disguise.

Where is her concern for what
Richard will or won't do? ✓
Or is he's dead? X
And the rich folks who's left behind
in Kingsbridge? All recovering? ✓

When she woke up at first light, she said to Jeanne: "Your grandsons—do you still have their clothes?"

The old woman opened a wooden chest. "Take what you want," she said. "I have no one to give them to." She picked up a bucket and went off to fetch water.

Caris began to sort through the garments in the chest. Jeanne had not asked for payment. Clothes had little monetary value after so many people had died, she guessed.

Mair said: "What are you up to?"

"Nuns aren't safe," Caris said. "We're going to become pages in the service of a minor lord—Pierre, Sieur of Longchamp in Brittany. Pierre is a common name and there must be lots of places called Longchamp. Our master has been captured by the English, and our mistress has sent us to find the army and negotiate his ransom."

"All right," Mair said eagerly.

"Giles and Jean were fourteen and sixteen, so with luck their clothes will fit us."

Caris picked out a tunic, leggings, and a cape with a hood, all in the dull brown of undyed wool. Mair found a similar outfit in green, with short sleeves and an undershirt.

Women did not wear underdrawers, but men did, and fortunately Jeanne had loving^{ly} washed

the linen garments of her dead family. Caris and Mair could keep their own shoes: the practical footwear of nuns was no different from what men wore.

"Shall we put them on?" Mair said.

Caris looked out of the back door. There was no sign of Jeanne: she was probably performing her morning ablutions. "All right—but let's be quick."

They pulled off their nuns' robes. Caris had never seen Mair undressed, and she could not resist a peek. Her companion's naked body took her breath away. Mair's skin seemed to

Wouldn't there be some excitement about finding this stuff

glow like a pink pearl. Her breasts were generous, with pale girlish nipples, and she had a luxuriant bush of fair pubic hair. Caris was suddenly conscious that her own body was not as beautiful. She looked away, and began quickly to throw on the clothes she had chosen.

She pulled the tunic over her head. It was just like a woman's dress, except that it stopped at the knees instead of the ankles. She pulled up the linen underdrawers and the leggings, then put her shoes and belt back on.

Mair said: "How do I look?"

Caris studied her. She had put a boy's cap over her short blonde hair, and tilted it at an angle. She was grinning. "You look so happy!" Caris said in surprise.

"I've always liked boys' clothes." Mair swaggered up and down the small room. "This is how they walk," she said. "Always taking up more space than they should." It was such an accurate imitation that Caris burst out laughing.

She was struck by a thought. "Are we going to have to pee standing up?"

"I can do it standing up, but not with undershorts on—too inaccurate."

Caris giggled. "We can't leave off the drawers—a sudden flurry of wind could expose our...pretences."

Mair laughed. Then she began to stare at Caris in a way that was strange but not entirely unfamiliar, looking her up and down, meeting her eyes and holding her gaze.

"What are you doing?" Caris said.

"This is how men look at women," Mair said. "As if they own us. But be careful—if you do it to a man, he becomes aggressive."

"This could be more difficult than I thought."

"You're too beautiful," Mair said. "You need a dirty face." She went to the fireplace

and blackened her hand with soot. Then she spread the soot over Caris's face. Her touch was like a caress. My face isn't beautiful, Caris thought; no one ever thought so—except Merthin, I suppose.

"Too much," Mair said after a minute, and wiped some off. "That's better." She smeared Caris hand, and said: "Now do me."

Caris spread a small quantity of soot on Mair's jawline and throat, making her look as if she might have a faint beard. It felt very intimate, to be looking so hard at her face, and touching her skin so softly. She dirtied Mair's forehead and cheeks. Mair looked like a pretty boy—but she did not look like a woman.

They studied one another for a moment. A smile played on the red bow of Mair's lips. Caris felt a sense of anticipation, as if something momentous was about to happen. Then a voice said: "Where are the nuns?"

They both turned around guiltily. Jeanne stood in the doorway, holding a heavy bucket of fresh water, looking frightened. "What have you done to the nuns?" she said.

Caris and Mair burst out laughing, and suddenly Jeanne recognised them. "How you've changed yourselves!" she exclaimed.

They drank some of the water, and Caris shared out the rest of the smoked fish for breakfast. It was a good sign, she thought as they ate, that Jeanne had not recognised them. If they were careful, perhaps they could get away with this.

They took their leave of Jeanne and rode off. As they breasted the rise before Hôpital-des-Soeurs, the sun came up directly ahead of them, casting a red light on the nunnery, making the ruins look as if they were still burning. Caris and Mair trotted quickly through the village, trying not to think about the mutilated corpse of the nun, and rode on into the sunrise.

Even with the disguised, ~~refuse~~
they move more wally.

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Sc.48

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KF: Ralph finds Ed III a man after his own heart. The king loves to fight. On the campaign, he is always ready to lead a sortie or raiding party, risking his own life without balancing cost and benefit. His appetite for violence is insatiable. His army spares no one, not even priests and nuns, as they rob, rape and burn the countryside. The older knights and earls have commented on his brutality, protesting for example about the systematic rape of the women of Caen, but Edward refused to do anything. When he was told that some of the citizens of that town had thrown stones at soldiers who were ransacking their homes, he ordered that everyone in the town should be killed and the town burned, and only relented when Sir Godfrey de Harcourt protested. See Mortimer, p229.

When the campaign is over, as soon as he gets home he will start organising mock wars—tournaments—with armies of knights in expensive specially-made costumes. He holds several of these a year.

KF: The king's army had got close enough to Paris to attack it, but Edward had backed away. Perhaps he flinched from attacking a city with an adult male population of fifty thousand. (He had visited Paris in his youth so he knew it.) By now, the Parisians would have heard what had happened in Caen, and would know that the arrival of the English king meant wholesale murder, rape and looting; so they would fight fiercely to defend their homes and families. He could not have deployed his archers in hand-to-hand street fighting. But if Paris was not his target, what was the objective of this invasion? Did he even have one?

Justifications for the war: (i) French attacks on the south coast in the late thirties. But this problem was dealt with by the battle of Sluys. (ii) French support for Scottish invasions. But Edward would have been much better placed to deal with the Scots if he had not been distracted by war with France. (iii) Edward's claim on the French throne. But he and everyone else knew that this was a fantasy: the French nobility would never have accepted the English king as their king.

And the cost of the war crippled the English wool trade.

KF: Each soldier paid one third of his war profits to his captain, who in turn had to pay one third of *his* gains (both what he could steal for himself and what he got from his men) to the king. Stonor Saunders, 147.

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By Tuesday 22 August, the English army was on the run.

Ralph Fitzgerald was not sure how it had happened. They had stormed across Normandy from west to east, looting and burning, and no one had been able to withstand them. Ralph had been in his element. On the march, a soldier could take anything he saw—food, jewellery, women—and kill any man who stood in his way. It was how life ought to be lived.

Then they had come to the river Seine. At Rouen, they had found the bridge destroyed, and the town—on the far side of the water—heavily fortified. King Philippe VI of France himself was there, with a mighty army.

The English marched upstream, but they found that Philippe had been there before them, and one bridge after another was either strongly defended or in ruins. However, the town of Poissy had been evacuated, and the English engineers were able to rebuild its bridge—fighting off a French attack at the same time—and the army crossed the river.

By then it was clear that Philippe had assembled an army larger by far than the English, and Edward decided on a dash to the north, to join up with an Anglo-Flemish force invading from the north-east.

Philippe gave chase.

based on what? ✓

How late? ✓

Next page.

p789

ML: 1. 2 The sorties along the river had been more than reconnaissance parties, they had been concerted attempts to get across the river at places such as Pont Remy (where the bridge had not been destroyed). They had not been able to fight their way across, because the French were prepared for them to attack the obvious places. The Blanchetaque was a less likely place for them to get across and they no doubt hoped for the element of surprise.

1. 23 The word retinue might be better than contingent. Earls had retinues of considerable size made up of knights, squires and men-at-arms and sometimes archers.

Today the English were encamped to the south of the Somme, and the French were playing the same trick as they had at the Seine. A reconnaissance party reported that every bridge had been destroyed, every riverside town heavily fortified. Even more ominously, the party's movements had been shadowed, on the far bank, by a force of men; and the English had recognised the flag of Philippe's most famous and frightening ally, John, the Blind King of Bohemia.

Edward had started out with fifteen thousand men in total. In six weeks of campaigning, many of those had fallen, and others had deserted, to find their way home with their saddlebags full of gold. He had about ten thousand left. Reports of spies suggested that in Amiens, a few miles upstream, Philippe now had twelve thousand mounted knights and sixty thousand foot soldiers, an overwhelming advantage in numbers. Ralph was more *better* it this comes with it in an event. No. worried than he had been since he first set foot in Normandy. The English were in trouble.

Next day they marched downstream to Abbeville, location of the last bridge before the Somme widened into an estuary; but the burgesses of the town had spent money, over the years, strengthening the walls, and the English could see it was impregnable. So cocksure were the citizens that they sent out a large force of knights to attack the vanguard of the English army, and there was a fierce skirmish before the locals withdrew back inside their walled town.

When Philippe's army left Amiens, and started advancing from the south, Edward found himself trapped in the point of triangle: on his right the estuary, on his left the sea, and behind him the French army, baying for blood.

That afternoon, Earl Roland came to see Ralph.

Ralph had been fighting in Roland's contingent for seven years. The earl no longer

p790

ML: 1. 10 The pottage/pea soup is probably about right, there may have been some fish about at this stage as well, if the Earl's organisation was good. Meat at this stage was only what you or your foragers could steal - some days good, some days bad. It may have been that as they were not marching at speed, this day the food was a bit better.

regarded him as an untried boy. Roland still gave the impression he did not much like Ralph, but he certainly respected him, and would always use him to shore up a weak point in the line, lead a sally, or organise a raid. Ralph had lost three fingers from his left hand, and had walked with a limp when tired ever since a Frenchman's pikestaff had broken his shinbone outside Nantes in 1342. Nevertheless, the king had not yet knighted Ralph, an omission which caused Ralph bitter resentment. For all the loot he had garnered—most of it held for safekeeping by a London goldsmith—Ralph was dissatisfied.

When Roland appeared, Ralph was sitting in a field of ripening wheat that had been trampled to shreds by the army. He was with Alan Fernhill and half a dozen comrades, eating a gloomy dinner, pea soup with onions: food was running out, and there was no meat left. Ralph felt as they did—tired from constant marching, dispirited by repeated encounters with broken bridges and well-defended towns, and scared of what would happen when the French army caught up with them.

Roland was now an old man, his hair and beard white, but he still walked erect and spoke with authority. He had learned to keep his expression stonily impassive, so that people hardly noticed that half his face was paralysed. He said: "The estuary of the Somme is tidal. At low tide, the water may be shallow in places. But the bottom is mostly thick mud, making it impassable."

"So we can't cross," said Ralph. But he knew Roland had not come here just to give him bad news, and his spirits lifted optimistically.

"There may be a ford—a point where the bottom is firmer," Roland went on. "If there is, the French will know."

"You want me to find out."

“As quick as you like. There are some prisoners in the next field.”

Ralph shook his head. “Soldiers might have come from anywhere in France, or even other countries. It’s the local people who will have the information.”

“I don’t care who you interrogate. Just come to the king’s tent with the answer by nightfall.” Roland turned and walked away.

Ralph drained his bowl and leaped to his feet, glad to have something aggressive to do. “Saddle up, lads,” he said.

They headed north-east, towards the estuary. Every peasant living within half a day’s walk would know of the ford if there was one, Ralph calculated. They would use it constantly, crossing the river to buy and sell livestock, to attend the weddings and funerals of relatives, to go to markets and fairs and religious festivals. They would be reluctant to give information to the invading English, of course—but he knew how to deal with that.

They rode away from the army into territory that had not yet suffered from the arrival of thousands of men, where there were sheep in the pastures and crops ripening in the fields. They came to a village from which the estuary could be seen, in the far distance. They kicked their horses into a canter along the grassy track that led into the village. As they expected, the peasants fled in all directions, the women carrying babies and children, the men holding an axe or a sickle.

Ralph and his companions had played out this drama twenty or thirty times in the past few weeks. They were specialists in gathering intelligence. Usually, the army’s leaders wanted to know where the local people had hidden their stocks. When they heard the English were coming, the sly peasants drove their cattle and sheep into woods, stashed sacks of flour in holes in the ground, and hid bales of hay in the bell tower of the church. They knew they

would probably starve to death if they revealed where their food was, but they always told sooner or later. On other occasions the army needed directions, perhaps to an important town, a strategic bridge, a fortified abbey. The peasants would usually answer such inquiries unhesitatingly, but it was necessary to make sure they were not lying, for the shrewder among them might try to deceive the invading army, knowing the soldiers would not be able to return to punish them.

As Ralph and his men chased the fleeing peasants across gardens and fields, they ignored the men and concentrated on the women and children. Ralph knew that if he captured them, their husbands and fathers would come back.

He caught up with a girl of about thirteen. He rode alongside her for few seconds, watching her terrified expression. She was the type he liked, with a child's face and a woman's body; probably a virgin. In slightly different circumstances he would have enjoyed her sexually, as he had done with several similar girls in the last few weeks.

But today he had other priorities. He turned his courser to cut her off. She tried to dodge him, tripped over her own feet, and fell flat in vegetable patch. Ralph leaped off his horse and grabbed her as she got to her feet. She screamed and scratched his face, so he punched her in the stomach a couple of times to quiet her. Then he grabbed her hair, which was long and dark. Walking his horse, he began to drag her back to the village. She stumbled and fell, but he just kept going, pulling her along by the hair; and she struggled to her feet. After that, she did not fall again.

They gathered in the little wooden church. The eight English soldiers had captured four women, four children between the ages of six and twelve, and two babies in arms. They made them sit on the floor in front of the altar. A few moments later, a man ran in, babbling

p793

ML: 1. 12 It would have been much more likely that cattle were moved across the Blanchtaque rather than sheep. Moving sheep through a ford is tricky due to their fleeces getting waterlogged. The man would be much more likely to be a cow-herd, than a shepherd.

in the local French, begging and pleading; and four others followed.

Ralph was pleased.

He stood at the altar, which was only a plain table, painted white. "Quiet!" he shouted. He waved his sword. They fell silent. He pointed at a young man. "You," he said. "What are you?"

"A leather worker, lord. Please don't harm my wife and child, they've done you no wrong."

He pointed to another man. "You?"

The girl he had captured gasped, and Ralph concluded that they were related: father and daughter, he guessed.

"Just a poor shepherd, lord."

"A shepherd?" That was good. "And how often do you take your flock across the river?"

"Once or twice a year, lord, when I go to market."

"And where is the ford?"

He hesitated. "Ford? There's no ford. We have to cross the bridge at Abbeville."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, lord."

He looked around. "All of you—is this the truth?"

They nodded.

Ralph considered. They were scared—terrified—but they could still be lying.

"If I fetch the priest, and he brings a Bible, will you all swear on your immortal souls that there is no ford across the estuary?"

“Yes, lord.”

But that would take too long. Ralph looked at the girl he had captured. “Come here.”

She took a step away from him.

The shepherd fell to his knees. “Please, lord, don’t harm an innocent child, she is only thirteen years old—“

Alan Fernhill picked up the girl and threw her across the intervening space. Ralph caught her. She began to cry.

Ralph said: “You’re lying to me, all of you. There is a ford, I’m sure there is. I just need to know exactly where.”

“All right,” said the shepherd. “I’ll tell you, but leave the child alone.”

“Where is the ford?”

“It’s a mile downstream from Abbeville.”

“What’s the name of the village?”

The shepherd was thrown by the question for a moment, then he said: “There is no village, but you can see an inn on the far side.”

He was lying. There was always a village by a ford.

Ralph took the girl’s hand and placed it on the altar. He drew his knife, a broad-bladed basilard dagger. With a swift movement, he cut off one of her fingers. His heavy blade easily split her small bones. The girl screamed in pain, and her blood spurted red over the white paint of the altar. All the peasants cried out with horror. The shepherd took an angry step forward, but was stopped by the point of Alan Fernhill’s sword.

Ralph kept hold of the girl with one hand, and held up the severed finger on the point of his knife.

"You're the devil himself," the shepherd said, shaking with shock.

"No, I'm not." Ralph had heard that accusation before, but it still stung him. "I'm saving the lives of thousands of men," he said. "And if I have to, I'll cut off the rest of her fingers, one by one."

"No, no."

"Then tell me where the ford really is." He brandished his knife.

The shepherd shouted: "The Blanchetaque, it's called the Blanchetaque, please leave her alone!"

"The Blanchetaque?" said Ralph. He was pretending scepticism, but in fact this was promising. It was an unfamiliar word, but it sounded as if it might mean a white platform.

"Yes, lord, they called it that because of the white stones on the river bottom that enable you to cross the mud." He was desperate and terrified, tears streaming down his face, so he was probably telling the truth, Ralph thought with satisfaction. The shepherd babbled on: "People say the stones were put there in olden times, by the Romans, please leave my little girl alone."

"Where is it?"

"Ten miles downstream from Abbeville."

"Not a mile?"

"I'm telling you the truth this time, lord, I swear by my life!"

"And the name of the village?"

"Saigneville."

"Is the ford always passable, or only at low tide?"

"Only at low tide, lord, especially with livestock or a cart."

“But you know the tides.”

“Yes.”

“Now, I have only one more question for you, but it is a very important one. If I even suspect you may be lying to me, I will cut off her whole hand.” The mother screamed. Ralph said: “You know I mean it, don’t you?”

“Yes, lord, I’ll tell you anything!”

“When is low tide tomorrow?”

A look of panic came over the shepherd. “Ah—ah—let me work it out!” The man was so wrought up that he could barely think.

The leather worker said: “I’ll tell you. My brother crossed yesterday, so I know. Low tide tomorrow will be in the middle of the morning, two hours before noon.”

“Yes!” said the shepherd. “That’s right! I was just trying to calculate. Mid-morning or a little after. Then again in the evening.”

Ralph kept hold of the girl’s bleeding hand. “How sure are you of that?”

The shepherd said: “Oh, lord, as sure as I am of my own name, I swear!”

The man probably did not know his own name right now, he was so distracted with terror. Ralph looked at the leather worker. There was no sign of deceit on his face, no defiance or eagerness to please in his expression: he just looked a bit ashamed of himself, as if he had been forced, against his will, to do something wrong. This is the truth, Ralph thought exultantly. I’ve done it.

He said: “The Blanchetaque. White stones on the bottom. Ten miles downstream from Abbeville, at the village of Saigneville. Low tide at midmorning tomorrow.”

“Yes, lord.”

p797

ML: The story about Gobin Agache and the finding of the Blanchetaque is very well known and perhaps needs to be acknowledged here in some way.

l. 16 There were many under-marshals who assisted the marshals but who were not noblemen. The under-marshals were likely to be men-at-arms and may have been noble or gentry, but not necessarily. I do have some names of under-marshals if you want.

Ralph let go of the girl's wrist, and she ran to her father. Ralph looked down at the pool of blood on the altar. There was a lot of it, for such a little girl. "All right, men," he said. "We're finished here."

*

The trumpets woke Ralph at first light. There was no time to light a fire or eat breakfast: the army struck camp immediately. Ten thousand men had to travel six miles by mid-morning, most of them on foot. The Prince of Wales's division led the march off, followed by the king's division, then the baggage train, then the rearguard. Scouts were sent out to check how far away the French army was.

Ralph was in the vanguard, with the sixteen-year-old prince. Last night the king had said: "Well done, Ralph Fitzgerald." Ralph had long ago learned that such words meant nothing. He had performed numerous useful or brave tasks for Edward, Roland, and other nobles, but he still had not been knighted. On this occasion he felt little resentment. His life was in as much danger today as it had ever been, and he was so glad to have found an escape route for himself that he hardly cared whether anyone gave him credit for saving the entire army.

As they marched, dozens of marshals patrolled constantly, heading the army in the right direction, keeping the formation together, maintaining the separation of divisions, and rounding up stragglers. The marshals were all noblemen, for they had to have the authority to give orders. King Edward was fanatical about orderly marching.

They headed north. The land rose in a gentle slope to a ridge from which they could see the distant glint of the estuary. From there they descended through cornfields. As they passed through villages the marshals ensured there was no looting, because they did not want

p798

ML: 1. 1 There would have been no time to set fire as well; indeed there is not a lot of reference to setting fire to crops or to a deliberate "scorched earth policy" on this campaign. There does not seem to have been the concern about ensuring the countryside could not support the enemy. This policy was certainly a part of later campaigns of the Hundred Years War in France.

1. 22 The number was more like 3,000 to 5,000; however a man on the English side of the river may not have appreciated this.

to carry extra baggage across the river. They also refrained from setting fire to the crops, for fear the smoke might betray their exact position to the enemy.

The sun was about to rise when the leaders reached Saigneville. The village stood on a bluff thirty feet above the river. From the lip of the bank, Ralph looked over a formidable obstacle: a mile and a half of water and marshland. He could see the whitish stones on the bottom marking the ford. On the other side of the estuary was a green hill. As the sun appeared on his right, he saw on the far slope a glint of metal and a flash of colour, and his heart filled with dismay. The strengthening light confirmed his suspicion: the enemy was waiting for them.

Ralph looked at the water. It was flowing west, showing that the tide was going out; but it was still too deep for a man to wade. They would have to wait.

The English army continued build up at the shore, hundreds more men arriving every minute. If the king had tried to turn the army around and go back now, the confusion would have been nightmarish.

A scout returned, and Ralph listened as the news was related to the Prince of Wales. King Philippe's army had left Abbeville and was marching this way along the south bank of the river.

The scout was sent to determine how fast the French king was moving.

There was no turning back, now, Ralph realised with fear in his heart: the English had to cross.

He studied the far side, trying to figure out how many French were on the north bank. It was not a large force, but he calculated several hundred men. The greater danger was the army of tens of thousands coming up from Abbeville. Ralph had learned, in many encounters

p799

GH: 'Hugh Despenser' shouldn't this be Edward le Despenser? Both Hughs were executed back in 1326.

ML: l. 18 Retinue a better word than group, for the Earl's followers.

with the French, that they were extraordinarily brave—foolhardy, sometimes—but they were also undisciplined. They marched in disarray, they disobeyed orders, and they sometimes attacked, to prove their valour, when they would have been wiser to wait. But if they could overcome their disorderly habits, and get here in the next few hours, they would catch King Edward's army in midstream. With the enemy on both banks, the English would be slaughtered.

After the devastation the English had wrought on France in the last six weeks, they could expect no mercy.

Ralph thought about armour. He had a fine suit of plate armour that he had taken from a French corpse at Cambrai seven years ago. But it was on a wagon in the baggage train. Furthermore, he was not sure he could wade through a mile and a half of water so encumbered. He was wearing a steel cap and a short cape of chain mail, which was all he could manage on the march. It would have to do. The others had similar light protection. Most of the infantrymen carried their helmets hanging from their belts, and they would put them on before coming within range of the enemy; but no one marched in full armour.

The sun rose high in the east. The water level fell until it was just knee deep. The noblemen came from the king's entourage with orders to begin the crossing. "The archers go first," Earl Roland said to his group. "Begin firing as soon as you are near enough to the other side. Then, when you reach the beach, the archers scatter left and right to let the knights and men-at-arms through." It sounded simple, Ralph thought; orders always did. But it was going to be bloody. The enemy would be perfectly positioned, on the slope above the river, to pick off the English soldiers struggling unprotected through the water.

The men of Hugh Despenses led the advance, carrying his distinctive black-on-white

Lord of what?

p800

ML: l. 21 The crossbowmen used pavises (they were large and rectangular) rather than shields and they were heavy and not very mobile - used for hiding behind rather than like a regular shield. It is unlikely that they would have used them here where they would need to move off the river bank sharpish. See also p. 802, l. 2.

The crossbows described here are of a later, 15th century design. The 14th century ones were smaller and were shot by a single man.

l. 15 Shooting sideways like this can be done, especially by experienced archers; Morgen has seen it done by modern longbow archers.

banner. His archers waded in, holding their bows above the water line, and the knights and men-at-arms splashed along behind. Earl Roland's group followed, and soon Ralph and Alan were riding through the water.

A mile and a half was not far to walk but, Ralph now realised, it was a long way to wade, even for a horse. The depth varied: in some places they walked on swampy ground above the surface, in others the water came up to the waists of the infantry. Men and animals tired rapidly. The August sun beat down on their heads while their wet feet grew numb with cold. And all the time, as they looked up ahead, they could see, more and more clearly, the enemy waiting for them on the north bank.

Ralph studied the opposing force with growing trepidation. The front line, along the shore, consisted of crossbowmen. He knew that these were not Frenchmen but Italian mercenaries, always called Genoese but in fact coming from various parts of Italy. The crossbow had a slower rate of fire than the longbow, but the Genoese were going to have plenty of time to reload while their targets struggled slowly through the shallows. Behind the archers, on the green rise of the slope, stood foot soldiers and mounted knights ready to charge.

Looking back, Ralph saw thousands of English soldiers crossing the river behind him. Once again, turning back was not an option; in fact, those behind were pressing forward, crowding the leaders.

Now he could see the enemy ranks clearly. Ranged along the shore were the heavy wooden shields of the crossbowmen. Behind each shield, Ralph knew, would be a team of two or three archers. Their steel bows could not be drawn by hand, but required a special crank to cock them; so the archers in each team would take turns to shoot, two men cranking

p801

CM: *Academic* – another of those modern words that bother me

and loading while the third took aim and fired.

As soon as the English came within range, the Genoese began to shoot.

At a distance of three hundred yards, their aim was inaccurate, and the bolts fell with diminished force. All the same, a handful of men and horses were hit. The injured fell and drifted downstream to drown. Wounded horses thrashed in the water, turning it bloody. Ralph's heart beat faster.

As the English came closer to the shore, the accuracy of the firing improved, and the bolts landed with greater power. The crossbow was slow, but it fired a steel-tipped iron bolt with terrible force. All around Ralph, men and horses began to fall. Some of those hit died instantly. There was nothing he could do to protect himself, he realised, with an apprehension of doom: either he would be lucky, or he would die. The air filled began to fill with the awful noise of battle: the swish of deadly arrows, the curses of wounded men, the screams of horses in agony.

The archers at the front of the English column tried to shoot back, but their six-foot longbows dragged their ends in the water, and were awkward to fire when held at an angle; so at first they had little impact.

Crossbow bolts could penetrate armour plate at close range, but this was academic—none of the English were wearing any serious armour. Apart from their helmets, they had little protection against the deadly hail.

Ralph would have turned and run if he could. However, behind him ten thousand men and horses were pressing forward, and would have trampled him and drowned him. He had no alternative but to lower his head to his horse's neck and urge it on.

The survivors among the leading English archers at last reached shallow water and

p802

ML: 1. 1 At short range the arrows would not go in a trajectory over the pavises (if they were there), but would go quite straight.

1. 3 The arrows would have steel, not iron tips.

began to deploy their longbows effectively. They shot in a trajectory, over the tops of the Genoese shields. Once they got started, English bowmen could shoot twelve arrows a minute. The missiles were made of wood—usually ash—but they had sharpened iron tips, and when they fell like rain they were terrifying. Suddenly the fire from the enemy side lessened. Some of the shields fell. The Genoese were driven back, and the English began to reach the foreshore.

As soon as the archers put their feet on solid ground they dispersed left and right, leaving the ground clear for the knights, who charged out of the shallows at the enemy lines. Ralph had seen enough battles by now to know what the enemy strategy should have been at this point: they needed to hold their line of shields and let the crossbowmen continue to slaughter the English on the beach and in the water. But the chivalric code of the French nobility would not permit them to hide behind low-born archers, and they broke the line of shields to ride forth and engage with the English knights.

The Genoese fell back, and the beach was a melee. Ralph's heart pounded with fear and excitement. The French had the advantage of charging downhill, and they were fully armoured; they slaughtered Hugh Despenser's men wholesale. The vanguard of the charge splashed into the shallows, cutting down the men still in the water.

Earl Roland's archers reached the edge. Those who survived gained the shore and divided. Ralph felt that the English were doomed, and he was sure to die, but there was nowhere to go but forward, and suddenly he was charging, head down by his horse's neck, sword in the air, straight at the French line. He ducked a scything sword and reached dry ground. He struck uselessly at a steel helmet, then his charger cannoned into a smaller horse, throwing its rider to the mud. Ralph whirled his horse around, went back, and prepared to

p803

ML: 1. 2 The jury is out on the effectiveness of swords against plate armour. It could be of some use, especially if used from above (on a horse for example). Also effectiveness would depend on the angle of attack and whether the weaker joints in armour were hit.

charge again.

His sword was of limited use against plate armour, but he was a big man on a big horse, and his best hope was to knock enemy soldiers off their mounts. He charged again. At this point in a battle he felt no fear. Instead, he was possessed by a exhilarating rage that drove him to kill as many of the enemy as he could. When battle was joined, time stood still; he fought from moment to moment; so that later, when the action came to an end, if he was still alive, he would be astonished to see that the sun was setting and a whole day had gone by. Now he rode at the enemy again and again, dodging their swords, thrusting where he saw an opportunity, never slowing his pace, for that was fatal.

At some point—it might have been after a few minutes or hours—he realised, with incredulity, that the English were no longer being slaughtered; in fact, he saw, they seemed to be winning ground and gaining hope. He detached himself from the melee and paused, panting, to take stock.

The beach was carpeted with corpses, but there were as many French as English, and Ralph realised that the enemy had made a strategic error. As soon as the knights charged, the Genoese had stopped firing, for fear of hitting their own side; so the French had lost most of the advantage they had enjoyed of picking off the English still in the water. Ever since then the English had streamed out of the estuary in their hordes, all following the same orders, archers spreading left and right, knights and infantrymen pushing relentlessly forward, so that the French were being overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. Glancing back at the water, Ralph saw that the tide was now rising again; so those English still in the water were desperate to get out.

As he caught his breath, the French lost their nerve. Forced off the beach, chased up

the hill, overwhelmed by the army stampeding out of the rising water, they began to retreat. Hardly able to believe their luck, the English pressed forward; and, as so often happened, it took only a few minutes for retreat to turn into flight, with every man for himself.

Ralph looked back over the estuary. The baggage train was in midstream, horses and oxen pulling the heavy carts across the ford. There was scrappy fighting on the far side, now. The vanguard of King Philippe's army must have arrived, and Ralph thought he recognised, in the sunlight, the colours of the Bohemian light cavalry. But they were too late.

He slumped in his saddle, suddenly weak with relief. The battle was over. Incredibly, against all expectations, the English had slipped out of the trap.

For today, they were safe.

49

49

Caris and Mair arrived in the vicinity of Abbeville on 25 August, and were dismayed to find the French army already there. Tens of thousands of foot soldiers and archers were camped in the fields around the town. On the road they heard, not just regional French accents, but the tongues of places father afield: Flanders, Bohemia, Italy, Savoy, Majorca.

The French and their allies, like Caris and Mair, were chasing King Edward of England and his army. Caris wondered how she and Mair were going to get ahead in the race.

When they passed through the gates and entered the town, late in the afternoon, the streets were crowded with French noblemen. Caris had never seen such a display of costly clothing, fine weapons, magnificent horses and new shoes, not even in London. It seemed as if the entire aristocracy of France was here. The innkeepers, the bakers, the street entertainers and the prostitutes were working non-stop to fulfil the needs of their guests. Every tavern was full of counts and every house had knights sleeping on the floor.

The abbey of St Peter was on the list of religious houses where Caris and Mair had planned to take shelter. But, even if they had still been dressed as nuns, they would have had trouble getting into the guest quarters: the King of France was staying there, and his entourage took up all the available space. The two Kingsbridge nuns, disguised now as Christophe de Longchamp and Michel de Longchamp, were directed to the grand abbey

p806

SC: barber, Martin Chirurgien: a barber would not be called a surgeon 14th c France: surgeons were of high status in France; Guy de Chauliac was a surgeon, and he was the personal doctor to three popes and the most respected medical man of his times. Call Martin a surgeon, not a barber. In France, the barbers were separate from them from 1210 on.

church, where several hundred of the king's squires, grooms, and other attendants were bedding down at night on the cold stone floor of the nave. However, the marshal in charge told them there was no room, and they would have to sleep in the fields like everyone else of low station.

The north transept was a hospital for the wounded. On the way out, Caris paused to watch a barber-surgeon sewing up a deep cut on the cheek of a groaning French man-at-arms. The surgeon was quick and skilful, and when he had finished she said admiringly: "You did that very well."

"Thank you," he said. Glancing at her he added: "But how would you know, laddie?"

She knew because she had watched Matthew Barber at work many times; but she had to make up a story quickly, so she said: "Back in Longchamp, my father was surgeon to the *Sieur*."

"And are you with your *Sieur* now?"

"He has been captured by the English, and my lady has sent me and my brother to negotiate his ransom."

"Hmm. You might have done better to go straight to London. If he isn't there now, he soon will be. However, now that you're here, you can earn a bed for the night by helping me."

"Gladly."

"Have you seen your father wash wounds with warm wine?"

Caris could wash wounds in her sleep. In a few moments she and Mair were doing what they knew best, taking care of sick people. Most of the men had been hurt the previous day, in a battle at a ford over the river Somme. Injured noblemen had been attended to first,

p807

GH: who at this time was the 'King of Rome', Emperor Louis (Ludwig) IV (d. Oct. 1347) who would at some stage I suppose have been King of the Romans The kingdom of Majorca (or the Balearics) was annexed permanently to Aragon in 1343/49?

and now the surgeon was getting around to the common soldiers. They worked non-stop for several hours. The long summer evening turned to twilight and candles were brought. At last all the bones had been set, the crushed extremities amputated, and the wounds sewn up; and the barber, Martin Chirurgien, took them to the refectory for supper.

They were treated as part of the king's company, and fed stewed mutton with leeks. They had not tasted meat for a week. They even had good red wine. Mair drank with relish. Caris was glad they had the opportunity to build up their strength, but she was still anxious about catching up with the English.

A knight at their table said: "Do you realise that in the abbot's dining room, next door, four kings and two archbishops are eating supper?" He counted on his fingers as he named them: "The kings of France, Bohemia, Rome and Majorca, and the archbishops of Rouen and Sens."

Caris decided she had to see. She went out of the room by the door that seemed to lead to the kitchen. She saw servants carrying laden platters into another room, and peeped through the door.

The men around the table were undoubtedly high-ranking—the table was laden with roasted fowl, huge joints of beef and mutton, rich puddings and pyramids of sugared fruits. The man at the head was presumably King Philippe, fifty-three years old with a scatter of grey hairs in his blond beard. Beside him, a red-faced younger man who slightly resembled him was holding forth. "The English are not noblemen," he said, spitting with fury. "They are like thieves, who steal in the night then run away."

Martin appeared at Caris's shoulder and murmured in her ear: "That's my master—Charles, count of Alençon, the king's brother."

A new voice said: "I don't agree." Caris saw immediately that the speaker was blind, and concluded that he must be King Jean of Bohemia. "The English cannot run much longer. They are low on food, and they're tired."

Charles said: "Edward wants to join forces with the Anglo-Flemish army that has invaded north-east France from Flanders."

Jean shook his head. "We learned today that that army has gone into retreat. I think Edward has to stand and fight. And, from his point of view, the sooner the better, for his men are only going to become more dispirited as the days go by."

Charles said excitedly: "Then we may catch them tomorrow. After what they have done to Normandy, every one of them should die—knights, noblemen, even Edward himself!"

King Philippe put a hand on the Charles's arm, silencing him. "Our brother's anger is understandable," he said. "The crimes of the English are disgusting. But remember: when we do catch them, the most important thing is put aside our differences and trust one another. We outnumber the English, and we should defeat them easily—but we must fight together, as one army. Let us drink to unity."

That was an interesting toast, Caris decided as she discreetly withdrew. Clearly the king could not take it for granted that his allies would act as a team. But what worried her about the conversation was the likelihood that there would be a battle soon, perhaps tomorrow. She and Mair would have to take care not to get mixed up in it.

When she returned to the refectory, Martin said quietly: "Like the king, you have an unruly brother."

Caris saw that Mair was getting drunk. She was overplaying her boyish role, sitting

with her legs splayed and her elbows on the table. "By the saints, that was a good stew, but it's making me fart like the devil," said the sweet-faced nun in man's clothing. "Sorry about the stink, lads." She refilled her wine cup and drank deeply.

The men laughed at her indulgently, amused by the sight of a boy getting drunk for the first time, doubtless remembering embarrassing incidents in their own pasts.

Caris took her arm. "Time you were in bed, baby brother," she said. "Off we go."

Mair went willingly enough. "My big brother acts like an old woman," she said to the company. "But he loves me—don't you, Christophe?"

"Yes, Michel, I love you," Caris said, and the men laughed again.

Mair held on tightly to her. Caris walked her back to the church and found the spot in the nave where they had left their blankets. She made Mair lie down, and covered her with her blanket. "Kiss me goodnight, Christophe," said Mair.

Caris kissed her lips, then said: "You're drunk. Go to sleep. We have to start early in the morning."

mild. Make her more bitter.

Caris lay awake for some time, worrying. She felt she had been unfortunate. She and Mair had almost caught up with King Edward—but at exactly the same moment the French army, too, had almost caught up with the English. She should keep well away from any battlefield. On the other hand, if she and Mair got stuck in the rear of the French army they might never catch the English.

On balance she thought she had better set off first thing in the morning, and try to get ahead of the French. An army this big could not move fast—it would take hours just to form up into marching order. If she and Mair were nimble they should be able to stay ahead. It was risky—but they had done nothing but take risks since leaving Portsmouth.

p810

ML: 1. 10 Reveille sound like the actual modern tune, perhaps "a reveille" would be better. (As a cornet player I am a bit pedantic on this subject.)

She drifted off to sleep, and woke up when the bell rang for Matins soon after three o'clock in the morning. She roused Mair, and was unsympathetic when she complained of a headache. While the monks sang psalms in the church, Caris and Mair went to the stables and found their horses. The sky was clear, and they could see by starlight.

The town's bakers had been working all night, so they were able to buy loaves for their journey. But the city gates were still closed: they had to wait impatiently until dawn, shivering in the cool air, eating the new bread they had bought.

At about half past four they at last left the city and headed north-west along the right bank of the Somme, the direction the English army was said to be taking.

They were only a quarter of a mile away when the trumpets sounded for reveille on the walls of the town. Like Caris, King Philippe had decided on an early start. In the fields, the soldiers and men-at-arms began to stir. The marshals must have got their orders last night, for they seemed to know what to do, and before long some of the army joined Caris and Mair on the road.

Caris still hoped to reach the English ahead of these soldiers. The French would obviously have to stop and regroup before joining battle. That ought to give Caris and Mair time to reach their countrymen and find some safe place beyond the battlefield. She did not want to get caught between the two sides. She was beginning to think she had been foolhardy to set out on this mission. Knowing nothing of war, she had not been able to imagine the difficulties. But it was too late now for regrets. And they had got this far in safety.

The soldiers on the road were not French but Italian. They carried steel crossbows and sheaves of iron arrows. They were friendly, and Caris talked to them in a mixture of French and Latin. They told her that in battle they always formed the front line, and fired from

behind heavy wooden shields, which at the moment were in wagons somewhere behind them. They grumbled about their hasty breakfast, disparaged French knights as impulsive and quarrelsome, and spoke with admiration of their leader, Ottone Doria, who could be seen a few yards ahead.

The sun climbed in the sky and everyone got hot. Because the crossbowmen were expecting to do battle today, they were wearing heavy quilted coats and carrying iron helmets and knee guards as well as their bows and arrows. Towards noon, Mair declared that she would faint unless they stopped for a rest. Caris, too, felt exhausted—they had been riding since dawn—and she knew their horses also needed rest. So, to her dismay, she was forced to stop while thousands of crossbowmen marched past.

Caris and Mair watered their ponies in the Somme and ate some more bread. When they set off again, they found themselves marching with French knights and men-at-arms. Caris recognised King Philippe's red-faced brother Charles at the head of the group. She realised she was in the thick of the French army now, but there was nothing to do but keep moving and hope for a chance to get ahead.

Soon after midday an order came down the line. The English were not west of here, as previously believed, but north; and the French king had ordered that his army should swing in that direction—not in a column, but all at the same time. The men around Caris and Mair, led by Count Charles, turned off the riverside road down a narrow path through the fields; and Caris followed, with a sinking heart.

A familiar voice hailed her, and Martin Chirurgien came alongside. "This is chaos," he said grimly. "The marching order has completely broken down."

A small group of men on fast horses appeared across the fields and hailed Count

Charles. "Scouts," said Martin, and he went forward to hear what they had to say. Caris and Mair's ponies went too, with the natural instinct of horses to stick together.

"The English have halted," they heard. "They've taken up a defensive position on a ridge near the Forest of Crécy."

Martin said in a low voice: "That's Henri le Moine, an old comrade of the King of Bohemia."

Let's see him. Is he dressed as a monk?

Charles was pleased by the news. "Then we shall have battle today!" he said, and some of the knights around him gave a ragged cheer.

Henri raised a hand in caution. "We're suggesting that all units stop and regroup," he said.

"Stop now?" Charles roared. "When the English are at last willing to stand and fight? Let's get at them!"

"Our men and horses need a rest," Henri said quietly. "The king is far in the rear. Give him a chance to catch up and look at the battlefield. He can make his dispositions today for an attack tomorrow, when the men will be fresh."

"To hell with dispositions. There are only a few thousand English. We'll just overrun them."

Henri made a helpless gesture. "It is not for me to command you, my lord. But I will ask your brother the king for his orders."

"Ask him! Ask him!" said Charles, and he rode on.

"I don't know why my master is so intemperate," Martin said.

Caris said thoughtfully: "I suppose he has to prove that he's brave enough to rule, even though by an accident of birth he's not the king."

p813

CM: *anomalous??*

Martin shot her a sharp look, and said: "You're very wise, for a mere boy."

Caris avoided his eye, and vowed to remember her false identity. There was no hostility in Martin's remark, but he was suspicious. As a surgeon, he would be familiar with the subtle differences between the bones of men and women, and he might have noticed that Christophe and Michel de Longchamp were anomalous. Fortunately, he did not press the matter.

The sky began to cloud over, but the air was still warm and humid. Woodland appeared on the army's left, and Martin told Caris it was the Forest of Crécy. They could not be far from the English—but now Caris wondered how she was going to detach herself from the French and join the English without being killed by one side or the other.

The effect of the forest was to crowd the left flank of the marching army, so that the road on which Caris was riding became jam-packed with troops, the different divisions getting hopelessly mixed up.

Couriers came down the line with new orders from the king. Martin went to Charles's side to hear them, and came back looking incredulous. "We have been instructed to halt and make camp—but Count Charles is refusing to obey!"

"Why?"

"He thinks his brother is over-cautious. He, Charles, will not be so lily-livered as to halt before such a weak enemy."

"I thought everyone had to obey the king in a battle."

"They should. But nothing is more important to French noblemen than their code of chivalry. They would rather die than do something cowardly."

The army marched on, in defiance of orders. "I'm glad you two are here," Martin

p814

ML: 1. 18 Alençon is recorded as calling the Italian *canailles* and *ribaudailles* which may be worse than cowardly. They mean scoundrels and debauched men, probably in this case with overtones of cowardice.

said. "I'm going to need your help. Win or lose, there are going to be a lot of wounded men by sundown."

Caris realised she could not escape. But somehow she no longer wanted to get away. In fact she felt a strange eagerness. If these men were made enough to maim one another with swords and arrows, she could at least come to the aid of the wounded.

Soon the crossbowmen's leader, Ottone Doria, came riding back through the crowd—not without difficulty, given the crush—to speak to Charles of Alençon. "Halt your men!" he shouted at the count.

Charles took offence. "How dare you give orders to me?"

"The orders come from the king! We are to halt—but my men can't stop, because of yours pushing from behind!"

"Then let them march on."

"We are within sight of the enemy. If we go any farther we'll have to do battle."

"So be it."

"But the men have been marching all day. They're hungry and thirsty and tired. And my crossbowmen don't have their shields."

"Are they too cowardly to fight without their shields?"

"Are you calling my men cowards?"

"If they won't fight, yes."

Ottone was quiet for a moment. Then he spoke in a low voice, and Caris could only just hear his words. "You're a fool, d'Alençon. And you'll be in hell by nightfall." Then he turned his horse and rode away.

Caris felt water on her face, and looked up at the sky. It was beginning to rain.

50

p815

ML: 1. 1 The bowstrings for longbows did not stretch when wet (although crossbow strings would have done). This story about the bowstrings is a long-lived and popular one, but not based on real fact. Inexperienced bowmen may have done this, I suppose. Robert Hardy talks about this in his book *Longbow*.

1. 13 Not only squires would have been digging - men at arms, archers, anyone with an appropriate tool probably.

1. 17 Cherbourg should be St-Vaast-la Hogue.

50

When the rain came, the English archers unstrung their bows and put the bowstrings in their caps, to keep them dry. The shower was heavy, but brief. When the weather cleared, Ralph looked down over the valley and saw, with a thrill of fear, that the enemy had arrived.

The English occupied a ridge that ran from south-west to the north-east. In front of them and on both sides the hill sloped down; behind them was a wood. Their right flank looked down on the town of Crécy-en-Ponthieu, which nestled in the valley of the River Maye.

The French were approaching from the south.

Ralph was on the right flank, with Earl Roland's men, commanded by the Prince of Wales. They were drawn up in the harrow formation that had proved so effective against the Scots. To the left and right, triangular formations of archers stood, like the two teeth of a harrow. Between the teeth, set well back, were dismounted knights and men-at-arms. In the ground in front of the knights, squires had dug pitfalls—holes in the ground a foot deep and a foot square—to trip the French horses.

On Ralph's right, at the end of the ridge, was a novelty: three new machines called bombards, or cannons, that used explosive powder to shoot round stones. They had been dragged all the way from Cherbourg but so far had never been fired, and no one was sure

How old is he?

Already

stated

p 797

p816

ML: 1. 1 Cannon were not a complete novelty, although they had probably never been used on a battlefield before. It would probably be assumed that they would work, but their effectiveness in this situation was an open question.

1. 7 The Genoese wore white coats, not uniforms in the modern sense.

1. 13 *Pavises* would be a better word than shields in the context of Genoese crossbowmen.

1. 18 Military is a rather modern word. The *furor fransiscus* was a feature of the French mounted cavalry - knights and men-at-arms.

whether they would work. Today King Edward needed to use every means at his disposal, for the enemy's superiority was somewhere between four to one and seven to one.

On the English left flank, the earl of Northampton's men were drawn up in the same harrow formation. Behind the front lines, a third battalion led by the king stood in reserve. Behind the king were two fall-back positions. The baggage wagons were drawn up in a circle, with non-combatants—cooks, engineers, and ostlers—inside the circle with the horses. And behind the wagons was a wood where, in the event of a rout, the remnants of the English army could flee, and the mounted French knights would find it difficult to follow.

They had been here since early morning, with nothing to eat but pea soup with onions. Ralph was wearing his armour, and had been sweltering in the heat, so the rainstorm had been welcome. It had also muddied the slope up which the French would have to charge, making their approach treacherously slippery.

Ralph could guess what the French strategy would be. The Genoese crossbowmen would fire from behind their shields, to soften up the English line. The English archers would fire back. Then, when the crossbowmen had inflicted enough damage, they would step aside, and the French knights would charge on their warhorses.

There was nothing so terrifying as that charge. Called the *furor franciscus*, it was the ultimate weapon of the French military. Their code of chivalry made them disregard utterly their own safety. Those huge horses, with riders so completely armoured that they looked like iron men, simply rolled over archers, shields, swords, and men-at-arms.

Of course, it did not always work. The charge could be repulsed, especially where the terrain favoured the defenders, as it did here. However, the French were not easily discouraged: they would charge again. And they had such enormous superiority in numbers

p817

ML: 1. 8 The cannon were placed on the Prince of Wales' flank, between him and the Earl of Arundel's force, rather than on the English flank.

1. 18 Arrows don't pause at the top of the curve - they are going over 100 mph at this point. This is based on personal experience. The chronicles compare the arrows to hail.

that Ralph could not see how the English could hold them off indefinitely.

He was scared, but all the same he did not regret being with the army. For seven years he had lived as he had always wanted to: a life of action, where strong men were kings and the weak counted for nothing. He was twenty-nine, and men of action rarely lived to be old. He had committed foul sins, but had been absolved of them all, most recently this morning, by the bishop of Shiring. If this was the end, so be it.

The crossbowmen in their Genoese uniforms reached the foot of the slope. The English archers, who had been sitting down, their arrows stuck point-first into the ground in front of them, now began to stand up and re-string their bows. Ralph guessed that most of them felt as he did, a mixture of relief that the long wait was over and fear at the thought of the odds they faced.

Ralph thought there was plenty of time. He could see that the enemy crossbowmen did not have the heavy wood shields that were an essential element of their tactics. The battle would not start until the shields were brought, he felt sure.

Behind the crossbowmen, thousands of knights were pouring into the valley from the south, spreading left and right behind the crossbowmen. The sun came out again, lighting up the bright colours of the French banners and the horse coats. Ralph recognised the coat-of-arms of Charles, the count of Alençon, King Philippe's brother.

The crossbowmen reached the foot of the slope and stopped. There were thousands of them. As if at a signal, they all gave a terrific shout. Some jumped up in the air. Trumpets sounded.

It was their war cry, meant to terrify the enemy; but the English army consisted of experienced fighting men who were at the end of a six-week campaign, and it took more than

p818

ML: 1. 1-2 The time to reload and shoot was probably more like 4 seconds. 10 arrows per minute is a fairly slow rate of fire (Morgen can do it!) and an experienced archer would be more like 16-18 per minute. This would not be sustained over a long period of time, but in the initial fusilade it would be about right.

shouting to scare them. They looked on impassively.

Then, to Ralph's utter astonishment, the Genoese lifted their crossbows and fired.

What were they doing? They had no shields!

The sound was sudden and terrifying, five thousand iron bolts flying through the air. But the crossbowmen were out of range. Perhaps they had failed to take account of the fact that they were firing uphill; and the sun setting behind the English lines must have been shining in their eyes. Whatever the reason, their bolts fell uselessly short.

There was a flash of flame and a crash like thunder from the English flank. Astonished, Ralph looked to his right and saw smoke rising from the area where the new bombards were. Their sound was impressive, but when he returned his gaze to the enemy ranks he saw little actual damage. However, many of the crossbowmen seemed shocked enough to pause in their reloading.

At that moment, the Prince of Wales shouted the order for his archers to fire.

Two thousand longbows were raised. Knowing they were too distant to shoot in a straight line, the archers aimed into the sky, intuitively plotting a trajectory for their arrows. All the bows bent simultaneously, like blades of wheat blown by a sudden summer breeze; then the arrows were released with a collective sound like a church bell tolling. The arrows rose into the air, paused at the top of the curve, then turned downwards and fell like rain on the crossbowmen.

The enemy ranks were densely packed, and the padded Genoese jackets gave little protection. Without their shields, the crossbowmen were horribly vulnerable. Hundreds of them fell, dead and wounded.

But that was only the beginning.

While the surviving crossbowmen were rewinding their bows, the English fired again and again. It took an experienced archer only five or six seconds to pull an arrow from the ground, notch it, draw the bow, take aim, fire, and reach for another arrow. In the space of a minute, twenty thousand arrows fell on the unprotected crossbowmen.

It was a massacre, and the consequence was inevitable: they turned and ran.

In moments they were out of range, and the English held their fire. But then the crossbowmen encountered another hazard. The French knights were moving forward. A dense herd of fleeing crossbowmen came head to head with massed horsemen itching to charge. For a moment there was chaos.

Then Ralph saw, to his amazement, that the enemy were fighting among themselves. The knights drew their swords and started to hack the bowmen, who discharged their crossbows at the knights then fought on with knives. The French noblemen should have been trying to stop the carnage but, as far as Ralph could see, those in the most expensive armour and riding the largest horses seemed to be at the forefront of the fight, attacking their own side in a mad fury.

The knights drove the crossbowmen back up the slope, and they all came back into longbow range. Once again the young Prince of Wales gave the order for the English archers to shoot. Now the hail of arrows fell among knights as well as crossbowmen. In seven years of warfare Ralph had seen nothing like this. Hundreds of the enemy lay dead and wounded, and not a single English soldier had been so much as scratched.

At last the French knights retreated, and the remaining crossbowmen scattered. They left the slope below the English position littered with bodies. Welsh and Cornish knifemen ran forward from the English ranks on to the battlefield, finishing off the French wounded,

retrieving undamaged arrows for the archers to reuse, and no doubt robbing the corpses while they were at it. Boy runners brought fresh stocks of arrows from the supply train to the archers at the front of the English lines.

There was a pause, but it did not last long.

The French knights regrouped, reinforced by the new arrivals who were appearing in their hundreds every minute. Peering into their ranks, Ralph could see that the colours of Alençon had been joined by those of Flanders and Normandy. The standard of the Count of Alençon moved to the front, and then the trumpets sounded, and the horsemen began to move.

Ralph put his faceplate down and drew his sword.

The huge horses were slow to start, encumbered as they were by riders in full plate armour. The setting sun glinted off the French visors, and the flags snapped in the evening breeze. Gradually the pounding of the hooves grew louder and the pace of the charge picked up. The knights yelled encouragement to their mounts and to one another, waving their swords and spears. They came like a wave on to a beach, seeming to get bigger and faster as they got nearer. Ralph's mouth was dry and his heart beat like a big drum.

They came within bowshot, and the prince gave the order to fire. Once more, the arrows rose into the air and fell like rain.

The charging knights were fully armoured, and it was a lucky shot indeed that found the weak spot in the joints between plates. But their horses had only face plates and chain-mail neck cowls. So it was the horses that were vulnerable. When the arrows pierced their shoulders and their haunches, some stopped dead, some fell, and some turned and tried to flee. The screams of beasts in pain filled the air. Collisions between horses caused more

p821

ML: 1. 18 The horses would be even more likely to shy from the arrows. The French knight had very little problem with fighting with the lower orders. They fought hand to hand with the archers at Morlaix, and at Cassel they fought and killed huge numbers of the working and merchant classes.

knights to fall to the ground, joining the bodies of the Genoese crossbowmen. Those behind were going too fast to take evasive action, so they just rode over the fallen.

But there were thousands of knights, and they kept coming.

The range shortened for the archers, and their trajectory flattened. When the charge was a hundred yards away, they switched to a different type of arrow, with a flattened steel tip for punching through armour. Now they could kill the riders, although an arrow that hit a horse was almost as good.

The ground was already wet with rain, and now the charge encountered the pitfalls dug earlier by the English. The horses' momentum was such that few of them could step into a hole a foot deep without stumbling, and most fell, pitching their riders on to the ground in the path of other horses.

The oncoming knights shied away from the archers. This was partly the natural instinct to move away from the source of the arrows, and partly the snobbery that would not permit a noble knight to lower himself so far as to fight with a humble archer. So, as the English had planned, the French charge was funnelled into a narrow killing field, fired upon from left and right.

This was the key to the English strategy. At this point the wisdom of forcing the English knights to dismount became clear. If they had been on horseback they could not have resisted the urge to charge, and then the archers would have had to cease fire, for fear of killing their own side. But, because the knights and men-at-arms remained in their lines, the enemy could be slaughtered wholesale, with no loss of life on the English side.

But it was not enough: the French were too numerous and too brave. Still they came on, and at last they reached the line of dismounted knights and men-at-arms in the fork

p822

GH: On p413 you speak of the leopard as a spotted lion Later P. 822 you refer, in passing, to the heraldic 'leopard' without, I think, explaining that this in fact designates a lion 'passant regardant' – do you think you should clarify or just refer to the 'lions' of England.

GH: a bishop wielding a sword – by convention martial clergy wielded a mace which, in theory, did not shed blood (!). Presumably these 'leopards' are heraldic lions passant regardant – should that be made clear?

between the two masses of archers; and the real fighting began.

The horses trampled over the front ranks of English, but their charge had been slowed by the muddy uphill slope, and they were brought up short by the densely-packed English line. Ralph was suddenly in the thick of it, avoiding deadly downward blows from mounted knights, swinging his sword at the legs of their horses, aiming to cripple the beasts by the easiest and most reliable method, cutting their hamstrings. The fighting was fierce: the English had nowhere to go, and the French knew that if they retreated they would have to ride back through the same lethal hail of arrow fire.

Men fell all around Ralph, hacked down by swords and battleaxes, then trampled by the mighty hooves of the warhorses. He saw Earl Roland fall to a French sword, and Roland's son, Bishop Richard, swinging a battleaxe to protect his fallen father; but a warhorse shouldered Richard aside, and the earl was trampled.

The English were forced back, and Ralph realised that the French had a target: the young Prince of Wales.

Ralph had no affection for the privileged sixteen-year-old heir to the throne, but he knew it would be a terrific blow to English morale if the prince were to be captured or killed. Ralph moved back and to his left, joining several others who thickened the shield of fighting men around the prince. But the French intensified their efforts, and they were on horseback.

Then Ralph found himself fighting shoulder to shoulder with the prince, recognising him by his quartered surcoat, with fleurs-de-lis on a blue background and leopards on red. A moment later, a French horseman swung at the prince with an axe, and the prince fell to the ground.

It was a bad moment.

p823

ML: 1. 9 The Earl of Arundel and his forces came from Prince's flank, not from the rear.

l. 15 Tactics should be used instead of strategy at this point.

p. 823-4 The low death rate of the English at Crécy is well-known; three of good birth only (named in the book) and an unknown number of others, and the death of an earl there is rather out of place. I know this is necessary for the plot, but could he die the next day? Similarly, the bishop's death.

p. 823, p. 824, l. 6 "My lord", rather than "lord" is more contemporary.

Ralph sprang forward and lunged at the attacker, sliding his long sword into the man's armpit, where the armour was jointed. He had the satisfaction of feeling the point penetrate flesh, and saw blood spurt from the wound.

Someone else straddled the fallen prince and swung a big sword two-handed at men and horses alike. Ralph saw that it was the prince's standard-bearer, Richard FitzSimon, who had dropped the flag over his prone master. For a few moments the two men fought savagely to defend the fallen prince, not knowing if he was alive or dead.

Then reinforcements arrived. The earl of Arundel, originally stationed with the reserves at the rear, arrived at the front line with a large force of men-at-arms, all fresh to the fight. The newcomers joined battle with vigour, and they turned the tables. The French began to fall back.

The Prince of Wales got to his knees. Ralph put up his visor and helped the prince to his feet. The prince seemed to be hurt, but not seriously, and Ralph turned away and fought on.

A moment later the French broke. Despite the lunacy of their strategy, their courage had almost enabled them to sever the English line—but not quite. Now they fled, many more falling as they ran the gauntlet of the archers, stumbling down the bloody slope back to their own lines; and a cheer went up from the English, weary but jubilant.

Once again the Welsh invaded the battlefield, cutting the throats of the wounded and collecting thousands of arrows. The archers, too, picked up spend shafts to replenish their stocks. From the rear, cooks appeared with jugs of beer and wine, and surgeons rushed to attend injured noblemen.

Ralph saw William of Casterham bent over Earl Roland. Roland was not breathing.

William would be the earl now.

Ralph wiped his bloody sword on the ground and put his visor up to drink a tankard of ale. The Prince of Wales approached him and said: "What's your name?"

"Ralph Fitzgerald of Wigleigh, lord."

"You fought bravely. You shall be Sir Ralph tomorrow, if the king listens to me."

Ralph glowed with pleasure. "Thank you, lord."

The Prince nodded graciously and moved away.

51

51

Caris watched the early stages of the battle from the far side of the valley. She saw the Genoese crossbowmen try to flee, only to be cut down by knights of their own side. Then she saw the first great charge, with the colours of Charles d'Alençon leading thousands of knights and men-at-arms.

She had never seen battle, and she was utterly sickened. Hundreds of knights fell to the English arrows, to be trampled by the hooves of the great warhorses. She was too far away to be able to follow the hand-to-hand fighting, but she saw the swords flash and the men fall, and she wanted to weep. As a nun, she had seen many injuries—men who had fallen from scaffolding, hurt themselves with tools, suffered hunting accidents—and she always felt the pain and the waste of a lost hand, a permanently damaged leg, a brain that would never be the same. To see men inflicting such wounds on one another intentionally made her despair.

For a long time it seemed to her that the fight could go either way. If she had been at home, hearing news of the war from afar, she might have been hoping for an English victory; but after what she had seen in the last two weeks she felt a sort of disgusted neutrality. She could not identify with the English who had murdered peasants and burned their crops, and it made no difference to her that they had committed these atrocities in Normandy. Of course, they would say the French deserved what they got because they had burned Portsmouth; but

that was a stupid way to think—so stupid that it led to scenes of horror such as this.

The French retreated, and she assumed they would regroup and reorganise, and wait for the king to arrive and plan a new strategy. They still had overwhelming superiority in numbers, she could see: there were tens of thousands of troops in the valley, with more arriving every minute.

But the French did not regroup. Instead, every new battalion that arrived went straight into the attack, throwing themselves suicidally up the hill at the English position. The second and subsequent charges fared worse than the first. Some were cut down by archers even before they reached the English lines; the rest were rapidly beaten off by foot soldiers. The slope below the ridge became shiny with the gushing blood of hundreds of men and horses.

After the first charge, Caris looked only occasionally at the battlefield. She was too busy tending those French wounded who were lucky enough to be able to leave the field. Martin Chirurgien had realised that she was as good a surgeon as he. Giving her free access to his instruments, he left her and Mair to work independently. They washed, sewed and bandaged hour after hour.

News of prominent casualties came back to them from the front line. Charles d'Alençon was the first high-ranking fatality. Caris could not help feeling that he deserved his fate if anyone did. She had witnessed his foolish enthusiasm and careless indiscipline. Hours later, King Jean of Bohemia was reported dead, and she wondered what madness drove a blind man to a battle.

“In God’s name, why don’t they stop?” she said to Martin when he brought her a cup of ale to refresh her.

“Fear,” he replied. “They’re afraid of disgrace. To leave the battlefield without

striking a blow would be shameful. They would prefer to die.”

“A lot of them have had that wish granted,” said Caris, and she emptied her tankard and went back to work.

The carnage continued until night fell. The English lit torches, afraid of a sneak attack under cover of darkness. But Caris could have told them they were safe. The French were defeated. She could hear the calls of French soldiers searching the battlefield for fallen kinsmen and comrades. The king, who had arrived in time to join in one of the last hopeless charges, left the field. After that the exit became general.

A fog came up from the river, filling the valley and obscuring the distant flares. Once again, Caris and Mair worked by firelight long into the night, patching up the wounded. All those who could walk or hobble left as soon as they could, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the English, hoping to avoid tomorrow’s inevitable bloodthirsty mopping-up operation. When all the wounded had been attended to, Caris and Mair slipped away.

They found their ponies, and led them forward by the light of a torch. They reached the bottom of the valley and found themselves in no man’s land. Hidden by fog and darkness, they slipped out of their boys’ clothing. For a moment they were terribly vulnerable, two naked women in the middle of a battlefield. But no one could see them, and a second later they were pulling their nuns’ robes over their heads. They packed up their male garments in case they should need them again: it was a long way home.

Caris decided to abandon the torch, in case an English archer should take it into his head to shoot at the light and ask questions afterwards. Holding hands so that they would not get separated, they went forward, still leading the horses. They could see nothing: it might

have been a starlit night, but the fog obscured the sky. They headed uphill towards the English lines. There was a smell like a butcher's shop. So many bodies of horses and men covered the ground that they could not walk around them. They had to grit their teeth and step on the corpses. Soon their shoes were covered with a mixture of blood and mud.

The bodies on the ground thinned out, and soon there were none. Caris began to feel a profound sense of relief as she approached the English army. She and Mair had travelled hundreds of miles, lived rough for two weeks, and risked their lives for this moment. She had almost forgotten the reason for the journey—the outrageous theft by Prior Godwyn of fifty pounds from the nuns' treasury. Somehow it seemed less important now than it had originally. Still, she would appeal to Bishop Richard and win justice for the nunnery.

The walk seemed farther than Caris had imagined when she had looked across the valley in daylight. She wondered nervously if she had become disoriented. She might have turned in the wrong direction and just walked straight past the English. Perhaps the army was now behind her. She strained to hear some noise—ten thousand men could not be silent, even if most of them were sleeping—but the fog muffled sound.

She clung to the conviction that, as King Edward had stationed his forces on the highest land, she must therefore be approaching him as long as she was walking uphill. But the blindness was unnerving. If there had been a precipice, she would have stepped right over it.

The light of dawn was turning the fog to the colour of pearl when at last she heard a voice. She stopped. It was a man speaking in a low murmur. Someone else answered. She could not make out the language. She feared that she might even have walked in a full circle and be back on the French side.

She turned towards the voice, still holding Mair's hand. The red glow of flames became visible through the grey mist, and she headed for it gratefully. As she came nearer, she heard their talk more clearly, and realised with relief that they were speaking English. A moment later she made out a group of men around a fire. Several lay asleep, rolled in blankets, but three sat upright, legs crossed, looking into the flames, talking. A moment later Caris saw a man standing, peering into the fog, presumably on sentry duty, though the fact that he had not noticed her approach proved his job was impossible.

At first they did not see Caris and Mair. To get their attention, Caris said in a low voice: "God bless you."

She startled them. One gave a shout of fear, and the sentry said belatedly: "Who goes there?"

"Two nuns from Kingsbridge Priory," Caris said. The men stared at her in superstitious dread, and she realised they thought she was some kind of apparition. "Don't worry, we're flesh and blood, and so are these ponies."

"Kingsbridge?" said one of them in surprise. "I know you," he said, standing up. "I've seen you before."

Caris recognised him. "Lord William of Casterham," she said.

"I am the earl of Shiring, now," he said. "My father died in the battle."

"May his soul rest in peace. We have come here to see your brother, Bishop Richard, who is our abbot."

"You're too late," William said. "My brother, too, is dead."

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Later in the morning, when the fog had lifted and the battlefield looked like a sunlit

p830

ML: 1. 6 Edward was born in November 1312, so was 35 at Crécy.

1. 13 The force of troops was not that small - it is possible that as many, if not more, French were killed on the day after the actual battle.

1. 24 The king could, and often did, intervene in church quarrels if it suited his aims do so.

slaughterhouse, Earl William took Caris and Mair to see King Edward.

Everyone was astonished at the tale of two young nuns who had followed the English army all the way through Normandy, and soldiers who had faced death only yesterday were fascinated by their adventures. William told Caris the king would want to hear the story from her own lips.

Edward III had been king for nineteen years, but he was still only thirty-three years old. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was imposing rather than handsome, with a face that might have been moulded for power: a big nose, high cheekbones, and luxuriant long hair just beginning to recede from his high forehead. Caris saw why people called him a lion.

He sat on a stool in front of his tent, fashionably dressed in two-coloured hose and a cape with a scalloped border. He wore no armour or weapons: the French had vanished, and in fact a small force of vengeful troops had been sent out to hunt down and kill any stragglers. A handful of barons stood around.

As Caris told how she and Mair had sought food and shelter in the devastated landscape of Normandy, she wondered if the king felt criticised by her tale of hardship. However, he seemed not to think the sufferings of the people reflected on him. He was as delighted with her exploits as if he were hearing of someone who had been brave during a shipwreck.

She ended by telling him of her disappointment on finding, after all her travails, that Bishop Richard, from whom she had hoped for justice, was dead. "I beg your majesty to order the prior of Kingsbridge to restore to the nuns the money he stole."

Edward smiled ruefully. "You're a brave woman, but you know nothing of politics," he said. "The king can't interfere in an ecclesiastical quarrel such as this. We would have all

p831

ML: 1. 20 "Civilian" is a bit of a modern word.

our bishops banging on the door in protest. And it would do your cause nothing but harm. The church would be so outraged that every cleric in the land would oppose our ruling, regardless of its merits."

"Perhaps you could tell my story to whomever you appoint as bishop in place of

Richard."

Will the King appoint the Bishop as William? And if the King, wouldn't he

"Of course," said the king, but Caris knew he would forget.

consult William? Roland must have had a

majer voice in the appointment of Richard.

The interview seemed to be over, but then William said: "Your majesty, now that you have graciously confirmed my elevation to my father's earldom, there is the question of who is to be Lord of Casterham."

"Ah, yes. Our son the Prince of Wales suggests Sir Ralph Fitzgerald, who saved his life yesterday."

Caris murmured: "Oh, no!"

The king did not hear her, but William did, and he obviously felt the same way.

"Ralph was an outlaw, guilty of numerous thefts, murders and rapes, until he obtained a royal pardon by joining your majesty's army."

The king was not as moved by this as Caris would have expected. He said: "All the same, we gather Ralph has fought in our armies for seven years now. He has earned a second chance."

"Indeed he has," William said diplomatically. "But, given the trouble we've had with him in the past, I'd like to see him settle down peacefully to civilian life for a year or two before he's ennobled."

"Well, you will be his overlord, so you'll have to deal with him. We won't impose him on you against your will. However, the Prince of Wales is keen that he should have some

p832

ML: l. 9 I'm afraid 12 was not an unusual age for aristocratic women. The Earl of Arundel and his first wife, for example, were both younger than this when married.

l. 15 Edward III had quite an outspoken wife and mother and was probably used to stroppy women, but perhaps not outside his own family!

l. 18 Edward prided himself on his courtly behaviour (at least in public) and would be unlikely to threaten violence to a nun; that is not to say that he wouldn't be rude and send her out his presence, but physical threats are probably unlikely.

further reward.” Edward thought for a few moments, then said: “Don’t you have a cousin who is eligible for marriage?”

“Yes, Matilda,” said William. “We call her Tilly.”

Caris knew Tilly: she was at the nunnery school.

“That’s right,” said the king. “She was your father Roland’s ward. Her father had three villages near Shiring.”

“Your majesty has a very good memory for detail.”

“Marry Lady Matilda to Ralph and give him her father’s villages.”

Caris burst out: “But she’s only twelve!”

William said to her: “Hush!”

King Edward turned a cold gaze on her. “The children of the nobility must grow up fast, Sister. Queen Philippa was fourteen when I married her.”

“There’s a big difference between twelve and fourteen.”

The young king became even more frosty. “In the royal court, people give their opinions only when asked. And the king almost never asks for the opinions of women.”

“But I know Tilly—you can’t marry her to that brute Ralph!”

Mair said: “Caris, remember who you’re speaking to!”

Edward looked at William. “Take her away, Shiring, before we’re forced to silence her by some unkindly means.”

William took Caris’s arm and firmly marched her out of the royal presence. Mari followed. Behind them, Caris heard the king say: “I can see how she survived in Normandy—the locals must have been terrified of her.” The noblemen around him laughed.

“You must be mad!” William hissed.

“Must I?” Caris said. They were out of earshot of the king, now, and she raised her voice. “In the last six weeks the king has caused the deaths of thousands of men, women and children, and burned their crops and their homes. And I have tried to save a twelve-year-old girl from being married to a murderer. Tell me again, Lord William: which of us is mad?”

Chapter Twelve