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DAN JONES

HENRY V



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THE ASTONISHING RISE OF ENGLAND'S GREATEST WARRIOR KING

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HEAD of ZEUS

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INTRODUCTION

The doctor is nervous. John Bradmore is the best surgeon in England. He has a famous practice in London. He attends on rich and powerful clients, including the king. He has the supreme self-confidence – bordering on arrogance – common to elite surgeons since the days of the ancient Greeks.

But this case is different.

In the course of his career, Bradmore has proved time and again that he can heal patients other surgeons have written off as incurable – often by daring and inventive means. He has cured a woman of scrofula – an infection of the lymph nodes so awful it is commonly thought to respond only to the touch of monarchs. He has developed a technique to cure drooping eyelid bags. He has saved a London carpenter who accidentally slashed an artery in his arm with a chisel, by cauterising the wound with a powder of his own invention.

Bradmore once spent nearly a month restoring to health a royal servant – the master of pavilions – who had succumbed to 'diabolical temptation' and attempted suicide, sticking a dagger into his guts and running into his office wall. But none of those cases had been so delicate, nor so high-profile, as the one he is about to take on.

It is July 1403, and Bradmore has been summoned one hundred miles from his home in London to Kenilworth Castle:

the palace-fortress in the English Midlands that is the historic home of the mighty dukes of Lancaster. It is a long journey, on uneven roads, towards a part of the country that is riven with disorder.

But travelling is not the problem, even at this time of great turbulence, during which England teeters on the brink of all-out civil war. Nor is dealing with the demands of wealthy clients.

What makes this job different is what is at stake.

The patient who lies at Kenilworth, having defeated every other doctor who has seen him, awaiting Bradmore's attention as a matter of last resort, is one of the most important members of the Lancastrian dynasty.

He is a teenage boy, born in Monmouth sixteen years ago, who has survived the lurching, bloody times through which he and England have recently lived. He is a promising warrior, a prodigious lover of music and literature, an avid sportsman and hunter.

He is the eldest son and heir to a man who four years ago became the first Lancastrian king of England, Henry IV.

He is Henry, Prince of Wales.

Henry is almost certainly going to die.

A few days ago, on 21 July, at a battle fought just north of Shrewsbury, in the borderlands between England and Wales, he was hit in the face with an arrow shot from a longbow.

How exactly this happened is not altogether clear. Henry ought to have been wearing a helmet with a visor protecting his face. Perhaps he lifted the visor, or removed the helmet entirely, to take a drink or get a better view of the chaotic, blood-soaked battlefield. But *how* it happened does not matter now. The fact is that several days ago the iron head of an arrow tore into Henry's face just to the right of his nose. It sheared through his cheek, tearing cartilage and flesh before lodging itself, six inches deep, in the back wall of his skull.

At some point someone – probably Henry himself – tugged at the arrow-shaft, and it came away from the arrowhead. That must have seemed, in the panic of the moment, to have dealt with the worst of it.

Far from it. Once Henry left the battlefield, having performed, by all accounts, very bravely, it was obvious that he remained in mortal danger. It was only thanks to the miracle of a few millimetres that the arrowhead did not instantly blind him, damage his brain or kill him outright. All the same, he still has a one-ounce chunk of metal embedded inside his head.

So having been saved by one miracle, Henry now needs another. Bradmore needs to provide it. Unless this arrowhead is removed, it is only a matter of time before it either shifts and damages the nerves and blood vessels inside his head – or blood poisoning sets in.

Bradmore has an idea how he might remove the arrowhead, then seal and heal the wound. His bag holds all he needs: blocks called tents for opening wounds, honey- and wine-based antiseptics, clean dressings and a tool he has designed himself, a little like a speculum, with which he hopes to grip the arrowhead and tease it out without causing further damage to the flesh. He knows how to make pastes to stem bleeding, creams to control the rate of healing and oils to flush out entry wounds. He has a lifetime of experience and a steady hand.

Yet like any good surgeon, Bradmore knows there are things he cannot control. Dirty metal in human flesh, close to the brain-stem: experience tells him there is a high risk of the patient going into seizure. ('The fear of the spasm… was my greatest fear,' Bradmore writes later.)

A fit could be brought on simply by the catastrophic damage already wrought on the delicate tissues of the patient's head. It could be caused by secondary infection: the painful toxic spasms that today we attribute to tetanus. If it occurs it will probably prove fatal.

What's more, even if seizure is avoided, this is still going to be

a long operation, involving many hours of painstaking surgery without reliable anaesthetic, followed by weeks of diligent after-care. Bradmore will have to be at his best for all of it. His patient will have to be abnormally tolerant of pain. And God will have to be on their side.

So Bradmore has good reason to be nervous. This will be among the most difficult operations anyone in England has ever performed. The odds are stacked against him, even if he does everything well. And if he makes the slightest mistake there is a good chance he will be remembered as the man who killed the eldest of the king's four sons and redirected the line of succession to the English crown.

The consequences of failure are clear. But what Bradmore cannot comprehend are the consequences of success.

For what he does not know – what no one can possibly know, including the patient himself – is that if this sixteen-year-old lying stricken at Kenilworth lives, he will grow up to be someone very special.

He will be the king regarded by most generations after him as the greatest medieval ruler England ever had.

THIS TEENAGE BOY WILL ONE DAY be Henry V.

Henry will be the general who wins the battle of Agincourt; the conqueror who achieves the longstanding Plantagenet dream of seizing the crown of France.

He will be the politician who understands better than any other of his time how to assert himself as a statesman on the foreign stage while still maintaining harmony in domestic politics.

He will be the monarch who does the most to promote the English language as the preferred tongue of poets and patriots.

He will be the king who is lionised by the generation who knew him, idolised by those who followed and eventually mythologised by William Shakespeare.

Although Henry V will reign for only nine years and four months, dying at the age of just thirty-five, he will loom over the historical landscape of the later Middle Ages and beyond, remembered as the acme of kingship: the man who did the job exactly as it was supposed to be done.

He will be considered the closest thing his age ever produced to one of the Nine Worthies. A titan. An English Alexander.

A young Henry VIII will regard his predecessor and relative Henry V as an idol to be mimicked to the point of obsession. Shakespeare will deploy Henry V as a character study in youthful folly redirected to grave and sober statesmanship. In the darkest days of the Second World War, the example of Henry's victories in France will be offered by British filmmakers as encouragement to a people existentially threatened by Nazism. Even Winston Churchill, who has mixed feelings about Henry, will call him 'a gleam of splendour' in 'the dark, troubled story of medieval England'.[1]

Well into the late twentieth century Henry's name will retain the power to enchant and entrance. True, around once in every generation a historian will do their best to bring Henry down a peg, usually by casting him as a cold, violent, overambitious warmonger whose campaigns in France caused great human suffering and were eventually proven, because they did not endure forever, to be a colossal waste of money and time. But these are generally voices crying in the wilderness.

More often than not those who appreciate what a medieval king was supposed to be and do will echo the judgement made in 1972, by one of the finest, most level-headed and most influential medievalists of the modern age, who told an audience that he considered Henry 'the greatest man who ever ruled England'.

Does Henry deserve that name? I believe he does. But why he deserves it is not a question that can be answered with regard to a single battle – his triumph at Agincourt in 1415 – nor by appeal to a simple preference for our kings manly and warlike.

To understand why – and how – Henry V was so spectacularly successful in his day, why he was so widely admired after his death and why his reputation has impressed so many historians over so many centuries, it is necessary to take stock of his life in the round.

Henry lived a short life, and was king for only a quarter of it. What made him such an extraordinary and effective figure (putting aside luck, which like all great historical figures he exploited when it came along) lies as much in the twenty-six years that preceded his coronation as in the subsequent nine. Many historians have praised Henry for what he managed to do as king – noting that he dragged England out of the doldrums into which it had sunk during the baleful reign of his cousin Richard II (1377–99) and the turbulent one of his father, Henry IV (1399–1413), balancing astonishing military achievements with stable and consensual domestic government.

Yet what is habitually underappreciated is the degree to which Henry was prepared to do that job by the time he ascended the throne in 1413. To understand the king, one must understand the prince. That is the premise around which I have conceived and structured this book.

This is a new biography of Henry V. I have been waiting to write it for some time.

More than a decade ago I published *The Plantagenets*, a narrative history which covered that dynasty's history from the accession of Henry II in 1154 to the deposition of Richard II in the Lancastrian revolution of 1399. Two years later I produced a companion volume known as *The Hollow Crown*. That book began in 1420 and concluded in 1525.

Between those two I left a *Henry V*-shaped gap.

It was not the case that the subject did not interest me. Quite the opposite. It was that the subject fascinated me so much

I wanted to wait until I was a little more experienced in my writing to take him on.

For Henry V is nothing if not a challenge. He is one of the most intriguing characters in all of medieval history, yet at the same time one of the hardest to pin down.

Henry had a reputation for being austere to the point of desiccation, yet he was also theatrical and astonishingly adept at the art of public spectacle.

He was a hardened warrior, a dyed-in-the-wool soldier, who exercised the power of life and death over his enemies from his early teens, and (notoriously) gave the order for a mass slaughter of prisoners of war at Agincourt. Yet he was also creative, artistic and literary, with a bookish temperament and a talent for composing music and playing a number of instruments, including the harp.

He was a leader who made his share of mistakes, misjudged his friends and family members and took gambles that brought him and others to the edge of ruin. Yet he always seemed to triumph when it mattered.

He was a king who did more than any other to bring England back from the brink of economic torpor, poisonous political faction and scorn on the European stage: a case study in the art of leadership in a time of crisis, which feels especially apposite as I write these words today. Yet through his singular triumph – the effective conquest of the French crown and the northern half of the French kingdom – he sowed the seeds for three generations of calamity at home, in the form of the Wars of the Roses.

He was his father's son, who honoured and rescued the fortunes of the Lancastrian dynasty that had snatched the crown in 1399. But he often seemed to owe more in his manner of kingship – and his sympathies – to his father's hapless, histrionic predecessor, Richard II: the king whom the 1399 revolution displaced.

These competing elements in Henry's character make him a difficult but attractive subject for a biography. So too does the generally distorted shape of Henry's popular historical

reputation, which tends to focus far too narrowly on the miraculous victory at Agincourt, and not enough on his life before he was a king, and after he was a conqueror.

All in all, it has long seemed to me that given the extraordinary nature of Henry's achievements, the dramatic intensity of his relatively short life and his singular cultural importance to English history, Henry deserves a volume all of his own.

That is why for the last decade I have planned to write a biography that would comprise a standalone portrait of king and man, while also serving as a final volume to be read alongside *The Plantagenets* and *The Hollow Crown*: not quite the third part of a trilogy, but the final panel in a triptych.

This is that book.

I HAVE ALREADY SAID A LOT about the story you are about to read, but two more things seem to me to be worth noting before we begin.

The first concerns structure. As I have already suggested, books about Henry V are often lopsided. That is to say: they concern themselves very heavily with the years during which he was king (1413–22) and very little with the years of his life (1386–1413) beforehand.

This strikes me as a mistake. Henry V enjoyed a long, eventful and invaluable apprenticeship to the office of monarchy. He was not born to be king, but from around the age of ten he was in close proximity to royalty, and from the age of thirteen he was a politically and militarily active heir to the throne.

Yet only Shakespeare – working in the realm of theatre and choosing to hang his narrative on an almost wholly fictitious characterisation of the young Henry as a tearaway, womanising drunk – seriously grasps that to understand Henry, we must understand 'Hal', the young man and prince, in equal measure. This book tries in its structure to address that imbalance. Almost every other serious biographer of Henry has treated

the twenty-six years of his apprenticeship as a short prelude to the real business of his life's story. Here, you will find that Henry does not become king until exactly halfway through the story.

The second thing I must say relates to style. It is traditional to write history books in the past tense. I have always done so myself. History is by definition the study of things that happened. (Or, if you like, things that *have* happened.) It usually makes sense to describe them in such a way.

Usually. But not always.

It is possible that trying to write a biography of a medieval person may be a contradiction in terms. In the modern sense, the word 'biography' implies a degree of psychological insight and inspection of a subject's interior world that is generally impossible given the nature of medieval sources.

Henry V was not a Queen Victoria. He did not – so far as we know – keep a diary. What personal remarks and reflections we can collect from him must be scraped from sources which were never created with the purpose of cracking open his mind for the benefit of future scholars. For the most part, what we have are his orders and his actions. Nothing else.

How, then, do we animate Henry V? How can we bring ourselves as close as possible to the man while remaining responsible historians? How can we get to know him, without straying into the realm of Hollywood fantasy?

My response to those questions, which I present here humbly but unapologetically, is through narrative style, by writing the story of his life in present tense.

Henry rides. He fights. He prays. He plans. He rules.

He is next to us as he does it all. We are living, as he does, on the edge of the next decision, and on the cusp of the next crisis. We are jolted out of our comfortable place in the distant future, and must wrestle with the medieval world in real time, with him.

I hope the effect of this slightly untraditional approach is that Henry will become, in the pages that follow, a man whom we will live alongside. I hope you will find, as I have, that he is

a man of surprising depths and tastes, who carries with him a range of contradictory influences built up across the course of his life, which swirl around him as he grows up.

I hope you will enjoy, as I have, seeing how Henry tries increasingly to live his life behind a mask that betrays as little of this as possible. And I hope you experience the same thrill that I have in peering behind that mask.

Henry is going to do as he will. We will do it with him, and I hope that in the end, we will feel that we know him better than we thought we possibly could.

This is Henry V.

Enjoy the ride.

Dan Jones
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