Chapter Fifteen

THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR

'THIS king Edward,' wrote the chronicler Froissart, 'was forsooth of a passing goodness, and full gracious among all the worthy men of the world.' For over half a century Edward III was to rule England as an ideal king until old age and the loss of his beloved queen began to erode the powers which had made him great. Like his grandfather, on whom he modelled himself, Edward was supremely endowed with all the attributes looked for in a medieval king. He was a brave general in battle, a born leader of men in time of peace, generous too, with an abundance of charm and good humour which endeared him to all with whom he came into contact. Edward set out to make himself a paragon of the chivalrous virtues, living out to the full the exploits of King Arthur and his court as they were recorded in the romances which were the fashionable reading of the age. Indeed he transformed Windsor Castle into his Camelot, a haven of chivalrous endeavour to which knights flocked from all over Europe in tribute to his fame. Pageantry and splendour were the order of the day from a ruler who was to be a mighty patron of architects, painters and musicians. Under Edward III the crown regained its vanished lustre.

Edward married Philippa of Hainault in 1328 and for forty years she stood by his side as a steadying influence, one which could curb the notorious Plantagenet rages, as when she interceded after the siege of Calais for the lives of its good citizens. She provided the king with no less than twelve surviving children, presiding over a royal family which was unique in being both united and happy. Unlike former reigns none of the king's sons plotted or revolted against him in old age.

That is a fair indication of the character of the man, one which ensured his widespread popularity with his people. It is caught too in this anecdote, recorded by Froissart, describing him on board ship shortly before a naval battle:

> '. . . the king stood at his ship's prow, clad in a jacket of black velvet, and on his head a hat of black beaver that became him right well; and he was then . . . as merry as ever he was seen. He made his minstrels sound before him

Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, Lord of Irnham, in Lincolnshire together with his wife, Agnes Sutton, in a miniature in his psalter executed about 1325 to 1335. The manuscript is filled with marginal scenes depicting everyday life in the early fourteenth century.

on their trumpets a German dance that had been brought in of late by Lord John Chandos, who was there present; and then for pastime he made the said knight sing with his minstrels, and took great pleasure therein. While the king thus took his pleasure . . . the watch cried: "Ho! I see a ship coming, and me thinks it is a ship of Spain!" Then the minstrels held their peace . . .'

As the enemy fleet appeared the king ordered wine and 'then he laced on his helm, and the rest did likewise.' The English then won a resounding victory.

What is striking about his reign is its political and social stability in the face of a major war and the horrors of the plague known as the Black Death. The king owed his success at home to the fact that, unlike his father, he realised the importance of the correct use of patronage in keeping the nobles loyal and contented with his rule.

He created new earls, granting them lands, and even married some of his daughters into the nobility, thus forging further ties of loyalty to the crown. But the greatest binding factor of them all was to be the war with France known as the Hundred Years War, one which, in fact, lasted one hundred and fifteen years in all.

The causes of this war were complex. In 1328 a new dynasty succeeded to the throne of France, the Valois. In that country the right to succeed could only pass through men and never through a woman, a principle which was called the Salic Law. That was not true in England where women could succeed to the crown. If such had been the case in France Edward III would have had the greater claim to be king of France because of his mother Isabella, than Philip VI, the first Valois king. But Edward initially never queried his right and indeed paid the new king homage for his French lands.

As time passed, however, relations between the two countries began to deteriorate sharply. There were squabbles over boundaries, legal disputes and commercial rivalry. There were above all clashes in the Netherlands which were crucial for the English wool trade. In the Channel French and English ships came to blows. Then there was Scotland, whose alliance with France meant entry to England through the back door. Add to that Edward's desire to take up the torch from his warrior grandfather and all the ingredients for a major conflict were in place.

Legend has it that at a great feast there was set before the king a heron, chosen deliberately as the most cowardly of all the birds, a fit dish in the eyes of the host for a monarch who had failed to claim his rightful inheritance. Not long after this, Edward asserted his right to the French crown and, in 1340, assumed publicly the title of king of France, quartering onto his coat of arms the lilies of France which remain there to this day. As a consequence this war was to be different from all its predecessors, for it was no longer to be vassal versus overlord but true king against usurper.

This was a war undertaken with all the fervour of a crusade. That God was perceived to be the ultimate judge of the victor was reflected in the repeated challenges to single combat hurled at each other by the two kings. These never happened but every campaign and battle was fought with the full panoply of chivalry. Edward III played his role to the full, riding at the head of his troops into battle, rallying them on the eve with a speech. His son, Edward of Woodstock, called the Black Prince probably on account of his black armour, was even more celebrated than his father, being hailed as 'the flower of chivalry of all the world'. At the age of sixteen he was already leading part of the English forces into the battle.

The war united every class behind the king. The nobles and knights lived out a chivalrous ideal, vowing to their ladies that they would not do this or that until such

time as they had fulfilled this or that feat of arms. Edward rallied his knights even in time of peace by holding spectacular tournaments, arenas for training young knights in how to fight and in the rules of chivalry. He rebuilt Windsor Castle as a setting for the great festivals of chivalry which he staged. In 1348 he founded a special fraternity or order, the Knights of the Garter, whose motto challenged anyone who dared oppose the English claim to the French crown: *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Shame to him who thinks evil of it).

To nobles and knights alike the war was not only acting out a role, it was also highly profitable. After each English victory there would be huge ransoms to be paid for captured French knights, so huge that whole castles were built from the proceeds. Not only that but the ordinary soldiers, men-at-arms and archers, also did well. The chronicler of Walsingham wrote: 'There were few women who did not have something from Caen, Calais and other overseas towns; clothing, furs, bedcovers, cutlery. Tablecloths and linen, bowls in wood and silver were to be seen in every English house.' More to the point such men were better paid and equipped than ever before. The skilled English archers were now deployed to devastating effect as their arrows rained down on the enemy from both sides. Armour too had developed, so that knights were better protected than ever. Cannon made their earliest appearance, heralding the age of gunpowder. On top of that, the wars against the Scots had taught the English a great deal about tactics, particularly the value of the plundering raid during which whole villages would be destroyed, the countryside laid to waste and the population slaughtered. For decades the French war was to be hugely popular with all sections of society, for the king was also a master of public relations, sharing with his people the justice of his cause and his victories by way of speeches in Parliament, sermons in the parish pulpit, and the circulation of newsletters.

For over two decades the English won victory after victory. In 1339 the French fleet was routed at Sluys. Seven years later there came an even more famous victory at Crécy thanks to the king's skill as a general and the abilities of the archers. That was followed by the siege and surrender of the port of Calais which was to remain in English hands for two centuries. Edward evacuated the starving citizens, giving them a square meal as they left, and later repopulating the town with English settlers. Ten years later came another legendary battle, Poitiers, in which the young Black Prince was the hero, and the French king was captured. As an index of the chivalrous code of the time the prince waited on his regal captive at table. The French king was taken to England, making an entrance into London during which he was showered with golden leaves. He was consigned to a luxurious prison in the Tower of London.

That glorious phase of the war came to an end in 1360 when peace was made and

A 14th century document depicts the granting of Aquitaine to the Black Prince, who kneels before his father, Edward III.

the vast ransom of three million pounds was paid for the French king. The English lands in France were enlarged as they now included Calais, and they were all held in full sovereignty. Although the war was renewed again in the 1370s it was never as successful. By then Edward was old and the Black Prince ill. He was to predecease his father. The Valois kings shrewdly avoided battle and gradually re-established themselves, for the brutal savagery of the English to the French had not increased support for Edward III's rule. Any idea of giving the French justice and good government was remote from his mind. The war meant profits. There was to be no return to the continental empire of Henry II.

Behind all the pomp and pageantry attending these triumphs, however, lurked the figure of the money-lender. The king went bankrupt twice. There were the wages of the soldiers, once paid at twice the going rate, there was the cost of transport and vict-

uals, besides the huge financial subsidies he gave to allies abroad to send in armies. As a result Edward fell into the hands of Italian money-lenders who in the end went bankrupt themselves. Then he turned to English merchants. Parliament was perpetually being pressed for funds and, as a result, gradually secured greater and greater control of the purse strings. However hostile or critical Parliament became over the cost of the war, Edward's hold always managed to ride it out.

Criticism became sharper as the king moved into old age. When his queen died in 1369 a restraining hand was removed. Increasingly Edward grew indolent, falling under the influence of his greedy mistress, Alice Perrers, who was out for every penny she could get. At a great tournament held at Smithfield she appeared as the Lady of the Sun decked out in the late queen's jewels. As Edward lay on his deathbed she is said to have pulled the rings off his fingers and fled.

Edward died at the age of sixty-five and was buried in Westminster Abbey. On his tomb we see his effigy in bronze, not that of the golden-haired young knight but resembling rather an Old Testament prophet with flowing locks and beard. By him lies his beloved queen, Philippa, and around the sides of the tomb stand his twelve children, who were, with their descendants, to be the ruin of the house of Plantagenet. In retrospect the reign of Edward III was soon to be seen as a golden age in which the fortunes of the late medieval monarchy reached their heights both in terms of popularity and achievement.

Weepers from the tomb of Edward III in Westminster Abbey. These depict three of the king's sons.