The Middle Ages
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A reflective European of the year 1300 would have been entitled to look on his world with a good deal of satisfaction. Progress during two centuries had been constant, even, if one came to think of it, amazing. The land was dotted with new towns and cities, secure behind their walls, adorned with noble churches, and filled with comfortable homes. Spacious castles offered amenities for the gentry and refuges for countryfolk in case of trouble. Food was cheap and plentiful, as a result of intensive agriculture. Business was good; the roads and seaways were usually open. A burgher in Scotland or Sweden could order wines from his favorite French vineyard, dress his wife and himself in Oriental damasks and brocades, and flavor his foods with spices from the world’s extremities. He could send his promising son to a university, where the boy would find great freedom to speculate and argue, within, of course, the reasonable limit set by the faith. The kings had more or less settled down behind borders determined by race and language; they had, in general, gained power enough to keep their turbulent nobles in check. Islam was rolled back in Spain and southern Italy; Christendom extended from Slavic eastern Europe to Greenland. The long disaster of the crusades had ended and had been succeeded by a booming trade with the East. The reflective European might have concluded, with Voltaire’s Babouc: “Si tout n’est pas bien, tout est passable (If all is not well, all is at least tolerable).”

It is true that the nobility had lost much of their independence to their kings and much of their wealth to the rising bourgeoisie. The feudal system had been weakened, and with it the old chivalric principles. The clergy were torn by dissension, especially by the rivalries of secular priests, monks, and friars. The bourgeois, increasingly prosperous, purchased estates and gained titles and married their daughters into the nobility. Rulers—in the Mediterranean lands at least—chose their advisers and executives less from the lords and high prelates and more from competent civil servants of undistinguished birth. In France there appeared the noblesse de robe, magistrates and government officials, with the gown not the sword as the mark of their eminence. In Italy, especially, class-consciousness was much infringed. Boccaccio tells of a baker who invited the pope's
ambassadors to drink wine; in return he was asked to dinner with the most honorable citizens. Petrarch was superbly entertained by a literary goldsmith. Dante, who piqued himself on his nobility, was a member of the apothecaries' guild.

The peasants, borne on a rising tide of prosperity, were probably better off than they would be again for centuries. Many were able to buy their liberty and become landowners. Louis X of France freed all the serfs in 1315 on the grounds that according to natural law every man is born free. (However, he made the serfs pay for their freedom.) Slavery, to be sure, was not extinct. In theory it was confined to non-Christians; in practice slave traders did not inquire closely into the faith of their captives.

The happy times, or relatively happy times, could not last. Population increase turned into overpopulation, as we may infer from the subdivision of landholdings into ever smaller units, from the effort to exploit marginal lands, from the growth of towns, with their hungry, rebellious proletarians. England's population rose from about 1,100,000 in 1086 to an estimated 3,700,000 in 1346. Bad weather brought famines; a very ugly one afflicted Europe from 1315 to 1317. There was, of course, no governmental organization of famine relief, no system for arranging and financing the movement of surpluses from areas of plenty to those of want. Sharp corn factors; especially those who were also millers, hoarded grain, holding it for high prices. The church did its best with almsgiving, but in famine country the church was nearly as poor as its charges. When the starving found a store of food, they were likely to eat so ravenously that they died.

During hard times industrial production in the towns was seriously curtailed, and many workers were thrown out of their jobs. The equilibrium of supply and demand was upset. Governments discovered inflation. They could not, of course, print bank notes, but they could reduce the amount of gold and silver in their coins. Base metal showed through, as it does in our quarters and dimes. The poor, unable to comprehend economic theory, blamed their increasing poverty on the machinations of the great and proposed to better their lot by killing their masters.

In France, ravaged by the Hundred Years War, the rebel mood showed itself in town and country. In Paris the Estates General of 1355, led by the provost of merchants, Etienne Marcel, made revolutionary demands to control the national finances and hence the kingdom. Marcel turned demagogue, courted the mob, invented the famous phrase "the will of the people," and also the liberty cap of red and blue. But as happens so often, the rebel defeated his own purposes by his exorbitance. In July 1358, Marcel was assassinated.

In the countryside discontent turned readily to violence. "We are men formed in Christ's likeness, and we are kept like beasts," said the peasants. They responded to the excesses of a high-handed lord with worse excesses. Their procedure was to break into a manor house, drink the choice wines, murder the hated bailiff, and burn the house with its rent rolls and records. Then the neighboring lords and often the king himself would send punitive troops, whose atrocities would outdo those of the peasants. The most famous uprising was the Jacquerie, which began in the Beauvais region in 1358, when men were killed if they did not have the horny hand of the toiler.

Italy had its share of troubles. In Florence the Ciompi, common workmen, seized power and ruled with surprising moderation for four years, from 1378 to 1382. In Rome in 1347 the low-born but well-educated Cola di Rienzo rebelled against the nobles and church authorities, and attempted to reestablish the ancient Roman republic. But he promised the mob more than he could deliver, and eventually the Romans removed his head and hung the rest of him by the feet from a balcony of the Colonna Palace. (Mussolini admired Cola and proclaimed him a proto-Fascist; and history decreed that he too should hang by the feet, though only at a Milan filing station.)

English villeins also learned the delights of riot and plunder. Unpopular abbeys were pillaged and burned. In London in 1326 the mob beheaded the city's bishop and left him naked in the street.

England's great social protest was the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which approached the dimensions of a revolution. The times were filled with war, plague, suffering, and anger. Although there was a shortage of labor as a result of the plague, the lords were declining to increase wages. The serfs demanded freedom and refused their feudal duties. A golden-voiced priest, John Ball, ancestor of all social-conscious clergics, preached to assembled throngs from the text: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?" He shouted: "Ah, ye good
people, the matter goeth not well to pass in England, nor shall not do so till everything be common, and that there be no vilen
leins or gentlemen, but that we may be all united together and
that the lords be no greater masters than we be. What have we
deserved or why should we be thus kept in servitude? We be all
come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve.” He is
said to have nominated himself for the post of archbishop of
Canterbury, and he promised to liquidate all religious houses
and distribute their possessions. Other natural leaders sprang up
to be the prophet’s generals, among them Wat Tyler and Jack
Straw.

In June 1381, three ragged armies converged on London,
which fell as easily as the Bastille was to do four hundred years
later. The invaders seized and beheaded the archbishop of Can-
terbury, the lord treasurer, and other officials. As these were
dragged off, says the contemporary Thomas Walsingham, “a
most horrible shout arose, not like men’s shouts, but worse
beyond all comparison than human cries, and most like to the
yelling of devils in hell.” The insurgents’ program, according to
the certainly prejudiced reports of their enemies, was to expel
all clergy, with the possible exception of the friars, to seize the
lands of the nobles and gentry, putting them to death, together
with all government ministers, lawyers, and judges. They pro-
posed to behead all foreigners and anyone who could write a
letter.

However, the rebels protested their loyalty to the king,
fourteen-year-old Richard II. He consented to come to a parley.
Surrounded by city officials, the king rode into the open square
of Smithfield. Wat Tyler, also mounted, met his monarch there
and greeted him with swaggering insolence, shaking his hand
and addressing him “comrade,” calling for beer, rinsing his
mouth in peasant style “in a very rude and disgusting fashion.”
This was more than the king’s gentlemen could endure. They
dragged Wat Tyler from his horse, and one of the royal squires
stabbed him to death. In the moments that followed, the king’s
party gained the upper hand, and the peasant army was
dispersed.

In the country and towns the rioters had been attacking
manor houses and abbeys, to burn charters, leases, and court
rolls. Says Walsingham: “They punished by beheading each and
all who were acquainted with the laws of the country… They
were eager to give old records to the flames and lest any should for the future make new ones they put all such as were able to do so to death. It was dangerous to be recognized as a clerk and such as were found with an inkhorn by their side seldom escaped their hands. The memory of ancient things having been lost the lords would not in the future be able to vindicate any kind of right against them."

Violence wounds its own cause. The rebellion rapidly disintegrated. John Ball and other leaders were executed, and their severed heads displayed on London Bridge. Amnesty was granted the followers on the condition that they disband and return to their homes. The uprising had followed a normal sequence: discontent; the appearance of compelling leaders to focus the discontent and propose alternatives; an onrush to the seizure of power; brief, bloody, drunken domination; failure of constructive purpose; reaction of the conservative, propertied classes with their weapons and troops; and a white terror to match the red terror.

These uprisings reveal a revolutionary spirit menacing to social stability. But it is easy to overrate their importance. They came but rarely in the course of two centuries, and they struck only in a few scattered regions. People might grumble and threaten; not many would ever join together to turn discontent into violent action. The system of social and political control, imposed by authority and accepted by custom and habit, was too strong for the rebel mood. Revolt is abnormal; the historian's first duty is to recognize the normal.

During these later years of the Middle Ages the spiritual health and authority of the church declined. For it the thirteenth century ended badly. In 1292 the cardinals could not settle on a pope; they split into factions and fought in the street. After two years they elected a simple-minded monk as Celestine V, partly on the grounds that in the presence of Pope Gregory and his court he had hung his cowl on a sunbeam. Celestine was terrified by a conviction that his elevation was a demon-inspired dream and also by the traffic noise of Rome, as many have been since. The story went that Cardinal Benedetto Gaetani, rigging the new pope's cell with a speaking tube, encouraged him to abdicate, addressing him in the commanding tones of an angel. The story is no doubt a fabrication; but Celestine did abdicate, wherefor Dante lodged him in hell. Cardinal Gaetani succeeded him as Boniface VIII and arrested his predecessor, who died soon after, in prison.

The arrogant Boniface reasserted the doctrine of papal supremacy over all Christendom. In 1300 he proclaimed the first papal jubilee. He appeared on parade wearing the imperial insignia. The two swords of spiritual and temporal dominion were borne before him, and heralds cried: "I am Caesar! I am the emperor!" He also added a second cincture to the papal tiara, to signify his double authority. (The third cincture, implying preeminence in heavenly matters, came a little later.)

The king of France during this period was Philip IV, "the Fair" or "the Handsome." When he attempted to impose a tax on the French clergy, Boniface retorted with the famous bull Clerici Laicos (1296), forbidding any kings or princes to tax clerics without papal consent and ordering the clergy subject to such taxes to defy their rulers. Philip then forbade the export of money and valuables from France, thus grievously reducing papal revenues. He sought to strengthen his position by assembling, in 1302, for the first time, the Estates General, representatives of the nobility and clergy and the bourgeoisie, or third estate. Thus a monarch appealed for popular support, recognizing the bourgeoisie as a social and political unity, with a right to share in the making of national decisions. The entire assembly—including the clergy—sustained the king. Boniface demanded instant submission from France, using the famous phrase: "Outside the church is no salvation." He threatened to depose the French king. Philip then sent a commando band to Italy, headed by a vengeful lawyer whose grandfather had been burned as a heretic in Languedoc. The party, aided by the Colonna family of Rome, seized, manhandled, and imprisoned the old pope, who died soon after of shock and shame. Dante, who opposed papal claims to temporal power, reserved for him a niche in hell that he would occupy upside down, the fire raining on his feet.

Philip, now in control, engineered, in 1305, the election of a French pope, Clement V. Instead of proceeding to Rome, the new pontiff established himself in Avignon and appointed a retinue of French cardinals, all of whom preferred Avignon to the pestilential, riot-prone Holy City. Thus began the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy, which lasted until 1378.

The French popes of Avignon, in their immense, mournful
palace, bear a bad name, though some of them were sincere, learned, pious, and efficient. A good pope must have more than familiar virtues, however, if he is to command the devotion of Christendom. The Avignon popes were sympathetic, at the very least, to French interests. As managers of the world's largest business organization they were more concerned with administration and money raising than with spiritual uplift. But the system was permeated with corruption. A petitioner began by tipping the palace guards and paid graft for every advance of his case. All judgments and decisions were influenced by money payments. The church rewarded with indulgences, notes payable in the next world, and punished with excommunications, which were invoked even against poor people whose taxes were overdue.

The church's greatest revenues and greatest disputes came from ecclesiastical appointments. An everlasting controversy with lay rulers raged over the right of appointment to bishoprics and abbacies. Bishops and abbots, as church officers and administrators of landed property, still had a dual allegiance, still were part of two systems—clerical and feudal. The rights to immense revenues were involved. Quarrels over appointments were endless and were rarely conducive to the spiritual health of the local populations.

The Babylonian Captivity was followed by the Great Schism. Since Rome, the Holy City, bore a prestige no other city could match—its very name booms like a bell—Pope Gregory XI returned there in 1377. When he died a year later, the cardinals, physically threatened by the Roman mob, elected an Italian pope. Most of them then fled, voided their action, and elected another pope, or antipope, who returned to the vacant palace at Avignon. Soon Christendom was treated to the painful spectacle of rival popes playing politics, anathematizing and excommunicating each other, mounting crusades against each other, and resolutely insisting on exclusive rights to the church revenues. God's will in the matter was not discernible. In 1398 the German emperor conferred with the king of France and the Avignon pope, Benedict XIII, on the problems of the papacy. "The Emperor, Wenceslas," Professor Coulton writes, "was a confirmed drunkard, and could do no business but quite early in the morning. The King, Charles VI, was seldom sane, but there was most sense in him later in the day when he had eaten and drunken. The Pope (or anti-Pope), sober and sane enough in other ways, was less sane politically, less able to listen to reason where his own power and dignity were concerned, than either the drunkard or the lunatic." Two years later Emperor Wenceslas was deposed for various good reasons, including the roasting of his cook on a spit for having spoiled his dinner.

The French clergy, disgusted with Benedict XIII, voted a "subtraction of obedience." This action presumed that a national church could affirm or deny allegiance to the pope at will. In 1409 a majority of the cardinals, in outrage, held a council at Pisa, where they enounced the conciliar theory that a council has authority even over popes. They deposed both popes as heretics and elected a third, Alexander II, who promptly died. Then they elected another, John XXIII. Although he had begun his career as a captain of mercenaries, John was unable to overcome his two papal rivals, who rejected the council's order to resign. (The church does not recognize him as a legitimate pope; hence another Pope John in the twentieth century could assume the same number.)

The Council of Pisa was followed in 1414 by the more famous Council of Constance. This council declared itself supreme and enjoined all three popes to abdicate. Two of them accepted the decree; the third, irascible Benedict XIII, retreated to a mountain fastness in Spain, whence he poured forth a stream of acrimonious and unregarded bulls. The Council of Constance, in 1417, elected a new and worthy pope, Martin V, who did his best to reassert papal authority.

For a full century the church had exhibited to the world a spectacle of disunion, intrigue, incompetence, and corruption in place of the spiritual and moral leadership for which people longed. Rome became a byword and a hissing among all nations. Boccaccio could tell, to applause, the story of the Jew who, during a visit to Rome, was converted to Christianity on the grounds that a religion that could survive the villainies of its representatives must be the true one. The spirit of the Reformation was already abroad. Instinctive reformers, angry men, muttered so loudly that their words became audible.

John Wycliffe, born about 1320, was an eminent theologian at Oxford. He was tempted to dangerous thoughts, which were aggravated by the shameful farce of the Great Schism in 1378. This seemed to him to belie God's guidance of his church. Wyc-
Wycliffe was choleric and fearless; he began uttering radical criticism of Rome’s claim to supremacy and of Catholic doctrine. The Bible, he said, contains all that is necessary for salvation. Since the Bible does not recognize a distinction between priests and bishops, the Roman hierarchy is abusive and the pope is Antichrist. The church has no right to interfere in civil government; all priests are subject to secular laws. Wycliffe further denied transubstantiation and proposed to abolish confession, penance, pilgrimages, the use of holy water, the veneration of relics, prayers for intercession of the saints and of the Virgin. He burst out against ecclesiastical wealth; he treated even the friars as demonic. But this is heresy! This is Protestantism more than a century before its time! Wycliffe was forced out of the university. He devoted himself to translating the Vulgate into English and to enlisting “simple” priests to spread his opinions. The English authorities were, at the very least, tolerant of his views.

Wycliffe established no formal party, but he found many sympathizers with his anticlericalism, his insistence on the right of individual judgment, and his demand for free access to the Scriptures. His followers, called Lollards, which may mean “babblers,” abounded among the lower clergy and the artisan class, who were natural dissenters. They called images idols, and the Virgin Mary a witch. They mocked the mass; a Wiltshire knight purloined a sacred host, ate one piece with oysters, one with onions, one with wine, without rebuke from on high. The Lollards were relatively unmolested, but in the early fifteenth century Henry IV insisted that heretics should be properly burned. Lollardy disappeared from view. It went underground, to emerge again with the Reformation.

Wycliffe’s ideas were borne afar, to seed and sprout in the mind of John Hus, a Bohemian preacher in Prague, dean of the faculty of philosophy and rector of the university. His views, comporting the right of every man to seek his faith in Scripture, were very welcome to the independent Czechs and became the doctrinal principle of a political rebellion against foreign overlordship, which included papal authority. Hus was summoned to the Council of Constance, condemned, and despite a safe-conduct, burned—for a promise to a heretic is invalid. His immolation was followed by the Hussite Wars, which ended with the triumph of the pope and the emperor in 1436. However, certain concessions were wrested from the papal govern-
ment, certain local practices of piety authorized, and John Hus remained, as he is today, the hero-martyr of the Czech Protestants.

It must have seemed, in the early fifteenth century, that the church had gained a dominance that would endure for eternity. The outward manifestations of heresy were suppressed; the faith was codified by the councils; the dissensions of the Great Schism were ended; papal authority within the church was again unchallenged. Nevertheless, these were years of an ending, not of a beginning, years of convalescence from a century of plague.

The spiritual plague was accompanied and outdone by the physical plague, the Black Death. In October 1347, a convoy of twelve Genoese galleys, believed to have come from the Crimea, limped into Messina, guided by dying men. "In their bones they bore so virulent a disease that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could evade death," says a contemporary chronicler. The authorities ordered the ships out of harbor, but too late. The Messinians fled, spreading the disease throughout Sicily and in early 1348 to the Italian mainland and France.

The plague, which still lingers dormant, biding its time, was recently analyzed by the World Health Organization of the United Nations. It is caused by bacilli dwelling in the blood of a certain flea. The flea's stomach becomes blocked; it cannot feed normally. It fastens by preference onto the black rat, trying to feed; it inserts its pricker repeatedly into its host's skin, and because of its blocked stomach, regurgitates the plague bacilli into the wound. When the rat dies, the fleas seek food elsewhere, choosing humans if rats are unavailable.

The infection may take three forms: bubonic, pneumonic, or septicemic. In the bubonic plague the bacilli in the bloodstream settle in the lymph glands. They act against the walls of the blood vessels, producing hemorrhages, dark patches that eventually cover the entire body, and the tongue turns black; hence the term Black Death. Under the arms and in the groin appear swellings and carbuncles, the buboes that give the plague its correct name. Sufferers from the bubonic form of this disease occasionally survive, but most die within three days. In the septicemic form, the blood is fatally infected. The pneumonic form causes gangrenous inflammation of the throat and lungs, resulting in violent pains in the chest, vomiting and spitting of blood, and a foul smell. Victims of the pneumonic form almost always die; fortunately death comes to them very quickly.

As the plague advanced from town to town—for the rat-filled, unclean cities suffered worst—normal life ceased. Physicians' remedies were powerless; priests feared to approach the dying and administer the last rites. The doors stood open, and no one dared or cared to enter and rob. Criminals released from jail and ignorant peasants imported from the mountains threw the dead in great common pits, with a curse for viaticum. At sea, ships, manned only by dead sailors, drifted derelict.

Boccaccio has left a memorable description of the plague's ravages in Florence. Many a man, he writes in The Decameron, dined heartily with his friends on earth and supped with his ancestors in paradise. People avoided one another. Brother abandoned brother; parents, children. Shame was forgotten; women negligently exposed their bodies to servants. "People cared no more for dead men than we care for dead goats." Peasants neglected their farms, thinking only of enjoying what they had. Animals, crying for the milker, wandered unchecked through the wheat. Sheep and hogs caught the disease, and like humans, died. The authority of laws, human and divine, and the bonds of family love almost vanished. Many of the unstricken, like Boccaccio's jolly immortal band, retreated to a country shelter and spent their days feasting, dancing, and telling funny stories.

The plague traveled north, lying dormant, with its fleas, during the winter and resuming its march in the spring. It spread throughout Europe, reaching England in August 1348, and then attacking Scandinavia and Russia. It gradually relented, but reappeared, with diminished violence, in 1361 and other years. The Great Plague of London in 1665 was a recurrence of bubonic plague.

No one knows how many died in the Black Death, for medieval statistics were very emotionally compiled. But when we read that many villages were totally wiped out, that the papal authorities counted 1500 dead in three days in Avignon, that five cardinals, 100 bishops, and 358 Dominicans succumbed in the same city, that at the end the Franciscan losses numbered 124,434, we may credit the specificity and accept the general conclusion that a third to half of Europe's population died. This was the greatest calamity ever visited on the Western world.
The immediate results of the plague were worse than those of any war. A traveler would find whole villages tumbling into ruin, yielding to the assault of the elements. The countryside was noisome with dead animals. The contemporary chronicler Henry Knighton reported five thousand sheep rotting in one pasture. For a time, he says, the fear of death ruled all men's thoughts, and no one cared for profits in the doomed world.

This state of affairs could not last long. As the plague receded and as the survivors looked again to a terrestrial future, prices rapidly rose to balance the scarcities. A pair of shoes cost as much as fourteen pence, says Knighton in horror; a reaper demanded at least eighnpence a day and food, a mower twelvepence. (The normal wage had been a penny a day.) Governments vainly issued decrees fixing prices and wages. The workers were well aware of their power. They secured the abolition of some feudal services; if a local landowner tried to enforce the official wage scale, the laborers could always migrate and find employment elsewhere, with no questions asked. Whole villages secured their corporate liberty. Great numbers of serfs bought freedom, to develop into a class of yeomen-farmers, an agrarian middle class. In general the peasantry realized their power, as evidenced by the uprising of the French Jacquerie and by the English Peasants' Revolt.

To the clergy the Black Death dealt a cruel blow. Conscientious priests, administering the last rites, ensure their own. Many monasteries were completely wiped out. Petrarch's brother Gherardo, a Carthusian in the monastery of Montreux, near Marseilles, tended his brother monks and buried them one by one; in the end only he and his faithful dog were left alive. (Dogs generally were more faithful than people.) The friars in particular, caring for the cities' sick, suffered appalling losses. But during the reconstruction period the monastic orders recruited too many unfit, who were eager to share the wealth of the abbeys. Says Henry Knighton: "A very great multitude whose wives had died of the plague rushed into holy orders. Of these many were illiterate and, it seemed, simply laymen who knew nothing except how to read to some extent."

A most woeful sequel of the plague was the persecution of the Jews. Since it is our nature to blame our misfortunes on the wickedness of others, people accused the Jews of a gigantic plot to destroy Christendom by poisoning the water supplies. There
may be this much color in the accusation: the Jews, so conscious of hygiene, presumably refrained from using insanitary wells and polluted river water. But the populace demanded a blood sacrifice and refused to note that the Jews died of the plague as did the Christians. Horrible pogroms took place in southern France, Spain, Austria, Poland, and especially in Germany. Two hundred Jews were burned alive in Strasbourg. At Speyer the Jews were massacred, and their bodies were sent down the Rhine in empty wine barrels. In Esslingen the Jewish survivors assembled in the synagogue and cremated themselves. But at Schaffhausen and perhaps elsewhere, enlightened authorities protected the Jewish inhabitants from the black plague of fanaticism.

As if plague were not enough, war came to afflict the Western world. By the fateful year 1348 the kings of England and France had already initiated the war that was to last a century more. The great Hundred Years War was dynastic and territorial. The rules of succession to the French throne were unclear; the kings of England could make a reasonable claim to the monarchy. The French, who would have no foreign master, changed the rules to permit the accession of Philip VI, the first of the Valois kings, in 1328. In that year Philip intervened in troubled Flanders and for a time was recognized as that country’s sovereign. Edward III of England, threatened with confiscation of his vast holdings in southwestern France, submitted to Philip and did him homage.

The war formally began in 1337, when Edward reasserted his claim to the French throne. For some years the war was prosecuted with little enthusiasm. Then in July 1346, Edward invaded France, landing an expeditionary force at St. Vaast on the northeastern shore of the Cotentin Peninsula of Normandy, only a few miles from the sites of the Allies’ landing beaches in the second World War. The army probably numbered about fifteen thousand men. It was novel in composition. Instead of heavy-armored knights with their horses, so hard to transport across the stormy Channel, the soldiers were mostly mobile light-armored infantry and archers. The archers carried the mighty longbow. The army made its way, looting and burning, through unhappy villages—Valognes, Carentan, St. Lô, which many Americans have reason to remember. Caen, which had

neglected to build proper defenses, was captured after a sharp fight. King Philip, with a large army, lay in wait near Paris. He offered to fight King Edward on a battlefield of the invader’s choosing. This was a chivalrous challenge, but Edward had other ideas. He succeeded in repairing a broken bridge across the Seine at Poissy, dodged Philip’s army, and headed northeast for the safety of Flanders. Hotly pursued by Philip, the English reached the Somme below Abbeville and in the nick of time found a ford passable at low tide. The army waded across, protected by covering fire from the archers. Philip’s main army arrived just as the tide had risen to block their passage. Edward took up a strong position near the village of Crécy, on the edge of a small plateau, with his flanks protected by thick woods. There he disposed his men in two strong bodies of infantry, with the bowmen thrown well forward between them and on either flank. The soldiers had time for a good rest.

Philip’s pursuing army, outnumbering the English by at least three to one, came up the narrow road from Abbeville. The mounted knights, lustful for battle, were well in advance. The foot soldiers, weary from a difficult march under the hot August sun, were strung out in a long disorder. When the French discovered the English position, they attempted to form on a rise opposite the English, but the battle line, crowded by troops constantly arriving from the rear, turned into a confused mass. The king himself had great difficulty in reaching the battle.

Philip sent forward a corps of Genoese crossbowmen to traverse the ground between the armies and engage the English. But they had the evening sun in their eyes, they had to shoot uphill, and they were outranged by the English archers. The English, as the historian C. W. C. Oman has noted, “shot so fast and close that it looked as if a snowstorm was beating upon the line of Genoese. Their shafts nailed the helmet to the head, pierced brigandine and breast, and laid low well-nigh the whole front line of the assailants in the first moment of the conflict. The crossbowmen only stood their ground for a few minutes; their losses were so fearful that some flung away their weapons, others cut their bowstrings, and all reeled backwards up the slope which they had just descended.”

And King Edward produced from his carts his secret weapon—mysterious iron tubes about five feet long. These were charged with a black powder and ignited. They fired balls
of iron and stone, about three inches in diameter. The belching flame of the guns, their thunderclap explosions, and the hurtling balls seemed to the French a diabolical magic.

The mounted French knights, in a fury, slashed their way through the retreating crossbowmen and charged up the slope. But the hail of English missiles brought them down in a mass of rearing, screaming horses. Among the heaps of their own dead, the valiant French charged again and again; very few reached the English line and none penetrated it. The flower of French chivalry fell; the heralds later reckoned 1,542 lords and knights, including dukes and counts, among the fallen.

The battle of Crécy was one of the decisive battles of the world. It meant the crippling of French power for a century and the beginning of English preponderance in world affairs. Militarily it marked the beginning of the decline of the cavalry and the introduction of the use of explosives in the field. Missile warfare—the use of mechanical weapons from the longbow to the cannon—diminished the importance of hand-to-hand conflict with swords, axes, and lances, mere extensions of the human arm. Personal gallantry yielded to the astute choice of defensive positions. The noble knight, essentially an amateur, was brought down by the professional soldier. War became a business, a rather dirty business. It was conducted by contract armies, recruited anywhere without concern for nationality. The knights themselves fought no longer from feudal obligation and loyalty but for advantage. Their dream was to capture and hold some noble for an enormous ransom.

The dreadful war dragged on, the background to human life in France for a hundred years. But not only France suffered. The period was one of warfare and upheaval throughout the West. Terror was a normal condition of existence. We are told that pigs learned to run for shelter at the sound of the alarm bell (a fine example of the conditioned reflex). The new professional soldiers had no liking for pitched battles; they preferred devastation and plunder, until in the end there was little left to plunder and devastate. Impoverished German knights in particular made a trade of war—indeed, they had no other. "Duke" Werner von Urslingen was conductor, condottiero, of a band known as the Great Company, which operated in Italy. He adorned his doublet with the words, in silver: "Duke Werner, the enemy of pity, of mercy, and of God." His system, worthy of the Mafia, was to invade a peaceful region, rob, burn, rape, and kill. Then he would call his demonstration to the attention of the capital city and demand a tremendous fee for passing on—or else! Thus he obtained vast sums from Siena, Perugia, Florence, and Bologna. Bertrand du Guesclin used the same shakedown on the pope in Avignon. But with one another the condottieri were inclined to live and let live.

The plague brought only a momentary respite to war. One might have thought that universal destruction would have sickened rulers with blood. But if death is invited to the dance, he is the last to leave. There seems never to have been a lack of soldiery to lend death a hand. Henry Knighton tells us that the Scots, not yet touched by plague, assumed that the avenging hand of God had inflicted it upon the English alone. They therefore assembled to invade England. Alas! God's vengeance was indiscriminate. In a very brief time five thousand Scots were laid low. The rest, both sick and well, headed for their homes. Then those English who had escaped the plague by God's favor caught up with the Scots and slew those that pestilence had spared.

In the war between England and France, the English had the best of it, thanks to competence and luck. The battle of Poitiers, in 1356, was a repetition of Crécy. The French, with a great superiority in numbers, were defeated by the English tactical dispositions. The French king, John the Good, was captured and held for a colossal ransom. Again at Agincourt, in 1415, the army of Henry V, outnumbered at least two to one, trampled in the mud a weary, hungry, ill-commanded French force. By this time gunpowder was in general use, but mostly for siege and field artillery. Small arms were still heavy and unreliable.

There were indeed islands of relative security in Europe. Chaucer's pilgrims seldom mention the war. Spain and Portugal were scarcely affected; northern Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, held themselves aloof. Even in France there were, according to one estimate, sixty years of nominal truce out of one hundred sixteen war years. There were bright interludes, as in 1389, when Isabella of Bavaria came to Paris for her coronation, and fountains spouted wine, and tapestries were hung along the streets of her progress.

In the general distress the duchy of Burgundy prospered. In the late fourteenth and in the early fifteenth centuries a succes-
tion of powerful dukes extended their territory, by conquest and astute marriages, to include Brabant, Flanders, and most of Holland. They challenged the power of France and England. In their courts, at Dijon and elsewhere, they patronized the arts. Their architects developed the sumptuous Burgundian Gothic; their painters and sculptors worked in a realistic style that informs us of the aspect of medieval life. Philip the Bold (1342–1404) was a collector, connoisseur, lover of fine clothes, furs, jewelry. Philip the Good (1396–1467) was a great art patron. Since, in fact, he was far from good, he might have been more accurately termed Philip the Dilettante.

France was less fortunate than Burgundy. The journal of a Paris burgher complains in 1421 of extortionate taxes and high prices. “Every day and every night one heard everywhere in Paris only pitiable outcries, because of the cost and scarcity of everything. I doubt if the lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet were more keen when the city of Jerusalem was entirely destroyed and the children of Israel were led to Babylon in captivity; for night and day men and women kept crying: ‘Alas, I die of cold, of hunger’.” The good citizens established refuges and soup kitchens, but these were never enough. The poor ate garbage that pigs scorned, raw cabbage cores, grass. In the hospitals the dying were heaped with the dead. In 1439 ravenous wolves devoured fourteen people in the region between Montmartre and the Porte St. Antoine, and attacked shepherds in preference to sheep. In 1444 a great company of thieves and murderers camped outside Paris, seizing animals for food and people for ransom. The countryside was a waste of abandoned fields and burned villages, sometimes occupied only by wild boars. The smiling fields of Normandy were a tangle of briars and thicketts. Roads were untended, bridges broken, river channels choked, harbors silted. Gangs of écorcheurs et chauffeurs, “skinner and footwarmers,” roamed the country, looting whatever had been overlooked by the armies, extorting “protection money,” and burning and flaying those who did not pay up. The only security was within the guarded walls of the large towns and cities, and often the only cultivated area lay within eyeshot and earshot of the watchmen in the towers. But not all the cities escaped. “The Black Prince” captured the city of Limoges in 1370; irritated by its resistance, he had three hundred inhabitants—men, women, and children—executed.

The battle of Crécy, in 1346, was one of the early disasters the French would face in the Hundred Years War. As seen in this painted miniature of the arduous battle, the French military, at left, fell to their British opponents. Despite their superiority in numbers, the French could not endure the slings of the English longbowmen.
France's woes derived largely from the incompetence of its lamentable rulers. Charles VI succeeded to the throne in 1380, at the age of twelve. He was not very bright at best, and in 1392 he became definitely insane, although he did enjoy lucid intervals. He died at last in 1422, and was succeeded by his son Charles, the dauphin or crown prince, feeble in body and mind. He was very dubious, as were others, about his own legitimacy. He was held practically captive by a band of villainous advisers in his gloomy castle of Chinon in Touraine. They kept him poor, made him wear wet, worn-out boots and repair his old coats. His dominions dwindled till they embraced only central and southeastern France. Hence he was known as the king of Bourges, and more commonly as the dauphin. According to French tradition, he could not become king until he should be consecrated with the sacred chrism in the cathedral of Reims. And Reims was held by the hostile Burgundians.

Then occurred a miracle, or the nearest thing to an attested miracle in recorded history.

In the Lorraine village of Domremy, not very far from Nancy, Bar-le-Duc, and Chaumont, dwelt a farmer, Jacques d'Arc. Domremy had a fairy tree and fountain and a certain reputation for witchcraft. Jacques's daughter Joan worked in the harvest fields, guarded the beasts at pasture, and did women's work. "For spinning and weaving," she said proudly at her trial, "put me up against any woman in Rouen." She was illiterate, though in time she learned to sign her name. She was a very good girl and very pious; she insisted on taking communion every month. At thirteen she began to hear voices and see visions of Saint Michael, Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret. Saint Michael told her of the great pity that was on the land of France. Aware of a prophecy that France in its greatest extremity would be restored by a virgin from the Lorraine marches, she vowed to preserve her virginity forever. (Virginity was regarded with superstitious awe, perhaps because there was so little of it.) The voices told her that she must come to the aid of the king of France, assure him of his legitimacy, and raise the siege of Orléans.

In May 1428, when she was sixteen or seventeen, Joan visited the captain of the nearby fortress of Vaucouleurs and told her story. The skeptical captain sent her home, but in the following February she returned and so impressed him that he detailed six men to conduct her to the dauphin in Chinon. The journey across France, through hostile country, took eleven days. The party moved often by night and slept side by side in the woods by day. For security and convenience Joan wore men's clothes. "I would never have dared make advances to her," testified one of her companions, "and I say upon oath that neither did I have for her desire nor carnal notion."

On her presentation at Chinon, the dauphin, forewarned, dissimulated himself in the throng, but Joan recognized him and made him her obeisance. The dauphin was delighted, but suspected necromancy; he sent her to Poitiers, where she was examined by a clerical commission. They found in her "no evil, but only good, humility, virginity, piety, honesty, simplicity." Her virginity was attested by two noble ladies. The dauphin was completely won over.

He presented her with a suit of armor, and his kinsman the duke of Alençon gave her a horse. She went out to the meadows and galloped a-tilt, lance under arm, spearing imaginary enemies. This is about the only playful moment recorded of her grim life.

Joan assured the dauphin of his legitimacy, that he was true king of France, and she insisted that she should lead the royal army to the relief of Orléans. The city, on the north bank of the Loire, had been under siege by the English since the previous October. They had built a ring of small forts around it and were waiting comfortably for starvation to do their work for them, with no fear of the dauphin's demoralized troops. Joan was therefore able to enter the city with a convoy of supplies, without much opposition. She sat her white charger with ease and grace. Before her was borne her white standard, pictured with two angels, each holding a lily of France. Leading the revivified citizens, she issued forth to attack the English forts one by one. "I was the first to place a scaling ladder on the bastion of the bridge," she testified at her trial. The English, decisively defeated, raised the siege and marched away.

The capture of Orléans was not only an evidence of Joan's brilliant, instinctive generalship, it was the greatest possible morale-builder for the French. The news spread through the countryside that supernatural aid had come to rescue them. Once more they were animated by the will to fight.
Joan now followed the second behest of her voices. She must make the dauphin lawful king by having him anointed in Reims, in accordance with French custom. Her army fought its way through Auxerre, Troyes, and Châlons-sur-Marne to the holy city, and there, on July 17, 1429, the dauphin was duly consecrated.

Joan then turned on Paris. The campaign was hampered by the new king's indecision—or cowardice. In the attack Joan was wounded in the thigh by a crossbow bolt. (A plaque on the Café de la Régence in the Place du Palais-Royal marks the spot.)

The war died down during the winter, following normal military practice. No one likes to fight in cold weather. On May 23, 1430, Joan, coming to the relief of Compiègne, was captured by Burgundians, and after a time, sold to the English. Charles made no effort to save her.

In January 1431, she was brought to trial in Rouen before an ecclesiastical court, dominated by the English, on charges of witchcraft, magic, impurity, wearing men's clothes, and recalcitrance to the church. The judge was Bishop Cauchon, a tool of the English, who hoped to get the archbishopric of Rouen as his reward. The purpose of the trial, apparently, was not to discover truth and administer justice but to sway public opinion by condemning Joan as a witch and crediting her victories to the devil. She was allowed no advocate or defender; the text of the trial record was truncated and falsified; her published act of abjuration is a forgery. Nevertheless, Joan's honesty, her sharp wit, her courage in facing the vindictive accusers in their awesome robes, shine through the moving record. At length, after nearly five months of relentless questioning, though without judicial torture, she was broken down. She signed an abjuration and then retracted it. This made her a relapsed heretic, for whom there can be no forgiveness.

On May 30 Bishop Cauchon pronounced her guilty, but instead of remitting her to a civil court—for the church courts cannot condemn to death—he handed her over to the English army. The English brought her to the Old Marketplace of Rouen to be burned. She asked for a cross; an English soldier made one of two sticks and handed it to her. She received it devoutly, kissed it, and clapped it to her bosom. A well-wisher brought a cross from St. Sauveur's Church and held it before her eyes as she died. Her last word was "Jesus," which she uttered more than six times. No one could fail to be reminded of the Crucifixion. The spectators, including the soldiers, wept. A secretary of the English king said: "We are all lost, for we have burned a good and holy person." Her ashes were thrown into the Seine to avoid their use in sorcery.

Bishop Cauchon, who was denied his archbishopric, was consumed with hatred. He continued to besoal Joan's memory and punished anyone who expressed sympathy for her.

By burning Joan, England alienated French public opinion and ensured its own defeat. France made a lasting truce with the Burgundians. King Charles entered Paris in 1436, Rouen in 1449. Normandy, all northern France, Bordeaux, and Bayonne were recaptured. Of all its Continental possessions England retained only Calais. In 1453 the Hundred Years War was over.

Two years later, at the appeal of Joan's mother and two brothers, her case was reopened. In this trial of rehabilitation she was declared innocent of all the charges against her. In 1920 she was canonized.

What can a historian say of this almost incredible tale of an illiterate peasant girl who altered the course of history, who daunted kings, who outgeneraled generals, who rose above human capacities, to sainthood? Was Joan an agent of divine purpose, or does she illustrate the extraordinary secret powers of the human spirit?

The answer depends on our judgment of Joan's voices. Were they real or false? If Saint Michael, Saint Catherine, and Saint Margaret actually spoke to Joan, a miracle occurred. Deity, then, intervenes in human affairs, aids its favorites, rewards and punishes people's actions. This is much the easier explanation. It eliminates the question of natural law, of possibility and impossibility. It admits the direct evidence on the basis of an a priori theory.

But if the voices were false, they were the products of a hysterical imagination, disturbed by puberty troubles, by an endocrine upset. One theory is that she suffered from tuberculosis, or bovine tuberculosis, which affected the temporoparietal lobe of the brain, perhaps causing an incipient brain tumor. Joan's religious hallucinations were, of course, no bar to intellectual power and to practical good sense. The pathology of genius does not deny genius. No miracle took place, for a miracle defies the great nexus of cause and effect in the world and by
definition violates the rule of natural law. There are no miracles. Joan was simply mistaken about the character of her voices. They came from within, not from without. They were hallucinations, though not delusions. There is a third possibility—that she deliberately lied to further her purposes or merely to attract attention. Every reader may choose according to the cast of his mind and in the light of his experience.

At any rate, whether God-inspired or self-inspired, Joan saved France. She restored the spirit and morale of the country, gave the French the will to fight the English, eventually to expel them, establish the French kingdom, and bring the hundred and more years of war to an end.

It was a futile war. It achieved little except destruction, misery, and death. "One stands amazed, when one compares the enormous efforts put forth with the insignificance of the results obtained," says Henri Pirenne. The war left behind not only material and physical ruin but a neurotic, morbid, sick mood that readily turned to hysteria. Flagellant processions and outbursts of mass mania were common. Art and literature were preoccupied with the body's decay and the soul's promised tortures.

The European spirit, the ideal of Christendom's unity above all nations, faded and gave place to angry nationalisms. Joan of Arc with her cry of "France for the French" incarnated the new spirit. Patriotism was conceived not in France alone but in England, Scotland, Bohemia, Hungary. Racial hatreds, as of the Germans and Slavs, were justified and embittered. Feudalism remained as a picturesque social code, no longer as a working system of government and administration.

Out of the wreckage the sovereigns gained power. The Hapsburgs held the German office of Holy Roman Emperor as a family right. In Italy tyrants took over the free cities, or communes. They lived in perpetual fear of poison, surrounded by exiles, astrologers, artists, and writers.

The rulers steadily sapped the independence and importance of the nobles, and deprived them of their ancient rights, especially that of waging private wars. German nobles were likely to live in two or three rooms of their dilapidated, comfortless castles, amid cows and chickens instead of men-at-arms. Kings brought the higher gentry to court, encouraged them to spend their days in elaborate, meaningless formalities and festivities.
The church's lands were wasted, its tithes went uncollected. Monasteries were half empty, often abandoned outright. No new orders were established; zeal seemed dead. The Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, the quarrels of councils and popes, encouraged ant clericalism, though, except in Bohemia, there was not much questioning of the church's doctrine and the priest's sacramental powers.

On the other hand, the bourgeois, accustomed to living by their wits rather than by force, made a handsome recovery. They supplied the monarch with legal advisers, administrators, and bankers; they helped replace the old economy based on land with a money economy. Some of them did extremely well, like Jacques Coeur, an entrepreneur with vast and varied interests, whose house in Bourges is a splendid example of medieval domestic architecture. (But in the end his magnificence undid him; he was falsely accused of treason, and after a term in jail he died fighting the Turks.) The big businessmen reorganized maritime transport, built countless ships, dug mines, erected silk, textile, and paper factories, gunsmitheries, glassworks. The great printing industry began. Agricultural villages were transformed into factory towns. The state undertook to protect and foster commerce. British merchants were everywhere, from Alexandria to Reykjavik. In favored regions the burghers lived well. We can see their comfortable homes in Hildesheim and Rothenburg and other still-medieval towns.

The peasants and workers suffered most from the wars and the troubles. Class lines were sharply drawn; a distinct working class, a proletariat, took form, from which it was very difficult to rise. In England the enclosures of common lands for sheep farming drove many displaced peasants into the towns. In Germany, we are told, forty-four percent of the villages in Hesse were deserted. A curious German development was that of the Vehmergericht, a kind of Ku Klux Klan designed to keep the peasants in order by stump trials and exemplary hangings. The sullen resentment of the little people was repressed, to burst forth in such uprisings as the Peasants' War in Germany in the following century.

As Europe struggled to reconstitute itself, a lowering storm gathered in the East. In the late fourteenth century the Tartar Tamerlane overrun Mesopotamia, northern India, and even Muscovy, marking his passage with pyramids of skulls. The Ottoman Turks crossed the Dardanelles, captured Adrianople, and defeated the Bulgarians, Bosnians, and Serbs at Kosovo in 1389. Sultan Bayazid, or Bajazet, known as Lightning, swore that he would not rest until he should feed his horse at the altar of St. Peter's in Rome. However, the Turkish invasion was held back by the Hungarian hero János Hunyadi.

In 1453 the Turkish Sultan Mohammed II attacked Constantinople. In a remarkable siege operation Mohammed broke into the city. The Emperor Constantine XI died fighting bravely. Constantineople died with Constantine as it was born with the first Constantine. The city became Istanbul. The great church of Santa Sophia was transformed into a mosque, though it still bore its dedication to Divine Wisdom; the Christian Empire of the East was turned into the Ottoman Empire; a piece of Europe was added to Asia.

This was the twenty-ninth of May 1453. It is one of the hinge dates of history. It is commonly taken to mark the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. The date is an arbitrary one, but so are the other dates proposed. It will serve; clearly something familiar was ending, something new beginning.

It was the end of a great age. In consonance with the rhythms of history, the age began in a period of stagnant misery, ascended through struggle to a stage of mighty vigor and achievement, and relapsed again into stagnation. The metaphor of an individual's progress from infancy to maturity to senility is inevitable and entirely justified. The comparison can be carried further; the Middle Ages bequeathed to its child, modernity, a richer inheritance than it had received at birth. The Middle Ages accomplished mighty things in architecture and the arts, in literature, in learning and wisdom. The period added grace and beauty as well as mere comfort to the art of daily living. It initiated industrialism and capitalism, concepts containing unimagined unreleased forces. There was much of socialism in the guilds, of communism in the monasteries. The Middle Ages prepared the humanism that was to flourish with the Renaissance, the religious free thought that was to make the Reformation. It developed the spirit of discovery that was to expand man's geographical, material, and spiritual universe.

Our judgments of the Middle Ages as a whole must be rela-
tive to our assessment of our own age. It was an age of superstition; and so is ours, though the superstitions are different. It was an age of needless pain and death; but it did not inherit the medical learning of enlightened centuries. Life was short, dangerous, and doomed; but it still is. It was a cruel age, callous toward suffering, merely diverted by people's contortions in agony. It felt little sympathy and pity; it had small respect for human life. We shudder at its tortures, judicial mutilations, blindings, beheadings. But our own cruelties are impersonal mass cruelties from which we can avert our eyes—air-bombings, genocides, the starvation of peoples.

There is much in the Middle Ages that we may admire and even envy. Society as a whole was fixed and stable, and within it most people could find contentment. They knew the rules imposed by civil authority and the church. They were not assailed by futile questionings and anxieties. Probably their mental health was better than ours. An English yeoman, a German burgher, an Italian craftsman, could lead a rewarding if unexciting life. Those who asked something more could pursue honor, join a crusade, die nobly in battle for their liege lord. Or they could renounce the world, practice asceticism and mortification of the flesh, count on a sure reward in heaven. People's faith was secure; they had a sense of closeness to God and the saints. And the saints, at least, were close to people, only a few miles or yards overhead, ready with miracles, attentive to prayers, grateful for offerings, totally occupied with people's welfare.

Medieval people had a sharp feeling for the beauty of the physical world, which they tried to match with their own creations. Encouraged by the romantic writers of the nineteenth century, we too find in the life of castle, cathedral, and beetling hilltop towns a poetic refuge from an industrialized world. Our imagination makes of the Middle Ages a wonderland, peopled by gallant knights and fair ladies, troubadours and magicians, saints and demons.

Our imagination does not play us entirely false. The world was strange and beautiful to medieval people; they had only to open their eyes to it. They were conscious of the marvel and wonder environing ordinary life; they could apprehend beauty in accesses of rapture.

There is a fine passage in the chronicle of Salimbene of Parma that renders the medieval experience of beauty an almost mysti-