First published in the UK in 2025 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781838937973; ISBN (XTPB): 9781838937980
ISBN (Broken Binding): 9781035922840; ISBN (E): 9781838937904

Cover design: Simon Michele | Head of Zeus
Map design: Jamie Whyte

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

To find out more about our authors and books
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For Arthur


Pipewell Gate
River Brede
To English Channel
The Green Lion
harbour
St Thomas's Church
Strand Gate
Monday Market
Winchelsea
1000 ft
Windsor
Staines
Southampton
To Castile
English


To Flanders
London
River Thames
Canterbury
Rye
Winchelsea
English Channel
20 miles

I should not spare to speak, if I hope to succeed
Of brave men with weapons, right worthy in weeds*
That are now in their graves, and did all their deeds
They sail in the sea-ground, fishes to feed.

Laurence Minot
Poem X: How King Edward and his many
met with the Spaniards in the sea (c.1350–2)

When the waves grow wild, and walls fall down…
And boastful, proud boys marry noble ladies
and lead them around
Then the dreadful day of Doom will soon draw near.

Winner and Waster
Anonymous English poem (c.1350s)

It is as it is.

Motto of Edward III

* I.e. armour.

Prologue

BORDEAUX

1348

We are sure that your Magnificence knows how, after much complicated negotiation about the intended marriage of the renowned Prince Pedro, your eldest son, and our most beloved daughter Joan, which was designed to nurture perpetual peace and create an indissoluble union between our Royal Houses, we sent our said daughter to Bordeaux, en route for your territories in Spain.

Letter of Edward III to Alfonso XI of Castile
September 1348

'What do you think?' said Thorp, shielding his face against the sun and looking at Bordeaux. The city seemed to wobble in the heat, as the English ship named the *Katherine* sailed up the narrowing mouth of the River Garonne. 'Could you swim from here?'

Thorp, a stocky, dark-haired archer, an Essexman about thirty-five summers in age, with strong shoulders and quick, cynical eyes, was standing on the raised platform men called a 'castle', which jutted out at the *Katherine*'s prow. Bordeaux was still a good way upriver, but the water through which the ship was cruising looked invitingly cool. Dragonflies flitted over its rippling surface. Silver fish snapped and flipped in the eddies.

The ship, a cog, was mostly used for ferrying wine from

ports like this one, in the sweltering country of Gascony, across sea channels menaced in those days by Castilian pirates, to the cooler shores of England. Today, the first day of July, it travelled in the other direction, and in the ship's belly were crates full of dresses, curtains, tapestries, bedspreads and treasure.

Besides the ship's captain and his small crew of sailors, there were also two dozen fighting men aboard: mostly hard-bitten veterans of King Edward's war against the French. One of those veterans was the man Thorp now addressed.

Gilbert 'Millstone' Attecliffe tugged a lock of his springy hair, which was running to grey here and there, and considered the matter.

Bordeaux was still nearly a mile away. Which was why Thorp had asked. Not many men could have contemplated such a feat of endurance. But Millstone was tough. For years, the two men had fought together in a war band known as the Essex Dogs. That crew was now broken up: some members dead, others missing, their leader, Loveday, retired. But Thorp and Millstone were keeping the spirit of the Dogs alive. Or trying to.

'Swim it? Aye,' said Millstone, still sizing up Bordeaux. 'Just. Without my boots on. But when I got there, I'd be good for nothing.' He crinkled his eyes. 'You'd have to drag me up the dock, blowing out of my arse like a porpoise.'

Thorp chuckled. 'Good fellow,' he said.

Millstone returned the question, like a favour. 'Reckon you could loose an arrow to hit the spire on the cathedral?'

'No chance,' Thorp said. He was a brilliant bowman: one of the best ever to hold a yew shaft. But to shoot an arrow a mile was undoable. 'A few hundred paces closer, mind…' He glanced at his mate. 'You know as well as I do that I could pin

a man's pintle to his hand if he was pissing against the bell tower.'

Thorp thumbed sweat out of his eyebrows and ran a hand through his hair, salt- and sweat-stiffened from the week at sea. He took a swig from his ale flask, leaned over the edge of the ship's castle and spat.

Then he recoiled in surprise.

A dead woman was staring up at him.

If Thorp had to guess, she was about twenty. She hung below the water, face and belly up, her eyes wide open and her brown hair floating around her like riverweed. The rough shift she wore exposed her thighs and revealed dark purple welts around her groin. It looked like she had been beaten there with a switch. More dark lumps, the size of a hen's egg, stood out around her neck.

'Christ's teeth!' Thorp felt queasy, but tried not to show it. He nudged Millstone. 'Look at that.' The big stonemason nodded. He, too, noticed the black lumps.

'Call Cosyngton,' said Millstone.

Sir Stephen Cosyngton, the knight in charge of the expedition, was already clambering up the steps to the forecastle. Cosyngton had a bushy moustache, which trailed in barbels down the sides of his lips. He wore a sweat-soaked length of red silk on his head to stop the sun burning his bald patch.

'What are you two staring at?' he asked, brusque as always.

'Dead girl,' said Thorp. 'Looks like she drowned.'

Cosyngton squinted into the water. 'Drowned, my bollocks,' he said. 'Look at her armpits.'

For a moment, they all leaned over the side of the castle and watched the round prow of the ship's hull nudge the girl's body, before she drifted along the *Katherine*'s steerboard side towards the stern and out of view.

Millstone pointed ahead. A forearm was bobbing above the surface, the hand grasping for some way out of the water, out of the unbelievable predicament of death. The flesh of the fingers was dark and mottled, the digits swollen like raw sausages.

'No one's been drowned,' said Cosyngton. 'Christ help us.' He took a deep breath. 'That's the Death.'

As Millstone, Thorp and Cosyngton watched the bodies floating in the river, each man was thinking the same thing. For the past half year and more, rumours had been swirling in England of a deadly sickness that was spreading around the whole Earth, having passed from the Tartars of the east to the land of the Saracens and now to the Christians.

It had various names. The plague. The pest. The mortality. Or simply the Death. All referred to an ague that caused a person's throat and privy parts to swell and blacken and rot, their breath to stink, their eyes and nostrils to bleed unstoppably and their piss to dry up. It killed almost everyone it touched.

Some men, like Thorp, doubted its existence, snorting that it was just a summer sickness; that talk of it being anything more was nonsense put about by fools, or else malicious talk by rich men hoping to scare the lesser sort into obedience.

But those who had seen it sweep through cities and countryside said that it spelt the end of the world. It looked, thought Millstone, as though they were about to find out.

Cosyngton had been deep in thought, the muscle at the side of his jaw pulsing. Eventually, he spoke. 'Let's get a lad up here to keep a count,' he said. 'So we know what we're dealing with. You've a boy with you?'

'Aye,' said Thorp. He scanned the boat and whistled through his fingers. 'Rigby!' he shouted.

Rigby was his sister's boy, half an orphan since the spring, when, after years of trying, his wastrel father drank himself dead. At that moment the lad was at the stern of the cog, making up lewd songs with a Castilian lute player – a friend of someone or other at court who had begged a ride home on the *Katherine*.

Many of the crew would have nothing to do with Garcias, hating all Castilians for the evils their pirates did to English shipping. But Rigby, in his simple way, did not care, and had been happily playing dice with the musician, who was also teaching him the filthiest Castilian curses he knew.

Hearing his uncle whistle, Rigby loped the length of the ship and up to the castle. 'Essex Dogs, my lord,' he said, rubbing his nose on his sleeve. 'Ready for anything. Who do you want us to fight?'

Sir Stephen Cosyngton looked at him in surprise. 'You could start by fighting the urge to be a fucking prick,' he said. 'Stand here and count how many dead are in the river.'

Rigby nodded enthusiastically. He took up a place on the castle, and stood there absent-mindedly scratching his arse.

As the *Katherine* continued upriver, Millstone watched Bordeaux emerge from the heat haze. It was huge – easily as big as London. Streets of one- and two-storey buildings

sprawled around the spire of a new cathedral. High stone walls enclosed the city's centre; a castle loomed in one corner. Outside the walls, suburbs gave way to vineyards. The whole crew had been excited about arriving. Bordeaux was known for fine wine and even better bathhouses. But now, as word went around the ship of the dead folk in the river, Millstone felt the mood grow tense.

This was supposed to be a simple job. They were there as part of a bodyguard assembled by Cosyngton to serve Princess Joan: a young daughter of Edward III. As Cosyngton had explained when he had found Millstone drinking in a London tavern favoured by seasoned soldiers, the princess was going to Bordeaux to get married.

'She's marrying a Castilian,' he had said. 'Pedro. To make an alliance. We all know those donkey-fuckers have been raising hell on the high seas. This will bring them over to our side.'

Cosyngton explained that the princess was already in Bordeaux. His men would be going down to take over bodyguard duties, travelling on the ships carrying something he called her *trousseau*: dresses, tapestries and clothes.

'We usually steal shit like this, we don't protect it,' Thorp had griped, when Millstone had told him about the job. But he soon changed his mind.

'Few weeks babysitting, few weeks dipping our pintles in the bathhouses of Bordeaux?' Thorp had said. 'When you put it like that…'

So here they were. Two old soldiers, on an easy mission for once.

Yet now they had seen the dead woman in the water, Millstone began to think that – not for the first time – God might have other plans for the last of the Essex Dogs.

⋆

Up on the *Katherine*'s forecastle, Rigby stood where the knight Cosyngton had bid him. He was a tall, ungainly lad: a streak of piss, his mother called him, when she beat him. He stroked the few hairs of his thin moustache and tried to stand still and pay attention to the task at hand.

He could see, as he looked over the ship's side, that there were a lot of bodies in the river. Some were old, some young, some men and some women. Some floated on their own and others in pairs, their limbs tangled like lovers in a hay-meadow.

How *many*, he could not say. Counting had never come easy to him.

After a while, he tired of the job and decided to entertain himself some other way. In his sleeve were a few pebbles he had won playing dice with Garcias. He thought he might see whether he could throw one all the way to the shore. He aimed a stone at a warehouse on the riverfront and whipped his wrist. The stone arced through the hot air and clattered into the warehouse door.

Rigby grinned. That had been easy. He spotted a few scrawny goats grazing a patch of brown grass. Rigby threw a stone and hit a goat on the rump. It bleated angrily. Rigby laughed.

By now, the *Katherine* was nearly at the harbour. The sailors were hauling ropes that made its big square sail collapse. On the dockside, Rigby saw men waving their arms in the direction of the *Katherine*. They looked rich. They also looked worried. The one in charge – a ruddy-faced individual wearing a tall hat – held something over his nose and mouth: a handful of leaves and sticks.

Rigby could not resist. Winding his arm as far back as he

could, accounting for the gentle cross-breeze that would move the stone as it travelled, and checking that neither his uncle Thorp nor Millstone was looking, he hurled a smooth, flat pebble the size of his thumb at the man in the tall hat.

The pebble sliced the air like a blade. It hit the man in the temple and surprised him so much that he raised his hand to his head, knocking off his hat.

Rigby shook with laughter. He ducked behind the castle's rail.

Then he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Sir Stephen Cosyngton had not wanted to come to Bordeaux. But he had had no choice. He was an ambitious knight with a history of good service to the crown. The appointment was an honour.

The timing, however, was terrible. Since the king had returned from his campaigns in France the previous autumn, fresh from the victories at Crécy and Calais, the royal court had been engaged in one long round of feasts, parties and tournaments.

One of the most eagerly anticipated events, a jousting tournament, was to take place in Canterbury in two weeks' time. Cosyngton had been asked to captain one of the teams of knights.

For months, Cosyngton had been at work preparing for this honour. He had recruited his team of twelve men and paid for their liveries, their stabling and their travel costs. He had sent several bolts of Flemish cloth as gifts for the king and queen: precious, beautiful rolls of fabric that he obtained from an

enterprising sergeant-at-arms named Richard Large, who sold good cloth at the best prices.

Yet at the last Cosyngton had been diverted here to Bordeaux, to deliver a cargo of gowns. He had been told that in the event of delays, he should attach his men to the army that was loose in Gascony, led by the king's cousin, the Earl of Lancaster. The very fact of that instruction meant that delays were expected.

Back in Canterbury, his men would still tourney under his banner and at his expense. But he would not be there. His golden chance to mark himself out as a great knight in a dazzling age might never return. And now, on top of that, it looked as though Bordeaux was full of the Death. As the *Katherine* floated into harbour at Bordeaux, he cursed his luck.

The party that had come to meet them was led by a man Cosyngton knew slightly: Lord Robert Bourchier, the king's representative in Gascony. Cosyngton knew Bourchier slightly, and considered him a bore and a prig. Ordinarily, therefore, he would have been amused when he saw the halfwit he had stationed on the forward castle hurl a pebble and knock the lord's hat off.

But now was not the moment for horseplay. From the grim looks on the faces of Bourchier and his companions, and the clumps of herbs and leaves they jammed in front of their noses, Cosyngton could tell things in Bordeaux were bad.

This was no time to be pissing around.

He climbed up to the ship's forward castle, grabbed the idiot boy by the shoulder and boxed his ears. Then he called for the captain to run a plank down from the *Katherine*'s side to the dock.

The greeting party shrank back at his approach, and he could tell they were very scared. 'My lords,' Cosyngton greeted them. 'I see things are going ill.'

As he spoke, he realised what an understatement this was. He looked up and down the dockside. It was around midday. The long port should have been buzzing with workers and traders. But there was virtually no one there. He felt a dribble of sweat escape the silk rag on his head and trickle down his face.

Bourchier held up a hand and drew a cross in the air between them. Speaking into his clutch of herbs, he simply said: 'Get back on the ship.'

'How bad is it? We saw the bodies in the river. How many…'

'Get back on the ship,' Bourchier said. 'It is real. Everything you have heard is true – only worse. The Death is here. And if you stay here, you will die.

'Go home. God spare you.'

'My men will stay aboard. But of course we must unload the princess's trousseau.'

Bourchier shook his head, sadly, as though he were dealing with a child. Then, for the first time, he released the herbs from his face.

'The princess died this morning.'

For a moment, Sir Stephen's head spun. King Edward's favourite daughter was dead. The Castilian peace would be wrecked. 'She died? So the marriage…'

'She died. Her servants too. Even her dogs.'

'Christ. God help her. God help us all.'

'God seems to be scourging, rather than helping. There is nothing to be done. Get on the ship. Leave and pray the Death does not follow you.'

Sir Stephen nodded. 'Very well.'

As he said this another thought entered his head. It was not a charitable thought, but it was an honest one. What had happened in Bordeaux was plainly a tragedy, and it would have terrible consequences for peace between England and Castile.

Yet for him, it might just prove to be a blessing.

If they left now, and the wind was favourable, he could disembark his men at La Rochelle tomorrow, with orders to find the Earl of Lancaster in the field.

He could return to England.

If he landed somewhere like, say, Winchelsea, *he* could ride hard and be in Canterbury just in time.

If they left now, *he* could be the man to bring the king the tragic news of his daughter's death. *He* could explain the extent and manner of the new plague.

He could ride in the tournament.

'My lord,' he said, as sombrely as he could, 'may God be with you. I wish you all the very best.' Then he turned and walked slowly back up the gangplank on to the *Katherine*.

'Change of plan,' Cosyngton cried, trying to stir some enthusiasm into the solemn-looking crew. 'The girl is dead. The peace is off. You lot are going raping with the Earl of Lancaster.

'And this man,' he muttered quietly to himself, 'is going to win a jousting match.'

The sailors hurried to rig the *Katherine* to sail back down the Garonne while the tide was still with them. There was no grumbling and no complaint. They all knew how serious the situation was.

As the ship turned, a child's body bobbed to the surface of the river, then sank back towards the mud-bed.

Sir Stephen did not see it. He was standing on the forward castle, thinking of England.

The news was bad. Worse than bad. But some good might be rescued all the same. King Edward had a saying he often liked to use on such occasions.

Cosyngton noticed a rat poke its nose between two crates in the ship's cargo, then retreat back into the darkness. He paid it no mind, as he said the king's favourite motto out loud.

'It is as it is,' he said. 'It is, as it is.'