

Henry V: A Soldier's Tale

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Right. Listen up. I can tell you all about it. But really and truly, you had to BE there - really BE there - to know what it was like. Me - Pistol - I was there. Right there. In the thick of things. Doing my bit. Pistol, yes, that's my name. Good name for a soldier, eh? BANG! Ha ha, ha! What did I scare you? You'd be no good in King Henry's army, then. Fierce as lions and brave as bears you have to be. Like me.

Can't *show* you how it was, of course - the sights and sounds of it! The spectacle! Well, here's me sitting here in the dark and there's you out there. I can't show you hundreds of horses, thousands of soldiers - cannon and castles and oceans of French countryside. I'll give it a go, but how could you possibly picture it? Not unless you've got the world's best, the world's biggest, the world's most fantastic IMAGINATION!

Picture it...

The jingle of bridles. The thud of a thousand hooves. The hiss of chain mail. The clatter of swords and pikes and arrows rattling in their quivers. There are wagons and carts full of rolled up tents and mules carrying wicker baskets with bandages spilling out. The King mustering an army. We are off to France to win him the crown of France!

It does belong to him. Fair and square. He shouldn't have to fight for it. At least that's what his advisers say, so it must be true. And King Henry agrees.

I don't like to brag, but I've known the King since he was a boy. We're old mates. Bardolph and Nym and me, we used to knock about with young Prince Harry, getting into mischief. We call him that: Harry. Right harum-scarums we were.

All that stopped when he became King, of course. Suddenly he's this serious, upright man. No more messing about. It was a bit startling for his friends, I can tell you. Bit startling for the French, too! They thought he was still a boy to be laughed at. Suddenly he's telling them: 'Give me the crown of France. It's mine by rights.' Well, they just snigger, of course - jeer and sneer - send him a present - a box of tennis balls - as if to say, 'Run away and play, little boy.' Ooooff. BIG mistake.

Suddenly the lanes of England are full of men steaming towards Dover. Knights in gleaming silver armour, look! Archers with long-bows as tall as themselves! Foot-soldiers with axes or clubs and daggers; farm-boys, holding weapons for the first time, like as not. They pass by blacksmiths on the edge of the road, shoeing horses or shaping bits of armour to fit. There are fathers and sons going to war together. There are weeping mothers - 'Be careful, son! Come safe home!'

Then the ships - banging and bumping together in the harbour, sails flapping. The glittering sea. And beyond it, FRANCE! The whole vastness of France! And we're marching. Slogging along, singing, and scaring the pheasants out of the long grass; eating the apples off French trees.

FORWARD, MEN! ATTACK! We wash up against Harfleur's city walls like the sea breaking against a cliff. Over and over. Again and again. And there at head of every charge is King Harry, brandishing his sword, snow-white horse rearing up, pawing the air. His voice booms above the noise of battle: 'You've broken down their walls, men! One more charge and we're through! Just look at you - like greyhounds straining on your leashes, eager for the hunt. Well follow your spirit, friends! Shout God for Harry, England and St George!'

Harfleur is ours. Now here's one small fly in the porridge. Harry says: no looting. No robbing the citizens of Harfleur. No punching them. No scaring their kids. No strangling their chickens. No burning down their houses. Odd way to run a war, eh? But our King Henry is doing things the honourable way. You've got to admire him, I suppose, but - well Bardolph and Nym were looking forward to a bit of looting.

Me, I'm as honest as the day is long, of course (ahem). But Bardolph and Nym do have rather sticky fingers, if you know what I mean? And now they're forbidden steal so much as a plum pie!

It all goes a bit wrong after that.

Men got hurt at Harfleur. Their wounds need time to heal, but there isn't any time. We have to be pressing on to the next city, the next battle. Men get sick on the long marches. Weary, too. Hungry.

The French generals get over being surprised and pull together an army. BIG army. Five times bigger than ours. It's getting seriously scary.

Look. Nym and Bardolph and me - we weren't thinking of fighting when we set off for France. Not actually fighting. We thought it would be an adventure - a laugh - a bit of excitement. Not getting killed. Or wounded. Or taken prisoner and chained up in some French dungeon for years.

Look, I'm not the kind to hurl myself into battle. I'm more the...how can I put this..? I'm more the hide-behind-a-tree-till it's-all-over kind. Now suddenly I'm shivering in the mud, hurting and scared. And over there, through the dark, there's the French camp - a thousand glimmering tents, the sound of men laughing and drinking and singing. And I'm asking myself: what are you doing here, Pistol? You don't stand a chance. Come the morning, you're gonna get slaughtered.



But then I spot Harry. Good King Harry. My marvellous mate, young Harry, walking from one campfire to the next, sharing a joke, greeting everyone by name. Calm and cheerful. A little touch of Harry in the night. What's going on inside his head...ah, can only guess. He must be worried. He must be scared. He must be. He brought us all here. We're like his children and he got us into this mess. But he talks as if everything is going to come good. And you know what? When he says it - the way he says it - we can't help believing him.

Someone says he wishes there were more of us here: more men should have joined up in England. But Harry says 'no'. We shouldn't wish for one man more, because we're the 'few' - 'the happy few' - 'a band of brothers' who are about to share this amazing triumph and go down in history. And we'll remember it until we're old, old men and be proud every time it comes round to this day on the calendar. And everyone who wasn't there will wish they had been at the Battle of Agincourt rather than safe at home in bed. Cos we're the best of the best.

By dawn that's just what we are: the best of the best.

Even I had my sword out. Even I'm a greyhound straining at the leash. And my lungs ache from bawling, 'God for Harry, England and St George!' Let them all come - those Frenchy princelings with their prancing horses and their plumes and ruffling saddlecloths and bannerets flying in the breeze...

Come on. Come and get us, why don't you? We're ready for you!

Our longbow men fill the sky with arrows - a thundercloud of arrows. When the French look up, they must think it's teeming rain - raining Death. Then we go in. The arrows stop. The two sides clash. Nym and I stand shoulder-to-shoulder, back-to-back, fighting for England. Cos it's fight or die. Our boots gouge up the grass. Hooves pound the soil to liquid. By sunset, the French silk banners are sunk in mud. So are their soldiers, and their horses. A white flag goes up. WE SURRENDER!

Far away, in the palace of the King of France, the Princess Katherine is taking English lessons. So we hear. For why? Because she's about to get married to an Englishman. She's about to marry - wait for it - King Henry the Fifth of England. And soon as her old Dad dies, Henry will take over as King of France. That's the deal. That's the peace deal. That's how you put a stop to a war: by joining two countries together with a royal wedding. Apparently the Princess is very happy about it. And so is Harry. Love at first sight, so they say. All that. Yes, well, everyone likes a happy ending.

Now all the trees that got cut down for campfires can grow up again. All the fields that got trampled this year by galloping knights will grow up gold with corn next summer. The French countryside will sort of...heal up...and forget what horrible things it has seen.

And so will we. Not Bardolph and Nym, unfortunately. They won't heal up. They were put to death for stealing things - for looting. Harry had them hanged. They broke the rules, see?

I don't know what's to become of me, either. I haven't got rich from the war. Just cos we won doesn't mean to say we get a prize. When we dock in England I'll look for work. But who needs an old soldier in peacetime, let's be honest. Nah! Don't let's be honest. Let be dishonest. I'll take up stealing for a living - picking pockets at theatres, maybe. And storytelling, of course. I'll sit in inn yards and roll up my sleeve and show this scar here and say I got it fighting alongside King Henry V at Agincourt! I'll tell them, 'Hardly any of us got killed - only the French'. I'll say how Harry said we were all his brothers, all his equals; how glorious it all was and how it put an end to War for ever and ever and ever. Probably.

And people will press money into my hand and buy me a drink.

Will they believe me? Who knows. I can't produce hundreds of warhorses or thousands of fighting men, canon or castles or a sky filled with arrows. I'm not a conjuror and they'd need a fantastic imagination to picture it all.

Pssst. Want to know a secret? Between you and me, there's not a lot that's glorious about War. If you take my advice, you'll keep well out of it. Certainly nothing glorious about Pistol. Look at me, here in the dark. And you out there with a peaceful life ahead of you.

BANG! Did I scare you? Hee, hee, hee! That's old Pistol for you. Always joking.

Remember me when people talk about the Battle of Agincourt. Say you met someone once who was there - a friend of the King. A hero. My finest hour, that was. God for Harry, England and St George! That's what I say.