

The Burghers of Calais



Biography Workbook Series

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The Burghers of Calais (1346) – Part of the Hundred Years' War

Edward III¹, after the battle of Crecy², laid siege to Calais³. He had fortified his camp in so impregnable a manner, that all the efforts of France proved ineffectual to raise the siege, or throw succors into the city. The citizens, under Count Vienne⁴, their gallant governor, made an admirable defense. France had now put the sickle into its second harvest, since Edward, with his victorious army, sat down before the town. The eyes of all Europe were intent on the issue.

1. Where did England's Edward III fight a battle before laying siege to Calais?

At length, famine did more for Edward than arms. After suffering unheard of calamities, the

¹ Edward III (lived 1312-1377) was a warlike king of England who reigned for fifty years.

² Crecy is a town in France, celebrated for a battle between the English and French, in which 30,000 foot and 1200 horse were slain.

³ Calais is a seaport town in France.

⁴ Count Vienne was a governor of the province of Vienne.

French resolved to attempt the enemy's camp. They boldly sallied forth. The English joined battle. After a long and desperate engagement, Count Vienne⁵ was taken prisoner, and the citizens who survived the slaughter retired within their gates. The command devolving upon Eustace St. Pierre, a man of mean birth, but of exalted virtue, he offered to capitulate with Edward, provided he permitted them to depart with life and liberty.

2. What leader of the French was taken prisoner?

3. Who came to command the French troops after this man (question 2) was taken prisoner?

Edward, to avoid the imputation of cruelty, consented to spare the bulk of the plebeians, provided they delivered up to him

⁵ Jean de Vienne.

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six of their principal citizens with halters about their necks, as victims of due atonement for that spirit of rebellion with which they had inflamed the vulgar. When his messenger, Sir Walter Mauny⁶, delivered the terms, consternation and pale dismay were impressed on every countenance.

4. What punishment did Edward III devise for the citizens of Calais?

To a long and dead silence deep sighs and groans succeeded, until Eustace St. Pierre, getting up to a little eminence, thus addressed the assembly: “My friends, we are brought to great straits this day. We must either yield to the terms of our cruel and ensnaring conqueror, or give up our tender

⁶ Walter Manny 1st Baron Mauny, Lord of Wexford (1310-1372). He is well known for founding the London Charterhouse in Smithfield, originally designated as a burial place for victims of the Black Death, which reached England in 1349.

infants, our wives and daughters, to the bloody and brutal lusts of the violating soldiers.

“Is there any expedient left, whereby we may avoid the guilt and infamy of delivering up those who have suffered every misery with you, on the one hand, or the desolation and horror of a sacked city, on the other? There is, my friends; there is one expedient left! A gracious, an excellent, a godlike expedient left! Is there any here to whom virtue is dearer than life? Let him offer himself an oblation for the safety of his people! He shall not fail of a blessed approbation from that power who offered up his only son for the salvation of mankind.”

He spoke; but a universal silence ensued. Each man looked around for the example of that virtue and magnanimity which all wished to approve in themselves, though they were lacking the resolution.

At length St. Pierre resumed: “I doubt not but there are many here as ready, nay, more zealous of this martyrdom, than I can be; though the station to which I am raised by the captivity of Lord

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Vienne imparts a right to be the first in giving my life for your sakes. I give it freely; I give it cheerfully. Who comes next?"

"Your son!" exclaimed a youth not yet come to maturity.

"Ah, my child!" cried St. Pierre. "I am, then, twice sacrificed. But no; I have rather begotten thee a second time. Thy years are few, but full, my son. The victim of virtue has reached the utmost purpose and goal of mortality! Who next, my friends? This is the hour of heroes."

"Your kinsman," cried John de Aire.

"Your kinsman," cried James Wissant.

"Your kinsman," cried Peter Wissant.

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir Walter Mauny, bursting into tears. "Why was not I a citizen of Calais?"

5. Following Eustace St. Pierre, what five men offer to sacrifice themselves as victims?

The sixth victim was still wanting, but was quickly supplied by lot from numbers who were now emulous of so ennobling an example. The keys of the city were then delivered to Sir Walter. He took the six prisoners into his custody. He then ordered the gates to be opened, and gave charge to his attendants to conduct the remaining citizens, with their families, through the camp of the English. Before they departed, however, they desired permission to take a last *adieu* of their deliverers.

What a parting! What a scene! They crowded with their wives and children about St. Pierre and his fellow prisoners. They embraced. They clung around. They fell prostrate before them. They groaned. They wept aloud. The joint clamor of their mourning passed the gates of the city, and was heard throughout the English camp.

6. The people of Calais were grateful for the sacrifice of St. Pierre and the others.

- a. True
- b. False

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The English, by this time, were apprized of what happened within Calais. They heard the voice of lamentation, and their souls were touched with compassion. Each of the soldiers prepared a portion of his own victuals, to welcome and entertain the half-famished inhabitants. They loaded them with as much as their present weakness was able to bear, in order to supply them with sustenance by the way.

7. The English soldiers were annoyed by the lamenting in Calais.

- a. True
- b. False

At length, St. Pierre and his fellow victims appeared, under conduct of Sir Walter and a guard. All the tents of the English were instantly emptied. The soldiers poured from all parts, and arranged themselves on each side, to behold, to contemplate, to admire, this little band of patriots as they passed. The soldiers bowed to them on all sides; they murmured their applause of that virtue which they could not but revere, even in

enemies. The soldiers regarded those ropes, which the burghers of Calais had voluntarily assumed about their necks, as ensigns of greater dignity than that of the English garter.

As soon as the burghers of Calais reached the royal presence, the monarch said, “Mauny, are these the principal inhabitants of Calais?”

“They are,” said Mauny. “They are not only the principal men of Calais, they are the principal men of France, my lord, if virtue has any share in the act of ennobling.”

“Were they delivered peaceably?” asked Edward. “Was there no resistance, no commotion among the people?”

“Not in the least, my lord. The people would all have perished rather than have delivered the least of these to your majesty. They are self-delivered, self-devoted; and come to offer up their inestimable heads as an ample equivalent for the ransom of thousands.”

Edward was secretly piqued at this reply of Sir Walter. But he knew the privilege of an English

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subject, and suppressed his resentment. "Experience has ever shown that only lenity serves to invite people to new crimes. Severity, at times, is indispensably necessary, to compel subjects to submission by punishment and example," said Edward. Then, to an officer, "Go. Lead these men to execution."

At this instant, a sound of triumph was heard throughout the camp. The queen⁷ had just arrived with a powerful reinforcement of gallant troops. Sir Walter Mauny flew to receive her majesty, and briefly informed her of the particulars respecting the six victims.

8. Who arrives at the camp just before the intended executions?

As soon as Queen Philippa had been welcomed by Edward and his court, she desired a private audience. "My lord," said she. "The question I am to enter upon is not touching the lives of a few

⁷ Philippa of Hainault (1314-1369), wife of Edward III.

mechanics. It respects the honor of the English nation. It respects the glory of my Edward, my husband, my king. You think you have sentenced six of your enemies to death. No, my lord, they have sentenced themselves; and their execution would be the execution of their own orders, not the orders of Edward.

"The stage on which they suffer would be to them a stage of honor; but a stage of shame to Edward, a reproach to his conquests, an indelible disgrace to his name. Let us rather disappoint these haughty burghers, who wish to invest themselves with glory at our expense.

"We cannot wholly deprive them of the merit of a sacrifice so nobly intended. But we may cut them short of their desires. In the place of that death by which their glory would be consummate, let us bury them under gifts. Let us put them to confusion with applauses. We shall thereby defeat them of that popular opinion which never fails to attend those who suffer in the cause of virtue."

"I am convinced. You have prevailed. Let it be so," replied

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Edward. “Prevent the execution. Have them instantly before us.”

9. Imagine that you are Edward III. Would you agree with Queen Philippa? Why or why not?

They came. When the queen, with an aspect and accents diffusing sweetness, thus bespoke them:

“Natives of France, and inhabitants of Calais, ye have put us to a vast expense of blood and treasure, in the recovery of our just and natural inheritance. But you have acted up to the best of an

erroneous judgment, and we admire and honor in you that valor and virtue, by which we are so long kept out of our rightful possessions. You noble burghers! You excellent citizens! Though you were tenfold the enemies of our person and our throne, we can feel nothing on our part save respect and affection for you. You have been sufficiently tested.

“We loose your chains. We snatch you from the scaffold. And we thank you for that lesson of humiliation which you teach us, when you show us, that excellence is not of blood, title, or station; that virtue gives a dignity superior to that of kings; and that those whom the almighty forms with sentiments like yours, are justly and eminently raised above all human distinctions. You are now free to depart to your kinsfolk, your countrymen, and to all those whose lives and liberties you have so nobly defended, provided you refuse not the tokens of our esteem. Yet we would rather bind you to ourselves by every endearing obligation. And, for this purpose, we offer to you your choice of the gifts and honors that Edward has

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to bestow. Rivals for fame, but always friends to virtue, we wish that England were entitled to call you her sons.”

“Ah, my country!” exclaimed Pierre. “It is now that I tremble for you. Edward only wins our cities, but Philippa conquers our hearts.”

10. Do you agree that “virtue gives a dignity superior to that of kings”? Why or why not? Explain your answer.

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Vocabulary Terms: Match each term (found in the text) with its meaning.

11. _____ act of ascribing or attributing
12. _____ act of surrounding a fortified city in order to capture it
13. _____ amends
14. _____ dismay
15. _____ fit or suitable under the circumstances
16. _____ futile or unavailing
17. _____ great disasters or misfortunes
18. _____ offering of the sacraments in the Eucharist
19. _____ passing on
20. _____ quality of being free from petty resentfulness
21. _____ set out from a besieged place
22. _____ to surrender
23. _____ unconquerable

- (a) atonement
- (b) calamities
- (c) capitulate
- (d) consternation
- (e) devolving
- (f) expedient
- (g) impregnable

- (h) imputation
- (i) ineffectual
- (j) magnanimity
- (k) oblation
- (l) sallied
- (m) siege

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Map Work



24. What is the capital city of France?

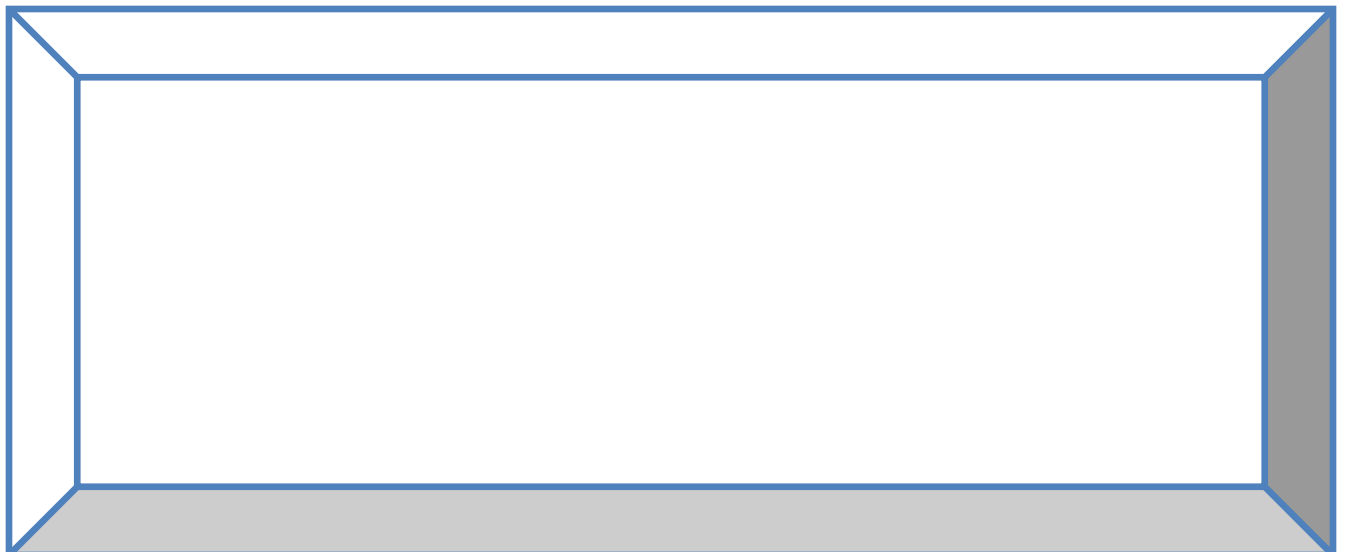
- a. Calais
- b. Dijon
- c. Lyon
- d. Paris

25. What body of water separates France from England?

- a. Atlantic Ocean
- b. Bay of Biscay
- c. English Channel
- d. Mediterranean Sea

26. Calais is located at approximately the closest place in mainland France to England. Indicate Calais on the map with a star.

Artistic Expression: Illustrate a scene from the text.



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Vocabulary Terms: Match each term (found in the text) with its meaning.

27. _____ act of expressing grief
28. _____ adequately for the purpose
29. _____ affected with keen irritation
30. _____ asked for in advance
31. _____ assessed
32. _____ bourgeois citizens of a town
33. _____ creating marks that cannot be erased
34. _____ death of a martyr
35. _____ moral excellence and goodness
36. _____ prominently
37. _____ something a person is bound to do by custom or a sense of duty
38. _____ to fulfill
39. _____ with absolute necessity

(a) apprized

(b) bespoke

(c) burghers

(d) consummate

(e) eminently

(f) indelible

(g) indispensably

(h) lamentation

(i) martyrdom

(j) obligation

(k) piqued

(l) sufficiently

(m) virtue

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