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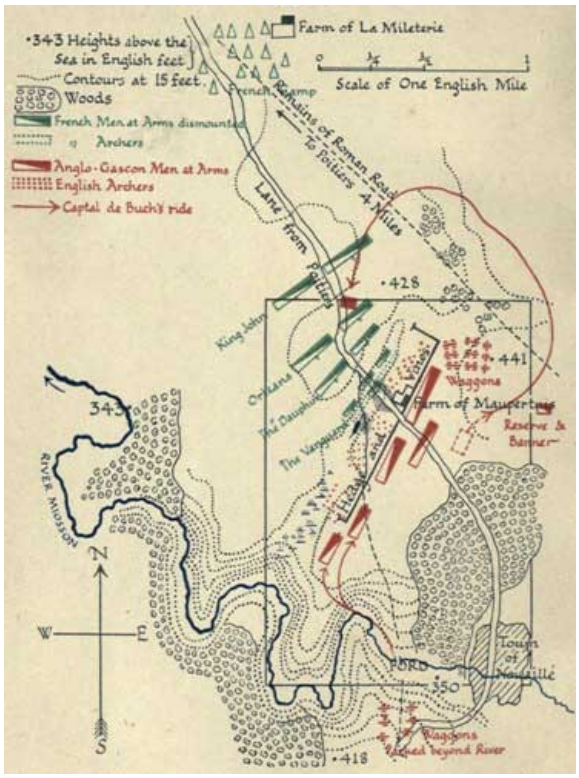
POITIERS



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POITIERS

BY

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1913

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POITIERS

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INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Poitiers was fought ten years and four weeks after that of Crécy.

The singular similarity between the two actions will be pointed out upon a later page. For the moment it must suffice to point out that Poitiers and Crécy form unique historical parallels, distinguishing like double summits the English successes of Edward III.'s army upon the Continent and of the first part of the Hundred Years' War.

For the political situation which had produced that conflict, and for the objects which Edward III. had in provoking it, I must refer my reader to the first section of my little book upon Crécy in this series; as also for the armament and organisation of the forces that served the English crown. There remain to be added, however, for the understanding of Poitiers and its campaign, two features which differentiate the fighting of 1356 from that of ten years before. These two features are: first, the character of the commander; and secondly, the nature of the regions from which he started and through which he proceeded, coupled with the political character of the English rule in the South of France. I will take these points in inverse order.

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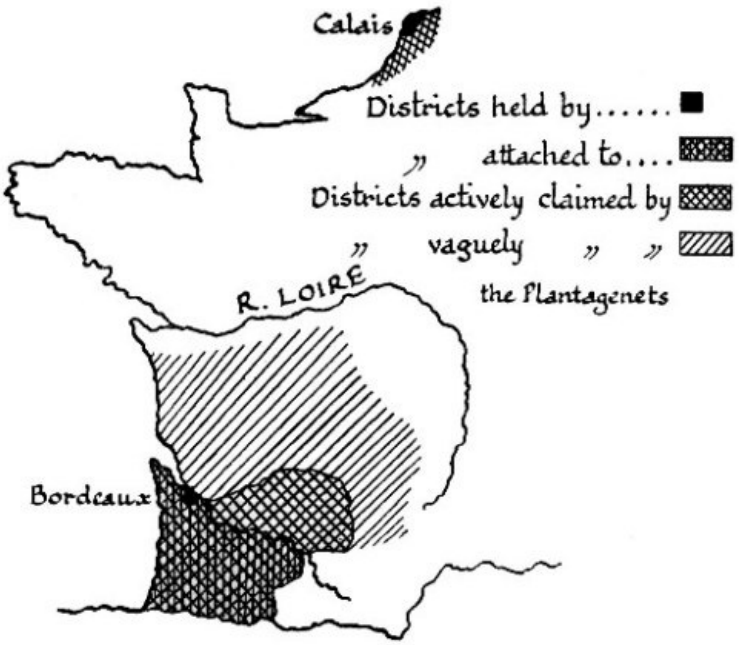
When Calais had fallen and had become an English possession in the summer of 1347 no

peace followed. A truce was patched up for some months, followed by further truces. Through the mediation of the Pope a final and definite treaty was sketched, which should terminate the war upon the cession of Aquitaine to Edward III. in full sovereignty. The French Valois king would perhaps have agreed to a settlement which would have preserved his feudal headship, though it would have put the Plantagenets in virtual possession of half France (as France was then defined). But Edward III. would not accept the terms. He had claimed the crown of France. He had won his great victory at Crécy still claiming that crown. He would not be content with adding to his *feudal tenures* under the French crown. He would add to his *sovereignty* at least, to his absolute *sovereignty*, or continue the war. In [Pg 11] 1354 (the Black Death intervening) the war was renewed. Edward would have been content, not with the whole of Aquitaine, but with complete sovereignty over the triangle between the Garonne and the Pyrenees in the south, coupled with complete sovereignty over the north-eastern seaboard of France from the Somme to Calais, and inland as far as Arras, and its territory, the Artois. But the French monarchy, though ready to admit *feudal* encroachments, would not dismember the nominal unity of the kingdom: just as a stickler in our north will grant a 999-year *lease*, but will not *sell*.

The result of this breach in the negotiations was that Edward, and his son the Black Prince, entered upon the renewal of the war with a vague claim to Aquitaine as a whole, with an active claim upon Guienne—that is, the territory just north of the Garonne—and a real hold upon Gascony; and still preserving at the back of the whole scheme of operations that half-earnest, half-theatrical plan for an Anglo-French monarchy under the house of Plantagenet which had been formulated twenty-five years before.

[Pg 12]



It must be clearly grasped by the general reader how natural was both the real and the [Pg 13] fantastic side of that pursuit. It involved no question of nationality as we should now understand it. It was based upon still living traditions of feudal connections which were personal and not racial; the chivalry of France and England was a French-speaking society based upon common ideals and fed with common memories. Gascony was in favour of the Plantagenets. Further, Guienne—the district north of Gascony beyond the Garonne—was Edward's feudal own. He was not king of it, but he was feudal lord of it, and had done homage for it in 1331 to the Valois. It was not a new or distant tie. For the rest of the quarrel my first section in the essay on Crécy already alluded to must suffice, but for the link with Gascony a more particular emphasis is needed. The trade of Bordeaux, its great town, was principally with British ports. Its export of wine was a trade with Britain. It lay far from the centre of the French monarchy. It had counted in its *Basque* population an element indifferent for hundreds of years to the national unity of Gaul. The moneyed interests of its great commercial centres, of the western ones, at least (which were by far the richest), were closely bound up with England, with English trade. Add to this his actual feudal tenure of [Pg 14] Guienne, and we can see how the feeling that all the south-west corner of France was his grew to be a very real feeling in Edward's mind, and was shared by his son.

When, therefore, upon the 20th September 1355, Edward, the Black Prince, landed at Bordeaux, it was to find a province the nobles of which were honestly attached to his cause and the greater townsmen as well; while in the mass of the people there was no disaffection to the idea of this one out of the vague, many, French-speaking feudal lords whom they

knew to be their masters, being the actual governor of the land. There was no conquest, nor any need for it, so far as Gascony was concerned; and in any expedition the Prince might make he was as certain of a regular following from the towns and estates that lay between the mountains and the Garonne as the King of France was certain of his own feudal levies in the north. But expeditions and fighting there would be because the Black Prince came with a commission not only to govern Gascony, but to establish himself in the more doubtful Guienne, and even to be—if he could conquer it—the lieutenant of his father, Edward, in all Aquitaine. He was to recover the districts immediately north of the Garonne, and even (in [Pg 15] theory, at least) right up to the neighbourhood of the Loire; and (in theory, again) he was to regard those who might resist his administration of all these "lost" countries of the Central and Southern West of France as "rebels."

It was thought certain at first, of course, that the whole claim could never be pushed home; but the Black Prince might well hope so to harry the districts which were claimed—and the neighbouring county of Toulouse to the east, which was admittedly feudatory to the King of Paris—as to compel that sovereign to recognise at last his father's absolute sovereignty over Gascony certainly, and perhaps over Guienne, or even somewhat more than Guienne.

The remainder of that year, 1355, therefore—the autumn and the winter—were spent in striking at the sole portion of Gascony that was disaffected (that of Armagnac), and pushing eastward to ravage Toulouse and Carcassonne; for though these towns were admittedly outside Edward's land, the wasting of their territory was a depletion of the King of France's revenue.

The Black Prince did more. In the early part of the next year, 1356, he set up his flag upon Perigueux, some days' march to the north of his father's real boundary; and, as the year [Pg 16] proceeded, he planned an advance far to the northward of that, which advance was to be taken in co-operation with a descent of the Plantagenet forces upon the other extremity of the French kingdom.

As to the character of the Black Prince, which so largely determined what is to follow, and especially his character in command, nothing is more conspicuous in the history of the Middle Ages. He was, partly from the influence of models, partly from personal force, the mirror of what the fighting, French-speaking nobility of that century took for its ideal conception of a captain. Far the first thing for him was the trade and the profession of arms, and the appetite for combat which this career satisfied certainly in its baser, but still more certainly in its nobler, effects in the mind of a virile youth. He had gone through the great experience of Crécy as a boy of sixteen. He was now, upon the eve of the Campaign of Poitiers, a man in his twenty-sixth year, thoroughly avid not only of honour but of capture, thoroughly contemptuous of gain, generous with a mad magnificence, always in debt, and always utterly careless of it. His courage was of the sort that takes a sharp delight in danger, and particularly in danger accompanied by strong action; he was an intense and a [Pg 17] variable lover of women, an unwearied rider, of some (but no conspicuous) ability in the planning of an action or the grasp of a field, not cruel as yet (but already violent to an excess which later years, alas! refined into cruelty), splendidly adventurous, and strung every way for command. He could and did inspire a force, especially a small force, in the fashion which it was his chief desire to achieve. He was a great soldier; but his sins doomed him to an unhappy failure and to the wasting of his life at last.

PART I

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THE CAMPAIGN

As the first of the great raids, that of Crécy, had been designed to draw off the pressure from Edward III.'s troops in the South of France, and to bring the French levies northward away from them, so the second great raid ten years later, which may be called by courtesy the "Campaign" of Poitiers, was designed to call pressure off the English troops in the north and to bring the French levies down southward away from them. As Edward's march through Normandy had been a daring ride for booty, so was the Black Prince's ride northward from Aquitaine; and as Edward from the neighbourhood of Paris turned and retreated at top speed from before the French host, so did the Black Prince turn from the neighbourhood of the Loire and retreat at speed from before the pursuit of the bodies which the King of France had gathered. And as the one great raid ended in the signal victory of [Pg 19] Crécy, so did the other end in the signal victory of Poitiers.

But these parallel and typical actions, lying ten years apart, have, of course, one main point of resemblance more important than all the rest: each includes the complete overthrow of a large body of feudal cavalry by the trained forces of the Plantagenets; Crécy wholly, Poitiers partly, by the excellence of a missile weapon—the long-bow. Each shows also a striking disproportion of numbers: the little force on the defensive completely defeating the much

larger body of the attack.

Those of my readers, therefore, who have made themselves acquainted with the details of Crécy must expect a repetition of much the same sort of incidents in the details of Poitiers. The two battles are twin, and stand out conspicuously in their sharpness of result from the mass of contemporary mediæval warfare.

In this opening section I will describe the great ride of Edward the Black Prince from the Dordogne to the Loire, and show by what a march the raid proceeded to its unexpected crisis in the final battle.

I have said that the Black Prince's object (apart from booty, which was a main business in all these rapid darts of the time) was to draw the pressure from the English troops in the north. [Pg 20]

As a fact, the effort was wasted for any such purpose. Lancaster, who commanded in the north, was already in retreat before the Black Prince had started, but that commander in the south could not, under the conditions of the time, learn the fact until he had set off. Further, the Black Prince hoped, by this diversion of a raid up from the south through the centre of France, to make it easier for King Edward, his father, to cross over and prosecute the war in Normandy. As a fact, the King of England never started upon that expedition, but his son thought he was about to do so, and said as much in a letter to the Mayor of London.

The point of departure which the Black Prince chose for this dash to the north was Bergerac upon the Dordogne, and the date upon which he broke camp was Thursday, the 4th August 1356.

His force was an extremely small and a very mobile one; 3500 men-at-arms—that is, fully armoured gentlemen—were the nucleus of it; 2500 archers accompanied them, and it is remarkable that these archers he *mounted*. Besides these 6000 riding men, he took with him 1000 lightly armed foot-soldiers, and thus, with a little band of no more than 7000 combatants all told, he began the adventure. He had no intention of risking action. It was his desire to take booty, to harry, to compel the French king to come south in his pursuit, and when that enemy should be close upon him, at whatever stage this might be in his own northern progress, to turn and ride back south as rapidly as he had ridden north. Thus he would draw the French feudal levies after him, and render what he had been told was the forthcoming English expedition to Normandy an easy matter, free from opposition. As things turned out, he was able to ride north as far as the Loire before his enemy was upon him, and it gives one an idea of the scale on which this great raid was planned, that from the point on the Dordogne whence he started, to the point on the Loire where he turned southward, was in a straight line no less than a hundred and fifty miles. As a fact, his raid northward came to much more, for he went round to the east in a great bend before he came to the neighbourhood of the French forces, and his total advance covered more than two hundred miles of road. [Pg 21]

Of the 7000 who marched with him, perhaps the greater part, and certainly half, were Gascon gentlemen from the south who were in sympathy with the English occupation of Aquitaine, or, having no sentiment one way or the other, joined in the expedition for the sake of wealth and of adventure. Of these were much the most of the men-at-arms. But the archers were for the most part English. [Pg 22]

Raid though it was, the Black Prince's advance was not hurried. He proposed no more than to summon southward the French king by his efforts, and it was a matter of some indifference to him how far northward he might have proceeded before he would be compelled by the neighbourhood of the enemy's forces to return. His high proportion of mounted men and the lightness of his few foot-soldiers were for local mobility rather than for perpetual speed; nor did the Black Prince intend to make a race of it until the pursuit should begin. Whenever that might be, he felt secure (though in the event his judgment proved to be wrong) in his power to outmarch any body the King of France might bring against him. He must further have thought that his chance of a rapid and successful retreat, and his power to outmarch any possible pursuers, would increase in proportion to the size of the force that might be sent after him.

The raid into the north began and was continued in a fashion not exactly leisurely, but methodically slow. It made at first through Périgueux to Brantôme. Thence up through the country of the watershed to Bellac. It turned off north-westward as far as Lussac, and thence broke back, but a little north of east, to Argenton. [Pg 23]

It will be evident from the trace of such a route that it had no definite strategic purpose. It was a mere raid: a harrying of the land with the object of relieving the pressure upon the north. It vaguely held, perhaps, a further object of impressing the towns of Aquitaine with the presence of a Plantagenet force. But this last feature we must not exaggerate. The Black Prince did not treat the towns he visited as territory ultimately to be governed by himself or his father. He treated them as objects for plunder.

The pace and method with which all this early part of the business was conducted in the first three weeks of August may be judged by the fact that, measured along the roads the Black Prince followed, he covered between Bergerac and Argenton just on a hundred and eighty miles, and he did it in just under eighteen marching days. In other words, he kept to a fairly regular ten miles a day, and slowly rolled up an increasing loot without fatiguing his horses [Pg 24]

or his men.

From Argenton, which he thus reached quite unweakened on the 21st of August, he made Châteauroux (rather more than eighteen miles off, but not nineteen by the great road) in two days, reaching it on the 23rd. Thence he turned still more to the eastward, and passed by Issoudun towards Bourges. This last excursion or "elbow" in the road was less strategically motiveless than most of the march; for the Prince had had news that some French force under the son of the French king was lying at Bourges, and to draw off such a force southward was part of the very vague plan which he was following. Unlike that string of open towns which the mounted band had sacked upon their way, Bourges was impregnable to them, for it was walled and properly defended. They turned back from it, therefore, down the River Yevre towards the Cher Valley again, and upon the 28th of August reached Vierzon, having marched in the five days from Châteauroux the regulation ten miles a day; for they covered fifty miles or a little more.

This point, Vierzon, is an important one to note in the march. The town lies just to the south of a curious district very little known to English travellers, or, for that matter, to the French themselves. It is a district called the "Sologne," that is, the "Solitarium" or "Desert." For a space of something like forty miles by sixty a great isolated area of wild, almost uncultivatable, land intervenes between the valley of the Cher and that of the Loire. Only one road of importance traverses it, that coming from Paris and Orleans, and making across the waste for Vierzon to the south. No town of any size is discoverable in this desolate region of stagnant pools, scrub, low forest, and hunters. [Pg 25]

It was such a situation on the outer edge of the Sologne which made Vierzon the outpost of Aquitaine, and having reached Vierzon, the Prince, in so far as he was concerned with emphasising the Plantagenet claim over Aquitaine, had reached his northern term. But his raid had, as we know, another object: that of drawing the French forces southward. And, with the characteristic indecision of feudal strategic aims, it occurred to the Black Prince at this stage to immix with that object an alternative, and to see whether he could not get across the Loire to join Lancaster's force, which was campaigning in the West of France on the other side of that river.

At Vierzon Edward's men came across the first resistance. A handful of John's forces, irregulars hired by the French king under a leader most charmingly named "Grey Mutton," skirmished to their disadvantage against the Anglo-Gascon force. [Pg 26]

The Black Prince made back westward after "Grey Mutton," thinking, perhaps, to cross the Loire at Blois, and two days out from Vierzon (rather over twenty miles) he made the only assault upon fortifications which he permitted his men in the whole campaign. This was an attack upon the Castle of Romorantin, in which "Grey Mutton" had taken refuge.

It was not the moment for delay. Edward knew that the French army must now be somewhere in the neighbourhood; he had already touched lance with one small French force; but he had his teeth into the business and would not let go his hold. The outworks were taken early in the affair. The keep held out for four days more, surrendering at last to fire upon the 3rd of September.

The season was now full late if the Black Prince intended a return to the south. But, as we have seen, he no longer entirely intended such a retreat. He had already begun to consider the alternative of crossing the Loire and joining his brother's force beyond it. He had information, however, that the bridges directly in front of him were cut. It is not easy to reconcile this with the passage immediately afterwards of the French army. But the most vivid, and perhaps the most accurate, account we have of this march not only tells us that the bridges were cut, but particularly alludes to the high water in the Loire at that moment. It is a significant piece of information, because no river in Europe north of the Pyrenees differs so much in its volume from day to day as does the Loire, which is sometimes a trickle of water in the midst of sandbanks, and at other times a great flood a quarter of a mile across, and twenty feet deep, like the Thames at London. [Pg 27]

At any rate, from Romorantin, Prince Edward made for Tours, a distance of fifty miles as the crow flies, and a march of precisely five days. It will be observed that his plotted rate of marching at ten miles a day was most accurately maintained.

Now from his camp in front of Tours, Edward behaved in a fashion singular even for the unbusinesslike warfare of that somewhat theatrical generation. He sat down, apparently undecided which way to turn, and remained in that posture during the remainder of September the 8th, all the next day, September 9th, and all the next day again, the 10th. There could be no question of attacking Tours. It was a strong, large, and well-defended town, and quite beyond the power of the Black Prince's force, which was by this time encumbered with a very heavy train of waggons carrying his booty. But while he was waiting there (and he could see, says one account, the fires of his brother's army by night beyond the Loire), his enemy, with such forces as he had been able to collect, was marching down upon him. [Pg 28]

The King of France had begun to get men together at Chartres upon the same day that his rival had reached Vierzon, the 28th of August. Five days later, just when Romorantin Castle was surrendering, he had broken up and was marching to the Loire. And upon the same 8th

of September which saw the Black Prince pitch his tents under the walls of Tours, the first bodies of the French command were beginning to cross the Loire at the two upper points of Meung and Blois, while some of them were preparing to cross at Tours itself.

Yet so defective was Edward's information that it was not until Sunday, September 11th, that news reached him of King John's movements. He heard upon that day that the French king himself had crossed at Blois, thirty miles up river behind him. Edward at once broke camp and started on his retreat to the south. After him as he went followed the French host, which had combined its forces after its separate passages of the river. [Pg 29]

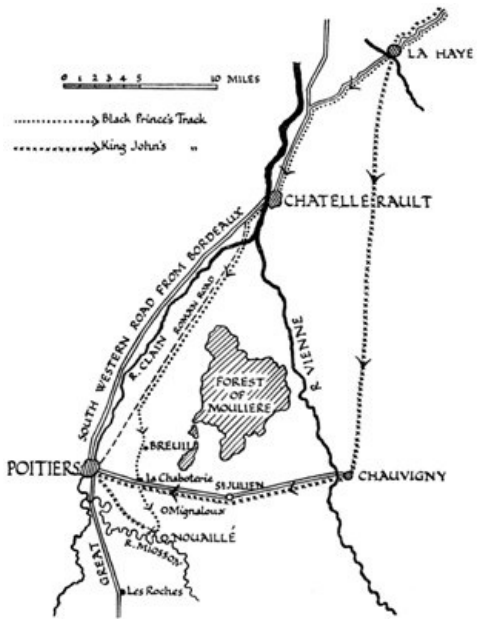
It is important, if we are to understand what follows, to appreciate both the quality and the numbers of those whom the King of France had been able to gather. He had with him, by the still necessary and fatal military weakness of French society, only those loose feudal levies whose lack of cohesion had accounted ten years before for the disaster of Crécy. But John commanded no such host as Philip had nominally led in the Picardy Campaign against Edward III. At the most, and counting all his command, it was little if at all superior in numbers to that of the Black Prince. He hoped, indeed, to increase it somewhat with further levies as his progress southward advanced, and we shall see that his ultimate entry into the town of Poitiers did considerably reinforce him. But at no time before the battle which decided this campaign was John in any important numerical superiority over his enemy, and even in that battle the superiority had nothing of the dramatic disproportion which has rendered the field of Crécy famous. [Pg 30]

John marched down the Loire straight on Tours. He reached Amboise, twenty miles off, in two days, coming under that town and castle upon Monday the 12th of September, twenty-four hours after the Black Prince had broken up his camp in front of Tours. As it was now useless to go on to Tours, John turned and marched due south, reaching Loches, another twenty miles away, not in two days but in one. It was a fine forced march; and if the Black Prince had appreciated the mobility of the foe, he would not have committed the blunder which will be described in the next section. He himself was marching well, but, encumbered as he was by his heavy baggage train, he covered on the 12th and 13th just less than thirty miles, and reached the town of La Haye des Cartes upon Tuesday the 13th, just as John, with his mixed force of Frenchmen, Germans, and Spaniards, was marching into Loches, twenty miles away.

On the next day, Wednesday the 14th, John made yet another of those astonishing marches which merited a better fate than the disaster that was to conclude them, covered the twenty miles between Loches and La Haye, and entered the latter town just as the Black Prince was bringing his men into Châtellerault, only fifteen miles in front of him. Both the commanders, pursuing and pursued, had been getting remarkable work out of their men; for even the Black Prince, though the slower of the two, had covered forty-five miles in three days. But John in that determined advance after him had covered forty miles in two days. [Pg 31]

With John's entry into La Haye des Cartes and Edward's leaving that town twenty-four hours ahead of him, we enter the curious bit of cross-marching and conflicting purposes which may properly be called "The Preliminaries" of the Battle of Poitiers, and it is under this title that I shall deal with them in the next section.

[Pg 32]



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Sketch Map of operations preceding the Battle

[Pg 33]

PART II

THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE ACTION

It was, as we have seen, on the evening of Tuesday, September the 13th, that the Black Prince with his 7000 men and his heavy train of booty had marched into La Haye des Cartes, a small town upon the right bank of the Creuse, somewhat above the place where that river falls into the Vienne.

His confidence that his well-mounted and light-armed troops could outmarch his pursuers was not yet shaken; he was even prepared to imagine that he had already shaken them off; but anyone who could have taken a general survey of all that countryside would have discovered how ill-founded was his belief. The great forces of the French king, coming down slantways from the north and east, had had nearly four miles to march to his three. Yet they were gaining on him. Edward had given the French king a day's advance by his hesitation [Pg 34] before Tours, and the tardiness with which he had received news of John's crossing the Loire was another point in favour of the French.

It was the Black Prince's business to get down on to the great road which has been the trunk road of Western France for two thousand years, and which leads from Paris through Châtellerault and Poitiers to Angoulême, and so to Bordeaux. If (as he hoped) he could advance so quickly as to get rid of the pursuit, so much the better. If he were still pressed he must continue his rapid marching, but, at any rate, that was the road he must take.

To the simple plan, however, of reaching Châtellerault and then merely following the great road on through Poitiers, he must make a local exception, for Poitiers itself contained a large population, with plenty of trained men, munitions, and arms; and it was further, from its position as well as from its walls, altogether too strong a place for him to think of taking it.

The town had been from immemorial time a fortress: first tribal (and the rallying point of the Gaulish Picts under the name of Limon); later, Roman and Frankish. The traveller notes to-day its singular strength, standing on the flat top and sides of its precipitous peninsula, [Pg 35] isolated from its plateau on every side save where a narrow neck joins it to the higher land; it is impregnable to mere assault, half surrounded by the Clain to the east, and on the west protected by a deep and formidable ravine.

It was absolutely necessary for the Prince not only to avoid Poitiers, but not to pass so close to it as to give the alarm. What he proposed to do, therefore, was to strike the great Bordeaux road at a point well south of the city, called Les Roches, and to do this he must engage himself within the broadening triangle which lies between the Clain and the Vienne: these rivers join their waters just above Châtellerault itself.

The main road from Châtellerault to Poitiers runs on the further side of the Clain from this triangle, and the Black Prince, by engaging himself in the wedge between the rivers, would thus have a stream between his column and the natural marching route of any force which might approach him from the fortified city which he feared.

Further, he was well provided for part of this march through the triangle between the rivers by the existence of a straight way formed by the old Roman road which runs through it, and may still be followed. He could not pursue this road all the way to Poitiers (which town it [Pg 36] ultimately reaches by a bridge over the Clain), but somewhere half-way between Châtellerault and Poitiers he would diverge from it towards the east, and so avoid the latter stronghold and make a straight line for Les Roches. This it would be the easier for him to do because the soil in that countryside is light and firm and traversed by very numerous cross-lanes which serve its equally numerous farms. Only one considerable obstacle interrupts a passage southward through the triangle between the rivers. It is the forest of Moulière. But the Black Prince's march along the Roman road would skirt this wood to the west, and by the time his approach to Poitiers compelled him to diverge from the Roman road eastward, the boundary of the forest also sloped eastward away from it.

His first day's march upon this last lap, as it were, of his escape was a long one. By the road he took it was no less than fifteen miles, and at the end of it he gathered his column into Châtellerault, a couple of miles from the place where the Clain and the Vienne meet, and where the triangle between the two streams through which he proposed to retreat begins. At the same hour that the Black Prince was bringing his men into Châtellerault, John was [Pg 37] leading the head of *his* column into La Haye. He was just one day's march behind the Plantagenet.

There followed an unsoldierly and uncharacteristic blunder on the part of the Black Prince which determined all the strange cross-purposes of that week.

The Black Prince having made Châtellerault, believed that he had shaken off the pursuit.

In explanation of this error, it must be remembered that the population so far north as this was universally hostile to the southern cause and to the claim of the Plantagenets. Whether news of the ravaging and burning to the eastward had affected these peasants or no, we are certain that they would give the Anglo-Gascon force nothing but misleading information. The scouting, a perpetual weakness in mediæval warfare, was imperfect; and even had it been better organised, to scout rearwards is not the same thing as scouting on an advance or on the flanks. At any rate, he took it for granted that there was no further need for haste, that he had outmarched the French king, and that the remainder of the retreat might be taken at [Pg 38] his own pleasure. It must further be noted that there was a frailty in the Black Prince's leading which was more than once discovered in his various campaigns, and which he only retrieved by his admirable tactical sense whenever he was compelled to a decision. This frailty consisted, as might be guessed of so headstrong a rider, in trying to get too much out of his troops in a forced march, and paying for it upon the morrow of such efforts by expensive delays which more than counterbalanced its value. He relied too much upon the very large proportion of mounted men which formed the bulk of his small force. He forgot the limitations of his few foot-soldiers and the strain that a too-rapid advance put upon his heavy and cumbersome train of waggons, laden with a heavier and heavier booty as his raid proceeded.

He stayed in Châtellerault recruiting the strength of his mounts and men for two whole days. He passed the Thursday and the Friday there without moving, and it was not until the Saturday morning that he set out from the town, crossed the Clain, and engaged himself within the triangle between the two rivers.

The land through which he marched upon that Saturday morning had been the scene of a [Pg 39] much more famous and more decisive feat of arms; for it was there, just north of the forest of Moulière, that Charles Martel six hundred years before had overthrown the Mahommedans and saved Europe for ever.

So he went forward under the morning, making south in a retreat which he believed to be unthreatened.

Meanwhile, John, at the head of the French army, was pursuing a better-thought-out strategical plan, whose complexity has only puzzled historians because they have not weighed all the factors of the military situation.

We do not know what numbers the King of France disposed of during this, the first part of the pursuit, but we must presume that he could not yet risk an engagement. The town of Poitiers was everything to him. There he would find provisions and munition, some considerable body of trained men, and the possibility of levying many thousands more. It was a secure rallying point upon which to block the Black Prince's march to the south, or from which to sally out and intercept his march. But when John found himself in La Haye upon Wednesday the 14th, a day's march behind Edward's command, he could not take the [Pg 40] direct line for Poitiers because that very command intercepted him. He knew that it had taken the road for Châtellerault. He determined, therefore, by an exceptionally rapid progress, to march *round* his enemy by the east, to get down to Chauvigny, and from that point to turn westward and reach Poitiers. It was a risk, but it was the only course open to him. Had the Black Prince pursued his march instead of waiting at Châtellerault, John's plan would have failed, prompt as its execution was; but the Black Prince's delay gave him his opportunity.

From La Haye to Chauvigny by the crossroads that lead directly southward is a matter of thirty miles. John covered this in two days. Leaving La Haye upon the morning of Thursday the 15th, he brought his force into Chauvigny upon the 16th, Friday. He left, no doubt, a certain proportion delayed upon the road, but he himself, with the bulk of the army, completed the distance.

While, therefore, the Black Prince was delaying all that Thursday and Friday in Châtellerault, John was passing right in front and beyond him some eight miles to the eastward; and on the Saturday, the 17th, while the Black Prince was leading his column [Pg 41] through the triangle between the rivers, John was marching due west from Chauvigny to Poitiers by the great road through St Julien, yet another fifteen miles and more, in the third day of his great effort. The head of the column, with the king himself, we must presume to have ridden through the gate of Poitiers before or about noon, but the last contingents were spread out along the road behind him when, in that same morning or early afternoon of Saturday, the outriders of the Anglo-Gascon force appeared upon the fields to the north.

It was an encounter as sudden as it was dramatic. The countryside at this point consists in wide, open fields, the plough-lands of a plateau which rises about one hundred feet above the level of the rivers. To the east of this open country a line of wood marks the outlying fragments of the forest of Moulière; to the west, five miles away, and out of sight of these farms, stands upon its slope above the Clain the town of Poitiers. The lane by which the Black Prince was advancing was that which passes through the hamlet of Le Breuil.[1] It is possible that he intended to camp there; he had covered sixteen miles. But if that was his [Pg 42] intention, the accident which followed changed it altogether. A mile beyond the village there is a roll of rising land, itself a mile short of the great road which joins Poitiers and

Chauvigny. It was from this slight eminence that scouts riding out in front of Edward's army saw, massed upon that road and advancing westward across their view, a considerable body of vehicles escorted by armed men. It was the rearguard and the train of King John.

A man following to-day that great road between Poitiers and Chauvigny eastward, notes a spinney and a farm lying respectively to the right and to the left of his way, some four kilometres from the gate of Poitiers, and not quite three from the famous megalith of the "Lifted Stone," which is a matter of immemorial reverence for the townsfolk. That farm is known as La Chaboterie, and it marks the spot upon the high road where John's rearguard first caught sight of Edward's scouts upon the sky-line to the north.

The mounted men of this force turned northward off the high road, and pursued the scouts to the main body near Le Breuil; then a sharp skirmish ensued, and the French were driven [Pg 43] off. This mêlée was the first news the Black Prince had that the French army, so far from having abandoned the pursuit, had marched right round him, and that his column was actually in the gravest peril. It warned him that though he had already covered those sixteen miles, he must press on further before he could dare to camp for the night. His column was already weary, but there was no alternative.

The army reached the high road, and crossed it long after the French rearguard had disappeared to the west. Exhausted as it was, it pushed on another mile or two southward by the lanes that lead across the fields to the neighbourhood of Mignaloux, and there it camped. The men had covered that day close on twenty miles! But before settling for the evening, the Black Prince sent out the Captal de Buch north-westward over the rolling plateau in reconnaissance. When this commander and his body reached the heights which overlook the Clain, and faced the houses of Poitiers upon the hill beyond, they saw in the valley beneath them, and on the slopes of the river bank, the encampment of the French army; and reported, upon their return, "that all the plain was covered with men-at-arms."

Upon the next morning, that of Sunday the 18th of September, broken as the force was with [Pg 44] fatigue, it was marshalled again for the march—but no more than a mile or two was asked of it.

Edward had scouted forward upon the morning, and discovered, just in front of the little town of Nouaillé and to the northward of the wood that covers that little town, a position which, if it were necessary to stand, would give him the opportunity for a defensive action.

That he intended any such action we may doubt in the light of what followed. It was certainly not to his advantage to do so. The French by occupying Poitiers had left his way to the south free, but the extreme weariness of his force and the possibility that the French might strike suddenly were both present in his mind. He wisely prepared for either alternative of action or retreat, and carefully prepared the position he had chosen. For its exact nature, I must refer my reader to the next section, but the general conditions of the place are proper to the interest of our present matter.

The main business, it must be remembered, upon which the Prince's mind was concentrated was still his escape to the south. He must expect the French advance upon him to come [Pg 45] down by the shortest road to any position he had prepared, even if he did not intend, or only half intended, to stand there: and that position was therefore fixed astraddle of the road which leads from Poitiers to Nouaillé.

Now, just behind—that is, to the south of—this position runs in a tortuous course through a fairly sharp[2] little valley a stream called the Miosson. It formed a sufficient obstacle to check pursuit for some appreciable time. There was only one bridge across it, at Nouaillé itself, which he could destroy when his army had passed; and the line of it was strengthened by woods upon either side of the stream.

The Black Prince, therefore, must be judged (if we collate all the evidence) to have looked forward to a general plan offering him two alternatives.

Either the French would advance at once and press him. In which case he would be compelled to take his chance of an action against what were by this time far superior numbers; and in that case he had a good prepared position, which will shortly be described, upon which to meet them.

Or they would give him time to file away southward, in which case the neighbouring [Pg 46] Miosson, with its ravine and its woods, would immediately, at the very beginning of the march, put an obstacle between him and his pursuer; especially as he had two crossings, a ford, and a bridge some way above it, and he could cut the bridge the moment he had crossed it.

Finally, if (as was possible) a combination of these two alternatives should present itself, he had but to depend upon his prepared position for its rearguard to hold during just the time that would permit the main force to make the passage of the Miosson, not two miles away.

With this plan clearly developed he advanced upon the Sunday morning no more than a mile or two to the position in question, fortified it after the fashion which I shall later describe, and camped immediately behind it to see what that Sunday might bring. He could not make off at once, because his horses and his marching men were worn out with the fatigue of the

previous day’s great march.

PART III

[Pg 47]

THE TERRAIN

The defensive position taken up by Edward, the Black Prince, upon Sunday the 18th of September 1356, and used by him in the decisive action of the following day, is composed of very simple elements; which are essentially a shallow dip (about thirty feet only in depth), bounded by two slight parallel slopes, the one of which the Anglo-Gascon force held against the advance of the King of France’s cosmopolitan troops from the other.

We can include all the business of that Monday’s battle in a parallelogram lying true to the points of the compass, and measuring three miles and six furlongs from north to south, by exactly two and a half miles from east to west; while the actual fighting is confined to an inner parallelogram no more than two thousand yards from east to west, by three thousand [Pg 48] from north to south. The first of these areas is that given upon the coloured map which forms the frontispiece of this little book. The second is marked by a black frame within that coloured map, the main features of which are reproduced in line upon a larger scale on the page opposite this.

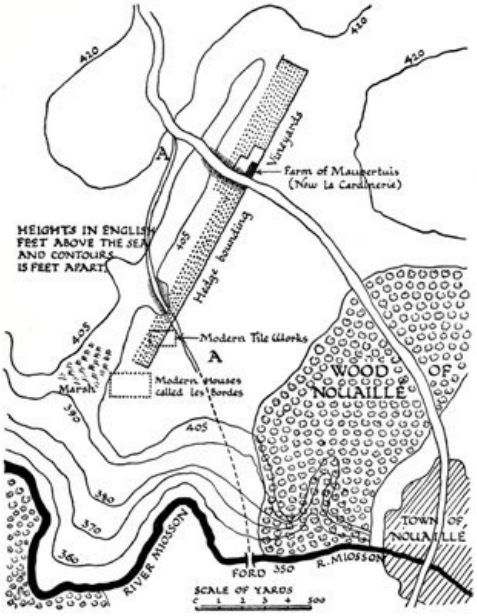
I have said that the essentials of the Black Prince’s defensive plan were:

(1) A prepared defensive position, which it might or might not be necessary to hold, coupled with

(2) an obstacle, the Miosson River, which (when he should retreat) he could count upon to check pursuit; especially as its little valley was (*a*) fairly deeply cut, (*b*) encumbered by wood, and (*c*) passable for troops only at the bridge of Nouaillé, which he was free to cut when it had served him, and at a somewhat hidden ford which I will later describe.

I must here interpose the comment that the bridge of Nouaillé, being of stone, would not have been destroyable during a very active and pressed retreat under the conditions of those times; that is, without the use of high explosives. But it must be remembered that such a narrow passage would in any case check the pursuit, that half an hour’s work would suffice to make a breach in the roadway, and perhaps to get rid of the keystones, that a few planks thrown over the gap so formed would be enough to permit archers defending the rear to cross over, that these planks could then be immediately withdrawn, and that the crush of a hurried pursuit, which would certainly be of heavily armed and mounted knights, would be badly stopped by a gap of the kind. I therefore take it for granted that the bridge of Nouaillé was a capital point in Edward’s plan.[3]

[Pg 49]



Larger Image

The line along which the Black Prince threw up entrenchments was the head of the slight slope upon the Nouaillé or eastern side of the depression I have mentioned. It ran from the farm Maupertuis (now called La Cardinerie) to the site of those out-buildings which surround the modern steadings of Les Bordes, and to-day bear the name of La Dolerie. The length of that line was, almost to a foot, one thousand English yards, and it will easily be perceived that even with his small force only a portion of his men were necessary to hold it. Its strength and weakness I shall discuss in a moment. This line faces not quite due west, indeed nearly twenty degrees north of west.[4] Its distance as the crow flies from the Watergate of Poitiers is just under seven kilometres, or, as nearly as possible, four miles and six hundred and fifty English yards.[5] While its bearings from the town of Poitiers, or the central part thereof, is a trifle south of due south-east.[6] [Pg 50] [Pg 51]

The line thus taken up, and the depression in front of it, are both singularly straight, and the slope before the entrenchments, like its counterpart opposite, is regular, increasing in depth as the depression proceeds down towards the Miosson, which, at this point, makes a bend upward to meet, as it were, the little valley. A trifle to the south of the centre of the line there is a break in the uniformity of the ridge, which comes in the shape of a little dip now occupied by some tile-works; and on the further, or French, side a corresponding and rather larger cleft faces it; so that the whole depression has the shape of a long cross with short arms rather nearer its base than its summit. Just at the end of the depression, before the ground sinks abruptly down to the river, the soil is marshy. [Pg 52]

Leading towards this position from Poitiers there was and is but one road, a winding country lane, now in good repair, but until modern times of a poor surface, and never forming one of the great high roads. The importance of this unique road will be seen in a moment.

There had once existed, five hundred yards from the right of the Black Prince’s entrenched line, a Roman road, the traces of which can still be discovered at various parts of its course, but which, even by the time of Poitiers, had disappeared as a passable way. The only approach remaining, as I have said, was that irregular lane which formed the connection between Poitiers and Nouaillé.

Now in most terrains where feudal cavalry was concerned, the existence or non-existence of a road, and its character, would be of little moment in the immediate neighbourhood of the action: for though a feudal army depended (as all armies always must) upon roads for its *strategics*, it was almost independent of them in its *tactics* upon those open fields which were characteristic of mediæval agriculture. The mounted and armoured men deployed and charged across the stubble. Those who have read the essay upon the Terrain of Crécy, which preceded this in the present series, will appreciate that the absence of a road uniting the English and French positions in that battle was of no significance to the result. [Pg 53]

But in the particular case of Poitiers this road, and a certain cart-track leading off it, must be carefully noted, because between them they determine all that happened; and the reason of this is that the front of the English position was covered with *vines*.

The French method of cultivating the vine, and the condition of that cultivation in the middle of September (in all but a quite exceptionally early year so far north as Poitou), makes of a vineyard the most complete natural obstacle conceivable against the use of cavalry, and at the same time a most formidable entanglement to the advance of infantry, and a tolerable cover for missile weapons at short range.

The vine is cultivated in France upon short stakes of varying height with varying districts, but usually in this neighbourhood somewhat over four feet above the ground; that is, covering most of a man’s figure, even as he would stand to arms with a long-bow, yet affording space above for the discharge of the weapon. These stakes are set at such distances apart as allow ordered and careful movement between them, but close enough together to break and interfere with a pressed advance: their distances being determined by the fulness of the plant before the grapes are gathered, a harvest which falls in that region somewhat later than the date of the action. [Pg 54]

Wherever a belt of vineyard is found, cultivated after this fashion, the public ways through it are the only opportunities for advance; for land is so valuable under the grape that various allotments or properties are cultivated to their outermost limit. The vineyards (which have now disappeared, but which then stood upon the battlefield) could only be pierced by the roads I have mentioned.[7]

This line, then, already well protected by the vineyards, was further strengthened by the presence of a hedge which bounded them and ran along their eastern edge upon the flat land above the depression.

I have mentioned a cart-track, which branched off on the main lane, and which is marked upon my map with the letters “A-A.” It formed, alongside with the lane, a second approach through the English line, and it must be noticed that, like the main lane, a portion of it, where it breasted the slope, was sunk in those times below the level of the land on either side. [Pg 55]

The first thought that will strike the modern student of such a position is that a larger force,

such as the one commanded by the King of France, should have been able easily to turn the defensive upon its right.

Now, first, a feudal army rarely manœuvred. For that matter, the situation was such that if John had avoided a fight altogether, and had merely marched down the great south-western road to block Prince Edward's retreat, the move would have had a more complete effect than winning a pitched battle. The reader has also heard how the Black Prince's sense of his peril was such that he had been prepared to treat upon any but the most shameful terms. It is evident, therefore, that if the French fought at all it was because they wanted to fight, and that they approached the conflict in the spirit (which was that of all their time) disdainful of [Pg 56] manœuvring and bound in honour to a frontal attack. A modern force as superior in numbers as was John's to the Black Prince's would have "held" the front of the defensive with one portion of its effectives, while another portion marched round that defensive's right flank. But it is impossible to establish a comparison between developed tactics and the absolutely simple plan of feudal warfare. It is equally impossible to compare a modern force with a feudal force of that date. It had not the unity of command and the elasticity of organisation which are necessary to divided and synchronous action. It had no method of attack but to push forward successive bodies of men in the hope that the weight of the column would tell.

Secondly, Edward defended that right flank from attack by establishing there his park of waggons.

None the less, the Black Prince could not fail to see the obvious danger of the open right upon the plateau beyond the Roman road; even in the absence of any manœuvring, the mere superior length of the French line might suffice to envelop him there. It was presumably upon this account that he stationed a small body of horse upon that slightly higher piece of [Pg 57] land, five hundred yards behind Maupertuis and a little to the right of it, which is now the site of the railway station; and this mounted force which he kept in reserve was to prove an excellent point of observation during the battle. It was the view over towards the French position obtained from it which led, as will be seen in the next section, to the flank charge of the Captal de Buch.

There remains to be considered such environments of the position as would affect the results of the battle. I have already spoken of the obstacle of the Miosson, of Nouaillé, of the passages of the river, and of the woods which would further check a pursuit if the pressure following upon a partial defeat, or upon a determination to retire without accepting action, should prove serious. I must now speak of these in a little more detail.

The depression, which was the main feature of the battlefield, is carved like its fellows out of a general and very level plateau of a height some four hundred to four hundred and fifty feet above the sea. This formation is so even that all the higher rolls of the land are within ten or twenty feet of the same height. They are, further, about one hundred feet, or a little more, [Pg 58] higher than the water level of the local streams. This tableland, and particularly the ravine of the Miosson, nourishes a number of woods. One such wood, not more than a mile long by perhaps a quarter broad, covers Nouaillé, and intervenes between that town and the battlefield. On the other side of the Miosson there is a continuous belt of wood five miles long, with only one gap through it, which gap is used by the road leading from Nouaillé to Roches and to the great south-western road to Bordeaux.

In other words, the Black Prince had prepared his position just in front of a screen of further defensible woodland.

I have mentioned one last element in the tactical situation of which I have spoken, and which needs careful consideration.

Over and above the passage of the Miosson by a regular bridge and a proper road at Nouaillé, the water is fordable in ordinary weather at a spot corresponding to the gap between the woods, and called "Man's Ford" or "Le Gué d'Homme." Now, of the several accounts of the action, one, the Latin chronicler Baker, mentions the ford, while another, the rhymed French story of the *Chandos Herald*, speaks of Edward's having begun to retire, and of part of his forces having already crossed the river before contact took place. I will deal [Pg 59] later with this version; but in connection with the ford and whether Edward either did or intended to cross by it, it is worthy of remark that the only suggestion of his actually having crossed it, and of his intention to do so in any case, is to be found in the rhymed chronicle of the *Chandos Herald*; and the question arises—what reliance should be placed on that document?

It is evident on the face of it that the detail of the retreat was not invented. Everyone is agreed that the rhymed chronicle of the *Chandos Herald* does not carry the same authority as prose contemporary work. It is not meant to. It is a literary effort rather than a record. But there would be no reason for inventing such a point as the beginning of a retreat before an action—not a very glorious or dramatic proceeding—and the mere mention of such a local feature as the ford in Baker is clear proof that what we can put together from the two accounts is based upon an historical event and the memory of witnesses.

On the other hand, the road proper ran through Nouaillé, and when you are cumbered with a number of heavy-wheeled vehicles, to avoid a road and a regular bridge and to take a bye- [Pg 60] track across fields down a steep bank and through water would seem a very singular

proceeding. Further, this track would lose all the advantages which the wood of Nouaillé gave against pursuit, and, finally, would mean the use of a passage that could not be cut, rather than one that could.

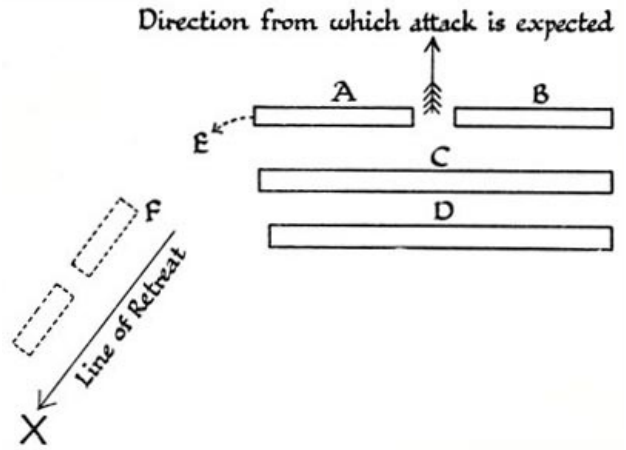
Again, we know that the Black Prince when he was preparing the position on Sunday morning, covered its left flank, exactly as his father had done at Crécy ten years before, with what the Tudors called a "leaguer," or park of waggons.

Further, we have a discrepancy between the story of this retreat by the ford and the known order of battle arranged the day before. In that order of battle he put in the first line, just behind his archers, who lined the hedge bounding the vineyards, a group of men-at-arms under Warwick and Oxford. He himself commanded the body just behind these, and the third or rearmost line was under the command of Salisbury and Suffolk.

How are these contemporary and yet contradictory accounts to be reconciled? What was the real meaning of movement on the ford?

I beg the reader to pay a very particular attention to the mechanical detail which I am here examining, because it is by criticism such as this that the truth is established in military history between vague and apparently inconsistent accounts. [Pg 61]

If you are in command of a force such as that indicated upon the following plan, in which A and B together form your front line, C your second, and D your third, all three facing in the direction of the arrow, and expecting an attack from that direction; and if, after having drawn up your men so, you decide there is to be no attack, and determine to retreat in the direction of X, your most natural plan will be to file off down the line towards X, first with your column D, to be followed by your column C, with A and B bringing up the rear. And this would be all the more consonant with your position, from the fact that the very men A and B, whom you had picked out as best suited to take the first shock of an action, had an action occurred, would also in the retreat form your rearguard, and be ready to fight pursuers should a pursuit develop and press you. That is quite clear. [Pg 62]



Now, if, for reasons of internal organisation or what not, you desired to keep your vanguard still your vanguard in retreat, as it was on the field, your middle body still your middle body on the march, and what was your rearguard on the field still your rearguard in the long column whereby you would leave that field, the manœuvre by which you would maintain this order would be filing off by the left; that is, ordering A to form fours and turn from a line into a column, facing towards the point E, and, having done so, to march off in the direction of X. You would order B to act in the same fashion next. When A and B had got clear of you and had reached, say, F, you would make C form fours and follow after; and when C had marched away so far as to leave things clear for D, the last remaining line, you would make D in its turn form fours and close up the column. [Pg 63]

Now, suppose the Black Prince had been certain on that Monday morning that there would be no attack, nor even any pursuit. Suppose that he were so absolutely certain as to let him dispense with a rearguard—then he might have drawn off in the second of the two fashions I have mentioned. Warwick and Oxford (A and B) would have gone first, C (the Black Prince, in the centre) would have gone next, and Salisbury, D, would have closed the line of the retreat. This would have been the slowest method he could have chosen for getting off the field, it would have had no local tactical advantage whatsoever, and to adopt such a method in a hurried departure at dawn from the neighbourhood of a larger force with whom one had been treating for capitulation the day before, would be a singular waste of time in any case. But, at any rate, it would be physically possible.

What is quite impossible is that such a conversion and retirement should have been

attempted; for we know that a strong rearguard was left, and held the entrenchments continuously.

To leave the field in the second fashion I have described is mathematically equivalent to breaking up your rearguard and ceasing to maintain it for the covering of your retreat. It is possible only if you do not intend to have a rearguard at all to cover your retirement, because you think you do not need it. As a fact, we know that all during the movement, whatever it was, a great body of troops remained on the field not moving, and watching the direction from which the French might attack. So even if there was a beginning of retirement, a strong rearguard was maintained to cover that movement. We further know that the Black Prince and the man who may be called chief of his staff, Chandos, planned to keep that very strong force in position in any case, until the retirement (if retirement it were) was completed; and we further know that the fight began with a very stout and completely successful resistance by what must have been a large body posted along the ridge, and what even the one account which speaks of the retirement describes as the bulk of the army. [Pg 64]

To believe, then, that Warwick filed off by the left, followed by the vehicles, and then by the main command under the Prince, and that all this larger part of the army, including its wheeled vehicles, had got across the ford before contact took place and an action developed, is impossible. It is not only opposed to any sound judgment, it is mathematically impossible. It also conflicts with the use of a park of vehicles to defend the left of the entrenched line, and with the natural use of the line of retreat by Nouaillé. I can only conclude that what really happened was something of this sort: [Pg 65]

Edward intended to retreat if he were left unmolested. He intended to retreat through Nouaillé and by its bridge, but for safety and to disencumber the road he sent the more valuable of the loot-waggons by the short cut over the ford.

The Prince had got the bulk of his force standing on the entrenched position upon that Monday morning, and bidden it wait and see whether the enemy would attempt to force them or no. As there was no sign of the enemy's approach from the northwest, and as he was not even watched by any scout of the enemy's, he next put Salisbury in command of the main force along the hedge, put Warwick and Oxford at the head of a strong escort for leading off the more valuable of the booty—which would presumably be in few waggons—and began to get these waggons away down the hill towards the ford. They would thus be taking a short cut to join the road between Nouaillé and Roches later on, and they would relieve the congestion upon the main road of retreat through Nouaillé. It is possible that the Black Prince oversaw this operation himself upon the dawn of that day, involving, as it did, the negotiation of a steep bank with cumbersome vehicles, and those vehicles carrying the more precious and portable loot of his raid. This would give rise to the memory of his having crossed the stream. But, meanwhile, the mass of army was still standing where it was posted, prepared for retreat on the bridge of Nouaillé if it were not molested, or for action if it were. Just as this minor detachment of the more valuable vehicles, with its escort, had got across the water, messengers told Edward that there were signs of a French advance. He at once came back, countermanded all provisional orders for the retirement, and recalled the escort, save perhaps some small party to watch the waggons which had got beyond the river. Thus, returning immediately, Edward was ready to instruct and fight the action in the fashion described in all the other accounts. [Pg 66]

This, I think, is the rational reconciliation of several stories which are only in apparent contradiction, and which are rather confusing than antagonistic. [Pg 67]

PART IV [Pg 68]

THE ACTION

Though the accounts of the Battle of Poitiers, both contemporary with and subsequent to it, show, like most mediæval chronicling, considerable discrepancies, it is possible by comparing the various accounts and carefully studying the ground to present a collected picture of that victory.

The reader, then, must first seize the position, character, and numbers of Edward's force as it lay upon the early morning of Monday the 19th of September.

Three considerable bodies of men arranged in dense formation, faced west by a little north upon the level which intervenes between the modern farm of Cardinerie and the wood of Nouaillé. These three bodies of men stood armed, one rank behind the other, and all three parallel. The first was commanded by Salisbury. It was drawn up along the hedge that bounded the vineyards, and it stretched upon either side of the lane which led and leads from Poitiers to Nouaillé. With Salisbury was Suffolk; and this first line, thus facing the [Pg 69]

hedge, the depression, and the fields beyond, from whence a French attack might develop, was certainly the largest of the three lines. The reader must conceive of the road astraddle of which this command of Salisbury's and Suffolk's stood as lying flush with the fields around, until the edge of the depression was reached, and there forming for some yards a sunken road between the vines that stood on either side of it. The reader should also remember that further to the left, and covered by the last extension of this line of men, was the second diverging lane, crossing through vineyards precisely as did the other, and sunk as the other was sunk for some yards at the crest of the little depression. It is this lane which now passes by the tile-works and leads later to the ford over the river in the valley beyond. The line thus holding the hedge, and commanded by Suffolk and Salisbury, contained the greater number of the archers, and also a large proportion of men-at-arms, dismounted, and ready to repel any French attack, should such an attack develop in the course of the morning to interfere with the retirement which Edward had planned; but as [Pg 70] yet, in the neighbourhood of six o'clock, there was no sign of the enemy in the empty fields upon the west beyond the depression. The King of France's camp was more than two miles away, and it looked as though Edward would be able to get his whole force beyond the river without molestation.

So much for what we will call the first line, for the position of which, as for that of its fellows, I must beg the reader to refer to the coloured map forming the frontispiece of this book.

Immediately behind the first line so drawn up came a second line, under the command of Warwick and Oxford, but it was a much smaller body, because it had a very different task to perform. Its business was to act as an escort for certain of the waggon-loads which Edward, both on account of their value and of the difficulty of getting them up and down the banks of the steep ravine of the river behind them, had determined to send forward at the head of his retirement. This escort, then, we may call the second line. Before the retiring movement began it stood parallel to and immediately in the rear of the first line.

The third line was a somewhat larger command, principally of Gascon men-at-arms under [Pg 71] the direct leadership of the Black Prince himself.

To this picture of the three lines standing one behind the other and facing away from the sunrise of that Monday morning, we must add a great body of waggons, parked together, upon the right of the first line and defending it from any turning movement that might be attempted upon that flank, should a French advance develop after all. We must suppose some few of the more valuable waggon-loads, carrying the best booty of the raid, to have been put last in this park, so that their drivers should have the opportunity of filing off first when the middle or second line, which was to be their escort, began the retirement. Further, we must remark teams harnessed and drivers mounted in front of those special waggons, while the mass of the wheeled vehicles still lay closely packed together for the purposes of defence against a possible attack, their teams standing to the rear, ready to harness up only when the retirement was in full swing, and to come last in the retreating column, saving perhaps for a small rearguard that might be left to watch the extremity of the line after everyone else had got safely off the field. We must see the Black Prince's command, such of [Pg 72] it as was mounted, all on horseback already, and the men-at-arms of the second line or escort under Warwick similarly in the saddle; but the first line, which formed the bulk of the whole force, we must picture to ourselves all on foot, the mounted men as well as the small proportion of foot-sergeants: for if there should be occasion to repel some attack developing during the retirement, it was in the essence of the Plantagenet tactics to dismount the men-at-arms during the defensive, and to hold a position entirely on foot.

I have said that no sign of the enemy appeared upon the empty fields to the west beyond the depression while these dispositions were being made; and, when all was ready, perhaps between seven and eight o'clock, the order for the first movement of the retirement was given. Warwick and the escort he commanded turned from line to column and began to file off by the left, down towards the ford. The special waggons, whose safety was thus being first anxiously provided for, followed, and the whole of the second line thus got clear of the space between the first and the third. It marched south towards the river, with its little body of wheeled vehicles following up its mounted men.

When the second line had thus got clear of the original formation, Edward, preceded by his [Pg 73] banner and accompanied by a certain number of men from the third line (how many we cannot tell, but presumably no great force), rode off over the fields to the left of Warwick's string of cavalry and waggons, to superintend the difficult passage of the Miosson. He left behind him, standing to arms at the hedge, the whole of the strong first line under Salisbury and Suffolk, and the bulk of his own third line marshalled in parallel behind this first line.

At this moment, then, somewhere between seven and eight o'clock, the situation is thus: the Prince and the band with him are riding off towards the edge where the land falls somewhat steeply towards the Miosson. He and his men have their backs turned to the bulk of the army, which, in two bodies, the larger one lining the hedge and a smaller one behind it, are holding the chosen defensive position in case there should be any sign of a French pursuit. We must presume that if no such pursuit appeared to be developing it was Edward's intention, when he had got the special waggons and their escort safely across the ford, to withdraw the bulk of his force thus left behind by the road through Nouaillé and across its [Pg 74]

bridge. The smaller body would go first; then, section by section, the first line would fall into column and retire by the Nouaillé road, leaving at last no more than a small rearguard at the hedge, which, when all the waggons of the park had been harnessed up and were filing down the Nouaillé road, would itself fall into column and bring up the extreme end of the retreat.

By this plan the valuable waggon-loads with their escort, which had crossed at the ford under Warwick, would be joined in, say, an hour or an hour and a half by the bulk of the army, which would have rejoined by the Nouaillé road, and the junction would be effected at the spot where, at the bottom of the frontispiece-map, the dotted line passing the ford reaches the main road. Well before noon the whole command, with its heavy and cumbersome train of wheeled vehicles, would be on the heights there called Le Bouilleau and would be approaching in safety, with the obstacle of the Miosson *behind* them, the great south-western road to Bordeaux, along which the rest of the retreat would take place.

This plan would have every advantage, always supposing that there was no French pursuit, [Pg 75] or that that pursuit should develop too late to interfere with the Black Prince's scheme. The more valuable of the booty would have been got clean away by a side track which was also a short cut, and which would put it, when the whole retirement was effected, ahead of the column, that is upon the safe side of the force, furthest from an enemy's attack. It would have got away early without suggesting to the enemy the line of its escape or the opportunity of using the ford. The retirement of the mass of the army by the Nouaillé road would lead the pursuit, if any, along that road and towards the bridge, the cutting of which after the Anglo-Gascon force had passed would leave that force with the obstacle of the river between it and its enemy.

As it happened, a French pursuit did develop, and, luckily for the Black Prince, it developed within a very few minutes of his setting off to superintend Warwick's passage of the ford. Had it come an hour later, when the mass of the force was in column of route and making for Nouaillé, he might have had to record not a triumph but a disaster.

The French camp was, as I have said, rather more than two miles away from the defensive position of Maupertuis. It lay on all that open land which now forms the fields of La Miletrie [Pg 76] farm and lies to the south-west of that steading, between the great Lussac road and that country road to Nouaillé along which the march of the French army had proceeded, and across which, further along, the Black Prince's command lay astraddle.

King John had no accurate knowledge of his enemy's dispositions. In spite of the coming and going of the day before, he still knew no more than the fact that somewhere two or three miles ahead down the road, and between him and Nouaillé, the Black Prince's force was gathered. He appears to have made no effort to grasp things in greater detail upon that Monday morning, and when he marshalled his host and set out, it was with the intention (which he pursued) of merely going forward until he found the enemy, and then attacking. The host was arranged in four bodies; three main "battles" or lines, comparable to the English three lines—it was the universal formation of a mediæval army—were brought up in column for the advance, to deploy when the field should be reached. The first was commanded by the heir to the throne, the Dauphin, Charles, Duke of Normandy; the second by the Duke of Orleans, the king's brother; the third was commanded by the king himself, [Pg 77] and was the largest of the three.

The attempt to estimate the numbers which John could bring against his enemy as he set out on that Monday morning is beset with difficulties, but must nevertheless be made.

Froissart, with his quite unreliable and (let us be thankful) romantic pen, speaks of over 40,000. That is nonsense. But it is not without some value, because, like so many of Froissart's statements, it mirrors the tradition of the conflict which future years developed. If we had no other figures than Froissart's we should not accept them, but we should accept, and rightly, an impression of great superiority in numbers on the part of the attack.

On the other hand, we have the evidence of a man who wrote from the field itself, and who wrote from the English side—Burghersh. If anything, he would exaggerate, of course; but he was a soldier (and Froissart was at the other psychological pole!). He actually wrote from the spot, and he thought that everything mounted in front of him came to about 8000, to which he added 3000 men upon foot. Now, Burghersh may have been, and probably was, concerned to mention no more than what he regarded as fighting units worth mentioning: [Pg 78] infantry more or less trained and properly accoutred men-at-arms. For these latter, and their number of 8000, we have plenty of independent testimony, and especially Baker's. Baker gives the same number. As regards the trained infantry, we know that John had 2000 men armed with the arbalest (a mechanical cross-bow worked with a ratchet), and we know that he also had, besides these cross-bowmen, a number of trained mercenaries armed with javelins.

We may set inferior and exterior limits to the numbers somewhat as follows: the French host included 8000 fully-armed mounted men; that is, not quite double the Gascon and English units of the same rank and equipment. It had somewhat less than the English contingent of missile-armed soldiers, and these armed with a weapon inferior to their opponents. Count these two factors at 10,000 against the Anglo-Gascon 7000 or 8000. There you have an inferior limit which was certainly exceeded, for John's command included a number of other

rougher mounted levies and other less trained or untrained infantry. Above that minimum we may add anything we like up to 10,000 for the untrained, and we get a superior limit for [Pg 79] the total of 20,000 men all told. Averaging the probabilities from the various accounts, we are fairly safe in setting this addition at 5000, and perhaps a little over. So that the whole force which John could have brought into the field, and which, had it been properly led and organised, he might have used to full effect in that field, was about double the numbers which the Black Prince could oppose to him. The Anglo-Gascons, standing on the defensive, had from 7000 to 8000 men, and the force marching against them on the offensive was presumably in the neighbourhood of 15,000 to 16,000; while an analysis of the armament gives you, in the capital factors of it, an inferior number of French missile weapons to the missile weapons of the English prince, but double the number of fully-armed knights.

As a fact, the organisation of the two sides offered a more striking contrast than the contrast in their numbers. The Plantagenet force worked together and was one well-handled command. The Valois force was in separate commands, so little cohesive that one of them, as we shall see, abandoned the struggle without orders. For the other causes of the defeat I [Pg 80] must ask the reader to wait until we come to the actual engagement.

To the three “battles” thus marshalled and advancing along the road, John added a special vanguard, the constitution of which must be carefully noted. It was sent forward under the two marshals, Audrehen and Clermont. They commanded: *first*, 300 fully-armoured and mounted men-at-arms, who rode at the head; *next*, and following immediately behind these, certain German auxiliaries, also mounted, in what precise numbers we do not know, but few; *thirdly*, 2000 spearmen on foot, and with them the whole 2000 cross-bowmen using the only missile weapons at John’s disposal.

It will be seen that something like a third of John’s whole force, and nearly half the trained part, was thus detached to form the vanguard in front of the three marching columns. Its function and mishap we shall gather when we come to the contact between them and Edward’s force. Meanwhile, we must conceive of the French army as breaking camp some time between six and seven o’clock of the Monday, forming in three columns upon the Nouaillé road, with the king commanding the largest rear column, his brother, the Duke of [Pg 81] Orleans, the column immediately in front, and the King’s son and heir, the Duke of Normandy, in front of Orleans; while ahead of all these three columns marched the 4000 or 5000 men of the vanguard under the marshals, with their 300 picked knights leading the whole.

It must have been at about eight o’clock that the men thus riding with the marshals in front of the French advance came up the slight slope near La Moudurerie, topped the hill, and saw, six or seven hundred yards in front of them, beyond the little depression, the vineyards and the hedge behind the vineyards, and behind that hedge again the massed first line of the Black Prince’s force. Off in the rear to the right they could see the Black Prince’s banner, making away down towards the river, and soon dropping out of sight behind the shoulder of the hill. The special waggons of booty, with Warwick and their escort, must already have disappeared when the French thus had their first glimpse of the enemy.

The sight of the Black Prince’s banner disappearing down into the valley on the right rear, rightly decided the French vanguard that their enemy had determined upon a retreat, and had actually begun it. The force in front of them, behind the hedge, large as it was, they [Pg 82] rightly conceived to be the rearguard left to protect that retreat. They determined to attack at once; and the nature of the attack, which had carefully been planned beforehand under the advice of Douglas, the Scotchman who was fighting on King John’s side, and who had experience of the new Plantagenet tactics, must next be grasped.

The experience and the memory of Crécy ten years before had left with the Valois a clear though very general idea that the novel and overwhelming superiority of the English long-bow could not be met by the old-fashioned dense feudal cavalry charge. Any attempt to attack the front of a line sufficiently defended by long-bowmen in this fashion meant disaster, many horses would be shot long before their riders could come within lance thrust, the dense packed line of feudal knights, thousands in number, would be thrown into confusion by the maddened and fallen animals, the weight of the remainder as they pressed forward would only add to that confusion, and the first “battle,” delivering the regular traditional first-charge with which every old feudal battle had opened, would in a few minutes degenerate into a wild obstacle of welter and carnage stretched in front of the [Pg 83] defensive line, and preventing anything behind them from coming up.

It was to avoid misfortune of this kind that the vanguard of which I have spoken was formed. Its orders were these:—The picked three hundred knights of that vanguard were to ride straight at the English archers, and almost certainly to sacrifice themselves in so doing. But as their numbers were few, their fall would not obstruct what was to follow. It was their business in this immolation of their bodies to make it possible for the mass of infantry, especially those armed with missile weapons, to come close in behind and tackle the English line. That infantry, aided by the mounted German mercenaries and meeting missile with missile by getting hand to hand with the English bowmen at last, would prevent those English bowmen from effective action against the next phase of the offensive. This next phase was to be the advance of the first “battle,” that of the Dauphin, the Duke of Normandy. His men-at-arms were to go forward dismounted, and to close with the whole

English line while its most dangerous portion, the bowmen, were still hampered by the close pressure of the vanguard.

The plan thus ordered by the French king at the advice of his Scotch lieutenant was not so incompetent as the results have led some historians to judge. It suffered from four misconceptions; but of these one was not the fault of the French commander, while the other three could only have been avoided by a thorough knowledge of the new Plantagenet tactics, which had not yet been grasped in the entirety of their consequences even by those who had invented them. [Pg 84]

The four misconceptions were:—

(1) The idea that the attack would only have to meet the force immediately in front of it, behind the hedge. This was a capital error, for, as we shall see, Warwick with his men escorting the waggons came back in time to take a decisive part in the first phase of the action. But it was not an error which anyone on the French side could have foreseen; Warwick's men having disappeared down the slope of the hill towards the ford before the French vanguard caught its first sight of the enemy.

(2) The underrating of the obstacle afforded by the vineyard in front of the English line, and the consequent "bunching" of the attack on to the lane which traversed that vineyard. Probably the archers themselves did not know what an extraordinarily lucky accidental defence the vineyard provided for their special weapon. It was exactly suited to giving them the maximum effect of arrow-fire compatible with the maximum hindrance to an advancing enemy. [Pg 85]

(3) The French king and his advisers had not yet grasped—nor did anyone in Europe for some time to come—the remarkable superiority of the long-bow over the cross-bow. Just so modern Europe, and particularly modern Prussia, with all its minute observation and record, failed for ten good years to understand that rate of delivery and not range is what turns the scale with modern artillery. The cross-bow shot an uglier missile, inflicted a nastier wound, was more feared by the man in danger of that wound than the long-bow was. In range the two weapons might be regarded as nearly equal, save for this deciding difference, that the trained long-bowman could always count upon his maximum range, whereas the cross-bow varied, as a machine always will, with conditions independent of the human will behind it. You could not extend its pull to suit a damp string, for instance, and if your ratchet caught, or your trigger jammed, the complicated thing held you up; but delivery from the long-bow was, from the hands of the strong and trained man, the simplest and most calculable of shots, variable to every condition of the moment. Its elasticity of aim was far superior, and, most important of all, its rate of fire was something like three to one of the arbalest. [Pg 86]

(4) Douglas and the French king rightly decided that horses were so vulnerable to the long-bow as to prevent a mounted charge from having a chance of success, if it were undertaken in a great mass. They decided, upon that account, to dismount their men-at-arms, and to attack on foot. But what they did not allow for was the effect of the new armour upon foot tactics of that kind. It was one thing for a line holding the defensive, and not compelled to any forward movement, to dismount its armoured knights and bid them await an attack. It was quite another thing for such armoured knights to have to make a forward movement of half a mile or more on foot, and to engage with the sword or the shortened lance at the end of it. Armour was at that moment in transition. To the old suit of chain mail, itself quite ponderous enough to burden a man on foot, there had been added in that generation plate in various forms. Everyone had plate armour at least upon the elbows, knees, and shoulders, many had it upon all the front of the legs and all the front of the arms, some had adopted it as a complete covering; and to go on foot thus loaded over open fields for the matter of eight hundred yards was to be exhausted before contact came. But of this men could not judge so early in the development of the new tactics. They saw that if they were to attack the bowmen successfully they must do so on foot, and they had not appreciated how ill-suited the armoured man of the time was for an unmounted offensive, however well he might serve in a defensive "wall." [Pg 87]

These four misconceptions between them determined all that was to follow.

It was a little before nine when the vanguard of the Valois advanced across the depression and began to approach the slight slope up towards the vineyards and the hedge beyond. In that vineyard, upon either side of the hollow road, stood, in the same "harrow" formation as at Crécy, the English long-bowmen.

The picked three hundred knights under the two French marshals spurred and charged. Small as their number was, it was crowded for the road into which the stakes of the vineyard inevitably shepherded them as they galloped forward, and, struggling to press on in that sunken way, either side of their little column was exposed to the first violent discharge of arrows from the vines. They were nearly all shot down, but that little force, whose task it had been, after all, to sacrifice their lives in making a way for their fellows, had permitted the rest of the vanguard to come to close quarters. The entanglement of the vineyard, the unexpected and overwhelming superiority of the long-bow over the cross-bow, the superior [Pg 88]

numbers of the English archers over their enemies' arbalests, made the attack a slow one, but it was pressed home. The trained infantry of the vanguard, the German mounted mercenaries, swarmed up the little slope. The front of them was already at the hedge, and was engaged in a furious hand to hand with the line defending it, the mass of the remainder were advancing up the rise, when a new turn was given to the affair by the unexpected arrival of Warwick.

The waggons which that commander had been escorting had been got safely across the Miosson; the Black Prince had overlooked their safe crossing, when there came news from [Pg 89] the plateau above that the French had appeared, and that the main force which the Black Prince had left behind him was engaged. Edward rode back at once, and joined his own particular line, which we saw just before the battle to be drawn up immediately behind the first line which guarded the hedge and the vineyard. Warwick, with excellent promptitude, did not make for Salisbury and Suffolk to reinforce their struggling thousands with his men, but took the shorter and more useful course of moving by his own left to the southern extremity of his comrade's fiercely pressed line (see frontispiece near the word "Hedge"; the curved red arrow lines indicate the return of Warwick).

He came out over the edge of the hill, just before the mass of the French vanguard had got home, and when only the front of it had reached the hedge and was beginning the hand-to-hand struggle. He put such archers as he had had with his escort somewhat in front of the line of the hedge, and with their fire unexpectedly and immediately enfiladed all that mass of the French infantry, which expected no danger from such a quarter, and was pressing forward through the vineyards to the summit of the little rise. This sharp and unlooked for [Pg 90] flank fire turned the scale. The whole French vanguard was thrown into confusion, and broke down the side of the depression and up its opposing slope. As it so broke it interfered with and in part confused the first of the great French "battles," that under the Dauphin, whose ordered task it was to follow up the vanguard and reinforce its pressure upon the English line. Though the vanguard had been broken, the Dauphin's big, unwieldy body of dismounted armoured men managed to go forward through the shaken and flying infantry, and in their turn to attack the hedge and the vineyard before it. Against them, the flank fire from Warwick could do less than it had done against the unarmoured cross-bowmen and sergeants of the vanguard which it had just routed. The Dauphin's cumbered and mailed knights did manage to reach the main English position of the hedge, but they were not numerous enough for the effort then demanded of them. The half mile of advance under such a weight of iron had terribly exhausted them, and meanwhile Edward had come back, the full weight of his command—every man of it except a reserve of four hundred—was massed to meet the Dauphin's attack. Warwick's men hurried up from the left to help in the [Pg 91] sword play, and by the time the mêlée was engaged that line of hedge saw the unusual struggle of a defensive superior in numbers against an inferior offensive which should, by all military rule, have refused to attempt the assault.

Nevertheless, that assault was pressed with astonishing vigour, and it was that passage in the action, before and after the hour of ten o'clock, which was the hottest of all. Regarded as an isolated episode in the fight, the Dauphin's unequal struggle was one of the finest feats of arms in all the Hundred Years' War. Nothing but a miracle could have made it succeed, nor did it succeed; after a slaughter in which the English defending line had itself suffered heavily and the Dauphin's attack had been virtually cut to pieces, there followed a third phase in the battle which quite cancelled not only the advantage (for that was slight) but also the glory gained by the Dauphin's great effort.

Next behind the Dauphin's line, the second "battle," that of the Duke of Orleans, should have proceeded to press on in reinforcement and to have launched yet another wave of men against the hedge which had been with such difficulty held. Had it done so, the battle would [Pg 92] have been decided against Edward. The Dauphin's force, though it was now broken and the remnants of it were scattering back across the depression, had hit the Anglo-Gascon corps very hard indeed. Edward had lost heavily, his missile weapon was hampered and for the moment useless, many of his men were occupied in an attempt to save the wounded, or in seeking fresh arms from the train to replace those which had been broken or lost in the struggle. What seems to have struck most those who were present at the action upon the English side was the exhaustion from which their men were suffering just after the Dauphin's unsuccessful attempt to pierce the line. If Orleans had come up then, he could have determined the day. But Orleans failed to come into action at all, and the whole of his "battle," the second, was thrown away.

What exactly happened it is exceedingly difficult to infer from the short and confused accounts that have reached us. It is certain that the whole of Orleans' command left the field without actually coming into contact with the enemy. The incident left a profound impression upon the legend and traditions of the French masses, and was a basis of that [Pg 93] angry contempt which so violently swelled the coming revolt of the populace against the declining claims of the feudal nobility. It may almost be said that the French monarchy would not have conquered that nobility with the aid of the French peasantry and townsmen had not the knights of the second "battle" fled from the field of Poitiers.

What seems to have happened was this. The remnant of the Dauphin's force, falling back in confusion down the slight slope, mixed into and disarrayed the advancing "battle" of Orleans. These, again, were apparently not all of them, nor most of them, dismounted as

they should have been, and, in any case, their horses were near at hand. The ebb tide of the Dauphin's retirement may have destroyed the loose organisation and discipline of that feudal force, must have stampeded some horses, probably left dismounted knights in peril of losing their chargers, and filled them with the first instinct of the feudal soldier, which was to mount. We may well believe that to all this scrimmage of men backing from a broken attack, men mounting in defiance of the unfamiliar and unpopular orders which had put them on foot, here riderless horses breaking through the ranks, there knots of men [Pg 94] stampeded, the whole body was borne back, first in confusion, afterwards in flight. So slight are the inequalities of the ground, that anyone watching from the midst of that crest could have made nothing of the battle to the eastward, save that it was a surging mass of the French king's men defeated, and followed (it might erroneously have been thought) by the Black Prince and his victorious men.

At any rate, the whole of the second "battle," mixed with the debris of the first, broke from the field and rode off, scattered to the north. It is upon Orleans himself that the chief blame must fall. Whatever error, confusion, stampede, or even panic had destroyed the ordering of his line, it was his business to rally his men and bring them back. Whether from personal cowardice, from inaptitude for command, or from political calculation, Orleans failed in his duty, and his failure determined the action.

The pause which necessarily followed the withdrawal of the central French force, or second "battle," under Orleans gave Edward's army the breathing space they needed. It further meant, counting the destruction of the vanguard and the cutting to pieces of the Dauphin's [Pg 95] "battle," the permanent inferiority through the rest of the day of anything that the French king could bring against the Plantagenets. The battle was lost from that moment, between ten and eleven o'clock, when Orleans' confused column, pouring, jostled off the field, left the great gap open between King John and the lead of his third battle and the English force.

Had strict military rule commanded the feudal spirit (which it never did), John would have accepted defeat. To have ridden off with what was still intact of his force, to wit, his own command, the third "battle," would have been personally shameful to him as a knight, but politically far less disastrous than the consequences of the chivalrous resolve he now made. He had left, to make one supreme effort, perhaps five, perhaps six thousand men. Archers wherewith to meet the enemy's archers he had none. What number of fully-armoured men-at-arms he had with him we cannot tell, but, at any rate, enough in his judgment to make the attempt upon which he had decided. The rest of the large force that was with him was of less considerable military value; but, on the other hand, he could calculate not unjustly upon [Pg 96] the fact that all his men were fresh, and that he was leading them against a body that had struggled for two hours against two fierce assaults, and one that has but just emerged—unbroken, it is true—from a particularly severe hand-to-hand fight.

John, then, determined to advance and, if possible, with this last reserve to carry the position. It was dismounted, as he had ordered and wished all his men-at-arms to be, and the King of France led this last body of knights eastward across the little dip of land. As that large, fresh body of mailed men approached the edge of the depression on its further side, there were those in the Black Prince's force who began to doubt the issue. A picturesque story remains to us of Edward's overhearing a despairing phrase, and casting at its author the retort that he had lied damnably if he so blasphemed as to say the Black Prince could be conquered alive.

I have mentioned some pages back that reserve of four hundred fully-equipped men-at-arms which Edward had detached from his own body and had set about four hundred yards off, surrounding his standard. The exact spot where this reserve took up its position is marked to-day by the railway station. It overlooks (if anything can be said to "overlook" in that flat [Pg 97] stretch) the field. It is some twelve or fifteen feet higher than the hedge at which, a couple of furlongs away, the long defence had held its own throughout that morning. The Black Prince recalled them to the main body. Having done so, he formed into one closely ordered force all the now mixed men of the three lines who were still able to go forward. John was coming on with his armoured knights on foot, their horses almost a mile away (he was bringing those men, embarrassed and weighted by their metal under the growing heat of the day, nearly double the distance which his son's men had found too much for them). Edward bade his men-at-arms mount, and his archers mounted too. It will be remembered that six men out of seven were mounted originally for the raid through Aquitaine. The fighting on foot had spared the horses. They were all available. And the teams and sumpter animals were available as well in so far as he had need of them. John's men, just coming up on foot to the opposite edge of the little dip, saw the low foot line of the Anglo-Gascons turning at a word of command into a high mounted line. But before that mounted line moved forward, Edward had a last command to give. He called for the Captal of Buch, a Gascon captain not [Pg 98] to be despised.

This man had done many things in the six weeks' course of the raid. He was a cavalry leader, great not only with his own talent, but with the political cause which he served, for of those lords under the Pyrenees he was the most resolute for the Plantagenets and against the Valois. The order Edward gave him was this: to take a little force all mounted, to make a long circuit, skirting round to the north and hiding its progress behind the spinneys and scrub-wood until he should get to the rear of the last French reserve that was coming forward, and when he had completed the circuit, to display his banner and come down upon

them unexpectedly from behind. It was an exceedingly small detachment which was picked out for this service, not two hundred men all told. Rather more than half of them archers, the rest of them fully-equipped men-at-arms. Small as was this tiny contingent which the Black Prince could barely spare, it proved in the event sufficient.

That order given, the Black Prince summoned his standard-bearer—an Englishman whose name should be remembered, Woodland—set him, with the great banner which the French [Pg 99] had seen three hours before disappearing into the river valley when Edward had been off watching the passage of the ford, at the head of the massed mounted force, and ordered the charge. The six thousand horse galloped against the dismounted armoured men of John down the little slope. The shock between these riders and those foot-men came in the hollow of the depression. The foot-men stood the charge. In the first few minutes gaps were torn into and through the French body by a discharge of the last arrows, and then came the furious encounter with dagger and sword which ended the Battle of Poitiers. It was the mounted men that had the better of the whole. The struggle was very fierce and very bewildered, a mass of hand-to-hand fighting in individual groups that swayed, as yet undetermined, backwards and forwards in the hollow. But those who struck from horseback had still the better of the blows, until, when this violence had continued, not yet determined, for perhaps half an hour, the less ordered and less armoured men who were the confused rearmost of John's corps heard a shout behind them, and looking back saw, bearing down upon them, the banner of St George, which was borne before the Captal, and his archers [Pg 100] and his men-at-arms charging with the lance. Small as was the force of that charge, it came unexpectedly from the rear, and produced that impression of outflanking and surrounding which most demoralises fighting men. The rear ranks who pressed just behind the place where the heaviest of the struggle was proceeding, and where John's knights on foot were attempting to hold their own against the mounted Gascons and English, broke away. The Captal's charge drove home, and the remnant of the French force, with the king himself in the midst of it, found themselves fighting against a ring which pressed them from all sides.

King John had with him his little son Philip, a boy of fourteen, later most properly to be called "The Bold." And this lad fought side by side with his father, calling to the king: "Father, guard to the right! Father, guard to the left!" as the lance-thrusts and the sword-strokes pressed them. The lessening and lessening group of French lords that could still hold their own in the contracting circle was doomed, and the battle was accomplished.

Scattering across those fields to the west and northward bodies of the Plantagenet's men [Pg 101] galloped, riding down the fugitives, killing, or capturing for ransom, the wounded. And Edward, his work now done, rode back to the old position, rested, sent messengers out to recall the pursuers (some of whom had pressed stragglers for four miles), and watched his men gathering and returning.

He saw advancing towards him a clamorous crowd, all in a hubbub around some centre of great interest for them, and slowly making eastward to where the banner of the Black Prince was now fixed. He sent to ask what this might be, and was told that it was the King of France who had been taken prisoner at last, and for whom various captors were disputing. John, pressed by so many rivals, had given up his sword to one of Edward's knights. That knight was a man from the Artois, who had said to the Valois, his lawful king, "Sir, I am serving against you, for I have lost my land, and, owing no allegiance, therefore, I became the man of the King of England."

Edward received his great captive, and that was the end of the Battle of Poitiers.

It was noon when the fight was decided. It was mid-afternoon when the last of the pursuers had been called back into the English camp.

PART V [Pg 102]

THE ASPECT OF THESE BATTLES

In closing the coupled and twin stories of Crécy and Poitiers it is not without advantage to describe the aspect which they would have presented to an onlooker of their time; and in doing this I must not only describe the general armament of Western European men in the middle of the fourteenth century, but that contrast between weapons and methods which gave the Plantagenets for more than a generation so permanent an advantage over their opponents.

You would have seen a force such as that of the Black Prince or of King John camped before a battle, a white town of tents crossing the fields, with here and there a vivid patch of colour where some great leader's pavilion was of blue or red and gold. The billeting of men upon householders was a necessary feature of a long march, or of the occupation of a town. But [Pg 103] when there was question of occupying a position, or when an army was too large to lodge

under roof, it depended upon canvas. But it must be remembered that not the whole of a force by any means enjoyed that advantage; a large portion, especially in a considerable body, was often compelled to bivouac.

Further, the reader must represent to himself a heavier impediment of vehicles than a corresponding force would burden itself with to-day: a far heavier impediment than a quite modern army would think tolerable. There were no aids whatsoever to progress, save those which the armed body carried with it. No commandeering of horses upon any considerable scale; no mechanical traffic, of course; and, save under special circumstances where water carriage could relieve the congestion, no chances of carrying one's booty (then a principal concern), one's munitions, and one's supplies, save in waggons.

On the other hand, the enormous supply of ammunition which modern missile warfare demands, and has demanded more or less for three hundred years, was absent. There was no reserve of food; an army lived not entirely off the country, for it always began with a [Pg 104] reserve of provisions, but without any calculated reserve for a whole campaign, and necessarily in such times without any power of keeping essential nourishment for more than a few days.

Say that your fourteenth-century corps was more burdened upon the march by far, but by far less dependent upon its base than a modern force, and you have the truth.

You must therefore conceive of the marching body, be it 7000 or be it 30,000 or more, as a long column of which quite one-half the length will usually consist of waggons.

The first thing that would strike the modern observer of such a column would be the large proportion of mounted men.

Even the Plantagenets, who first, by an accident about to be described, discovered, and who by their genius for command developed, a revolution in missile weapons, marched at the head of columns which were, not only for their spirit and their tradition and command, but for all their important fighting units, mounted.

Tradition and the memory of a society are all-important in these things. From the beginning of the Dark Ages until well on into the Middle Ages, say, from the end of the fifth century to [Pg 105] the beginning of the fourteenth, a battle was essentially a mounted charge; and the noble class which for generation after generation had learnt and gloried in the trade of those charges was the class which organised and enjoyed the peril of warfare.

The armoured man was always an expensive unit. His full equipment was the year's rent of a farm, and what we should to-day call a large country estate never produced half a dozen of him, and sometimes no more than one. He needed at least one servant. That was a mere physical necessity of his equipment. Often he had not one, but two or three or even four. He and his assistants formed the normal cell, so to speak, of a fourteenth-century force. And on the march you would have seen the thousands of these "men-at-arms" (the term is a translation of the French "gensdarmes," which means armed people) surrounded or followed by a cloud of their followers.

Now their followers were more numerous than they, and yet far more vulnerable, and they form a very difficult problem in the estimation of a fourteenth-century force.

When I say, as I have said with regard both to Crécy and to Poitiers—though it is truer of Crécy than of Poitiers—that the number of combatants whom contemporaries recognised as [Pg 106] such was far less than the total numbers of a force, I was pointing out that, by our method of reckoning numbers, it would be foolish to count Edward III.'s army in 1346 as only 24,000, or the Black Prince's ten years later as only 7000. The actual number of males upon the march who had to be fed and could be seen standing upon the field was far larger. But, on the other hand, the value for fighting purposes of what I may call the domestics was very varied. Some of those who served the wealthiest of the men-at-arms were themselves gentry. They were youths who would later be fully armed themselves. They rode. They had a sword; they could not be denied combat. Even their inferiors were of value in a defensive position, however useless for offensive purposes. When we hear of A making a stand against B though B was "three times as strong" as A, we must remember that this means only that the counting combating units on B's side were three times A's. If A was holding a defensive position against B, B would only attack with his actual fighting units, whereas A could present a dense mass of humanity much more than a third of B, certainly two-thirds of B, and sometimes the equal of B, to resist him, though only one-third should be properly [Pg 107] armed. While, on the other hand, if B should fail in the attack and break, the number of those cut down and captured in the pursuit by the victorious A would be very much greater than the fighting units which B had brought against A at the beginning of the combat. All the followers and domestics of A's army would be involved in the catastrophe, and that is what accounts for the enormous numbers of casualties which one gets after any decisive overthrow of one party by the other, especially of a large force against a small one. It is this feature which accounts for the almost legendary figures following Crécy and Poitiers.

The gentry, who were the nucleus of the fighting, were armed in the middle of the fourteenth century after a fashion transitional between the rings of mail which had been customary for a century and the plate armour which was usual for the last century before the general use of firearms, ornamental during the century in which firearms established

themselves, and is still the popular though false conception of mediæval accoutrement. From immemorial time until the First Crusade and the generation of the Battle of Hastings and the capture of Jerusalem, fighters had covered their upper bodies with leather coats, [Pg 108] and their heads with an iron casque. From at least the Roman centuries throughout the Dark Ages, a universal use of metal rings linked together over the leather protected the armed man, and our word *mail* is French for links, and nothing else. In time, the network of links came to be used separate from the leather, and so it was put on like a shirt of flexible iron all through the great business which saved Europe during the ninth century against the Northmen in Gaul and Britain, against the Moor in Spain. It was the armour of the knights in Palestine, of the native armies which drove the Germans from Italy, and of the Norman Conquest.

But with the end of the thirteenth century, which for simplicity and virile strength was the flower of our civilisation, armour, with many another feature of life, took on complexity and declined. Men risked less (the lance also came in to frighten them more). The bascinet, which had protected the head but not the face (with later a hinged face-piece attached), was covered or replaced by a helmet protecting head and face and all. At the knees, shoulders, elbows, jointed plates of iron appeared. Scales of iron defended the shin and the thigh, [Pg 109] sometimes the lower arm as well. The wealthier lords covered the front of every limb with plates of this sort, and there was jointed iron upon their hands. The plain spur had rowels attached to it; the sword shortened, so did the shield; a dagger was added to the sword-belt upon the right-hand side.

We must further see in the picture of a fourteenth-century battle great blazonry.

The divorce of the gentry from the common people (one of the fatal eddies of the time) developed in the wealthy this love of colour, and in their dependants the appetite for watching it. Of heraldry I say nothing, for it has nothing to do with the art or history of soldiers. But banners were a real part of tactics and of instructions. By banners men had begun to align themselves, and by the display of banners to recognise the advent of reinforcement or the action at some distant point (distant as fields were then reckoned) of enemies or of friends. Colour was so lively a feature of those fields that shields, even the horses' armour, cloths hung from trumpets, coats, all shone with it.

Now to the feudal cavalry with their domestics, to the gentry so armed whose tradition was [Pg 110] the soul and whose numbers the nucleus of a fourteenth-century army, one must add, quite separate from their domestics and squires, the foot-soldiers; and these were trained and untrained.

At this point a capital distinction must be made. Armies defending a whole countryside, notably the French armies defending French territory during the Hundred Years' War, levied, swept up, or got as volunteers masses of untrained men. Expeditions abroad had none such: they had no use for them. Edward had none at Crécy and his son had none at Poitiers; and what was true of these two Plantagenet raids was true of every organised expedition made with small numbers from one centre to a distant spot, throughout the Middle Ages. It is important to remember this, for it accounts for much of the great discrepancies in numbers always observable between an expeditionary force and its opponents, as it does for the superior excellence of the raiding tens against the raided hundreds.

But if we consider only the trained force of foot-men in an army of the fourteenth century, we discover that contrast between the Plantagenet and the Valois equipment with which I desire to conclude. England had developed the long-bow. It is a point which has been vastly [Pg 111] overemphasised, but which it would be unscholarly and uncritical to pass over in silence. A missile weapon had been produced and perfected by the Welsh, the art of it had spread over the west country; and it was to prove itself of value superior to any other missile weapon in the field throughout the fourteenth and even into the early fifteenth centuries. Outside these islands it was imperfectly understood as a weapon, and its lesson but imperfectly learnt. When it was replaced by firearms, the British Islands and their population dropped out of the running in land armament for two hundred years. The long-bow was not sufficiently superior to other weapons to impress itself dramatically and at once upon the consciousness of Europe. It remained special, local, national, but, if men could only have known it, a decisive element of superiority up to the breakdown of the Plantagenet tradition of government and of Plantagenet society.

I have described in the writing of Crécy how superior was its rate of delivery always, and often its range, to other missile weapons of the time. We must also remember that capital factor in warfare, lost with the Romans, recovered with the Middle Ages, which may be [Pg 112] called the instruction of infantry.

The strength of an armed body consists in its cohesion. When the whole body is in peril, each individual member of it wants to get away. To prevent him from getting away is the whole object of discipline and military training. Each standing firm (or falling where he stands) preserves the unity, and therefore the efficacy, of the whole. A few yielding at the critical point (and the critical point is usually also the point where men most desire to yield) destroy the efficacy of nine times their number. Now, one of the things that frighten an individual man on foot most is another man galloping at him upon a horse. If many men gallop upon him so bunched on many horses, the effect is, to say the least of it, striking. If

any one doubts this, let him try. If the men upon the horses are armed with a weapon that can get at the men on foot some feet ahead (such as is the lance), the threat is more efficacious still, and no single man (save here and there a fellow full of some religion) will meet it.

But against this truth there is another truth to be set, which the individual man would never guess, and which is none the less experimentally certain—which is this: that if a certain number of men on foot stand firm when horses are galloping at them, the horses will swerve or balk before contact; in general, the mounted line will not be efficacious against the dismounted. There is here a contrast between the nerves of horses and the intelligence of men, as also between the rider's desire that his horse should go forward and the horse's training, which teaches him that not only his rider, but men in general, are his masters. What is true here of horses is not true of dogs, who think all men not their masters, but their enemies, and desire to kill them, and what is more, can do so, which a horse cannot. A charge of large mounted dogs against unshaken infantry would succeed. A charge of mounted horses against unshaken infantry, if that infantry be sufficiently dense, will fail. [Pg 113]

To teach infantry that they can thus withstand cavalry, instruction is the instrument. You must drill them, and form them constantly, and hammer it into them by repeated statement that if they stand firm all will be well. This has been done in the case of men on foot armed only with staves. It is easier, of course, to inculcate the lesson when they are possessed of missile weapons; for a continued discharge of these is impossible from charging riders, and an infantry force armed with missile weapons, and unshaken, can be easily persuaded by training, and still more by experience, that it can resist cavalry. Under modern conditions, where missile weapons are of long range and accurate, this goes without saying; but even with a range of from fifty to eighty yards of a missile that will bring down a horse or stop him, infantry can easily be made sufficiently confident if it is unshaken. Now, to shake it, there is nothing available (or was nothing before the art of flying was developed) save other men, equally stationary, armed with other missiles. The long-bowman of the Plantagenets knew that he had a missile weapon superior to anything that his enemy could bring against him. He therefore stood upon the defensive against a feudal cavalry charge unshaken, and he was trained by his experience and instruction to know that if he kept his line unbroken, the cavalry charge would never get home. That is the supreme tactical factor of the Plantagenet successes of the Hundred Years' War. [Pg 114]

PART VI [Pg 115]

THE RESULTS OF THE BATTLE

The immediate results of the victory of Poitiers consisted, first, in the immensely increased prestige which it gave to the House of Plantagenet throughout Europe.

Next, we must reckon the local, though ephemeral, effect upon the opinion of Aquitaine, through which the Black Prince was now free to retreat at his ease towards Bordeaux and the secure territories of Gascony.

But though these results were the most immediate, and though the victory of one monarch over the other was the most salient aspect of the victory for contemporaries, as it is for us, there was another element which we must particularly consider because it illustrates the difference between the political conditions of the fourteenth century and of our own time.

The real point of the success was the capture of the king's person. The importance of the action lay, of course, to some extent, in the prestige it gave to the Black Prince personally; though that point was lost a very few years afterwards in the subsequent decline of the Plantagenet power in the south. In so far as an action in those days could carry a *national* effect—that is, could be regarded by distant civilian populations as proof of strength or weakness in contrasting races and societies—Poitiers had not even the claim of Crécy; for it was not principally an archers' but a knights' battle, and the knights were mainly the gentry of the South of France, while those who had been broken by the only cavalry movement of the engagement were not even French knights, but levies of German, Spanish, and other origin. But the capture of the King of France at that particular moment of chivalry, that last fermentation of a feudal society which was reaching its term, had a vast positive effect, as well as an almost incalculable moral effect. [Pg 116]

There is nothing in modern times to which such an accident can be accurately paralleled. Perhaps the capture of the capital city would be the nearest thing; but there is this grave difference between them, that the capture of the modern capital must mean prolonged and decisive success in war, whereas the capture of John was an accident of the field. The victory would have been less by far if the whole of the king's command had fled, with the king himself at the head of the rout. [Pg 117]

A modern parallel more nearly exact would be the transference in the midst of a conflict of some great financial power from one side to the other; or again, in a naval war, the blowing up of so many capital ships by contact mines as would put one of the two opposing fleets into a hopeless inferiority to the other. To capture a king was to capture not so much a necessary part of the mechanism of government as the most important and the richest member of a feudal organisation. It meant the power to claim an enormous feudal ransom for his person. It meant, more doubtfully, the power to engage him, while he was yet a prisoner, to terms that would bind his lieges: “more doubtfully,” because the whole feudal system jealously regarded the rights both of individual owners and of custom from the peasant to the crown. Finally, to capture the king was to get hold of the chief financial support of an enemy. A feudal king had vast revenues in the shape of rents, not competitive, but fixed, which came to him as they did to any other lord, but in much greater amount than to any other lord. The king was the chief economic factor in that autonomous economic federation which we call the feudal organisation of Gaul. [Pg 118]

The fact that his capture was an accident in no way lessened the result; it was regarded in the military mind of those days much as we regard the crippling of a modern financial power by some chance of speculation. It was only a bit of good fortune on the one side, and of bad fortune on the other, but one to be duly taken advantage of by those whom it would profit.

The immediate result of that capture was twofold: an admission on the part of John of the Plantagenet claim, and a corresponding spontaneous movement in France which led to the defeat of that claim; the signing (ultimately) of a treaty tearing the French monarchy in two; and, finally, the rejection and nullifying of that treaty by the mere instinct of the nation. But these lengthy political consequences—followed by the further success of the Black Prince’s nephew at Agincourt, and again by his successor’s loss of all save Calais—do not concern this book.

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Footnotes:

[1] Le Breuil Mingot, not Le Breuil l'Abbesse, which lies south upon the Chauvigny road.

[2] The tops of the steep banks are nearly a hundred feet above the water.

[3] There are to-day three bridges, but in the fourteenth century only one existed, the central one.

[4] "Facing north-east," Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. i. p. 39. I mention this considerable error for the purposes of correction: Mr Fortescue's history being rightly regarded as the standard text-book of English military history.

[5] "Some fifteen miles," Fortescue, *ibid.* "Seven miles," Oman, *History of Art of War, etc.* Always use a map when you write about battles.

[6] "South-west," Fortescue, *ibid.*, p. 38.

[7] It may be presumed upon the analogy of surrounding vineyards—though it is not certain—that the cultivation of the vine would cease on the lower slope (since that inclined away from the sun), and was thickest upon the summit of the ridge.

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