Chapter Twenty

THE VICTOR OF AGINCOURT

Now is a good time, for all England prayeth for us; and therefore be of good cheer, and let us go to our journey.' With these words ringing in their ears the English soldiers advanced on the French to achieve a famous victory at the Battle of Agincourt. They were spoken by King Henry V, who saw himself as his great grandfather, Edward III, leading his army in conquest of his rightful inheritance, the realm of France. Henry V was to unite his country in seemingly glorious victories, which remain part of national myth, but he was to do it at a price.

Such unity was much needed when Henry came to the throne in 1413. His father, Henry IV, had proved to be a lacklustre ailing monarch whose whole reign was dogged by rebellions, both in the north and, more seriously, in Wales, which the English had treated badly. In comparison the short nine-year reign of his son was to be like a meteor erupting and skimming its way across a night sky. Unlike Richard II, Henry V was to give his subjects what they wanted, war with France.

The king was twenty-four when he came to the throne. He was a born leader of men, a natural soldier and a skilled tactician. He had enormous vitality and physical charm, with his long oval face, straight nose, high cheekbones, full red lips, deeply cleft chin and large expressive hazel eyes. He had a zest for life and was hugely athletic. At the same time he was a man of intellect and careful consideration, a good listener, well educated with an ability to read and write English, French and Latin. He was perfectly endowed for his role as king, a role he intended to play to the full.

From the moment of his accession, Henry voiced his territorial claims to France, along with one for the hand of the French king's daughter. On the other side of the Channel he was seen initially as little more than a figure of fun. The French nobles said 'that they would send Henry, king of [the] English, since he was a youngster, little balls to play with and soft cushions to lie upon, until he had grown to manly strength later on.'

Thomas Occleve presenting his poem *De Regimine Principum* to Henry V. There is no doubt that this was intended to be a portrait.

Such comments the French were shortly to regret, for the king had already made up his mind to invade and lay claim to his lands as Duke of Normandy, a part of France which the English had lost two hundred and fifty years before. Henry supervised the expedition in every detail. He realised that an army needed a constant supply of food and weapons to be successful. It also needed equipment to assault walled cities: towers and scaling ladders, engines for battering walls, guns and artillery. Then there were the soldiers; firstly, the men-at-arms, mounted knights, each man bringing with him as many as four horses tended by grooms and pages; secondly, the archers, both mounted and on foot; and finally the gunners, miners, smiths, painters, armourers, tent makers, carpenters, fletchers, bowyers, farriers, carters and cordeners. The king himself took most of his household as well, including his minstrels, for he loved music. No less than nine thousand people in all crossed the Channel in one thousand five hundred ships. It was a masterpiece of organisation and the king had supervised every detail. But it was expensive, and had to be paid for by raising huge loans on items like the royal jewels.

Henry's plan was to capture the port of Harfleur and use it as a base to re-establish English rule in Normandy. The moment was right; Charles VI, king of France, had periods of insanity and the French nobility was divided into warring parties. The English fleet crossed on 11 August 1415 and laid siege to Harfleur, which was protected by strong battlements, ditches and towers. The attackers had to fill in the ditches in order to get their guns close enough to strike so the siege was slow, and it was not until 22 September that Harfleur capitulated. By then Henry had lost a third of his army through sickness. There was to be no looting or plundering, but two thousand citizens were expelled to make way for colonisation from England. Henry really believed himself to be the rightful Duke of Normandy but he was to learn that the clock could not so easily be put back.

After this victory no one seemed to know what to do next, until the king decided to return via Calais. A garrison was left in Harfleur and the army began what was believed to be an eight day march, covering some one hundred and twenty miles. What had not been anticipated was that the French would destroy the bridges and fords across the River Somme. As a result the English army found itself making a huge detour upriver so that in all the soldiers marched two hundred and fifty miles in seventeen days. On 19 October they were at last able to cross the river and face the French army on the opposite bank. The next day the French issued a challenge to battle.

The battle was fought on a piece of open ground

The Battle of Agincourt 25 October 1415 as recorded in Froissart's *Chronicles*. The rival armies can be identified by their heraldic banners, either the lions of England or the lilies of France.

close to the village of Agincourt on 25 October. The French army was three or four times the size of the English one, but it was largely made up of knights in heavy armour, with very few archers. They hoped to win purely on numbers; indeed they went into the fight assuming that the victory was theirs. But they lacked two things: archers and, above all, leadership. The English had both, together with another unexpected advantage, the weather, for on the eve of battle it rained hard, turning the ploughed field into a quagmire.

The key factor proved to be the archers, for they could decimate the French with their arrows at a distance of two hundred yards. And this was the distance to which they advanced before driving stakes into the ground to face the French cavalry. When the French charged, it was chaos. The horses were caught on the staves. There were so many French that they fell over each other. Others turned back causing further panic. As the enemy lay unable to get up in the mud, the English cut their throats. Arrows meanwhile rained down on the rest. By then a large number of prisoners was taken when the king, sighting a third wave of the French army about to advance, ordered their slaughter. This was against all the rules of chivalry and the men-at-arms refused, so that Henry was forced to command his archers to carry out the massacre. The battle was a great, if disgraceful, victory and destroyed the flower of the French nobility.

Both king and army returned to England in triumph. When they entered London the city staged splendid pageantry. Figures depicting St. George, the Apostles, angels, and the king's regal ancestors, hailed him as victor. English pride was restored and the king proceeded to plan a second invasion, intending to return not only as Duke of Normandy but as France's future king.

The marriage of Henry V to Katherine of Valois, 1420. A drawing from a series made c. 1485-90 called *The Pageant of the Birth, Life and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick.*

During the next year the English were again victorious, this time over the French fleet. Meanwhile Henry not only mustered his army, but gained two allies in the Holy Roman Emperor, Sigismund, and the Duke of Burgundy. In August 1417 the army crossed again to France. The town of Caen fell, then Falaise and finally, in the August of the following year, the English lay siege to the capital of Normandy, Rouen. This was a long cruel siege lasting six months. Food ran out in the city and twelve thousand women, old men, and children were pushed out of its gates. Normally they would have been allowed safe passage through the English lines but Henry left them to die of starvation in the ditch between the city walls and his own troops. On 19 January Rouen surrendered and the whole of Normandy was in Henry's hands.

By then the French were in complete disarray, and one wholly unexpected event gave Henry V everything he aspired to. In September the Duke of Burgundy was murdered at a meeting with the heir to the French throne, the Dauphin. So great was the reaction to this that the French sued for peace, Charles VI agreeing to disinherit his son and recognise Henry, married to his daughter Katherine, as 'heir of France'. Henry V entered Paris in triumph and when he and his bride returned to England there was universal rejoicing. The child of this marriage would be destined to rule over the dual monarchy of France and England. On the surface no king of England had restored the nation to such glory. But it was an illusion.

The greatest difficulty was that the treaty with the French stated that Henry could be king of the country, but that he would have to pay for the conquest of it first. He returned to France in June 1422 to begin the long and arduous task which in his case was cut short, for he died on 31 August of the disease which had racked his own army at Harfleur, dysentery. By then the vision had clouded. The war was costly and Parliament began to complain about taxation. The conquest of Normandy was not working and it was proving impossible to administer. And, just as the French war had united England behind Henry, so, in defeat, it was uniting the French behind the Dauphin. Within a few years Joan of Arc appeared to inspire a new loyalty to the French crown and, with Henry dead, the English had lost their commander.

In many ways if Henry V had not revived the French war he would have been a greater king. At home he restored the fortunes of the monarchy and was revered by his subjects for his unswerving devotion to justice. But his belief in his rights led him to take his country into a war which could never be won. He left his heir to face the defeat which would have been his had he lived longer. Before long, the dual monarchy had vanished, and within thirty years England was reduced only to its old foothold of Calais.