

## JOHN CRABBE: FLEMISH PIRATE, MERCHANT, AND ADVENTURER

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A GOOD way to illustrate the character of mediaeval piracy and some of the innumerable vicissitudes incidental to the life of merchants, especially at the opening of the Hundred Years' War, is to recount the fortunes of one John Crabbe, whose name was mentioned with shudders by the people who sailed the narrow seas between England and the continent.

For Flaundres is staple, as men tell me,  
To all nacyons of Crystiante.<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe, although rarely mentioned in historical literature,<sup>2</sup> was a splendid example of a merchant who with equal facility engaged in commerce, war, and piracy and finally even won the favor of King Edward III of England. The type was common in ancient times as we know from Homer.<sup>3</sup> But we are better acquainted with men who followed piracy during the Middle Ages, chiefly because we possess a greater abundance of sources. The general conditions of state, society, and business during the early as well as the later Middle Ages made piratical activity relatively safe and profitable.<sup>4</sup> The decades before the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War were notoriously fruitful in commercial violence. The antagonisms of the English and Scots, the rivalry of England and France, the close economic relations between England and the Low Countries bred much ill will and violence which proved a contributing cause of the catastrophe of the Hundred Years' War.

Unfortunately we know practically nothing about John Crabbe's private life and commercial activities before 1305 or 1306 when for the first time his name appears in connection with a robbery perpetrated off the port of La Rochelle on the Bay of Biscay. Crabbe was a Fleming who came from Muiden (Mude, St Anna-ter-Muiden), a small town on the Flemish coast near the mouth of the Zwin, a river now filled with sand but which during the fourteenth century connected Bruges, Damme, and Sluis with the North Sea.<sup>5</sup> The name Crabbe was

<sup>1</sup> *The Libelle of Englyshe Polyce. A Poem on the Use of Sea Power*, 1439, ed. by Sir G. Warner (Oxford, 1926), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Although referred to by several contemporary chroniclers, he seems to have been completely forgotten until the last century when scholars began to search the manuscript documents of the chanceries of England and other countries. He is mentioned, however, in *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland. V. Scotland* (London 1808), 368.

<sup>3</sup> For piracy in classical times, see Ch. Daremberg et E. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, iv (1), 486-488. There is an instructive article on the general character of piracy by D. Hannay in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th ed.), xxi, 1399.

<sup>4</sup> Little has been written on mediaeval piracy. The account by Ph. Grosse, *A History of Piracy* (New York, 1934), is wholly inadequate. The articles by W. Vogel, 'Ein seefahrender Kaufmann um 1100,' *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 1912, Erstes Heft, pp. 239-248, and 'Zur Nord- und west-europäischen Seeschifffahrt im früheren Mittelalter,' *ibid.*, 1907, Erstes Heft, pp. 153-205, are especially valuable. For the freebooting Vitalienbrüder, see H. C. Cordsen's *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Vitalienbrüder* (Halle, 1907).

<sup>5</sup> *Notice sur la Carte Géographique et Héraldique du Franc de Bruges, Ouvrage de Pierre Pourbus* (Bruges, 1852).

quite common in Bruges and other places in Flanders.<sup>1</sup> There was, for example, a Clais Crabbe who in 1347 was associated with Simon Van Artevelde, member of the noted Ghent family to which Jacob Van Artevelde belonged.<sup>2</sup> Even today one frequently finds the name in the telephone directories of Flemish cities. It also is common in the Kingdom of The Netherlands, where it usually is spelled Krabbe but pronounced in the same way.<sup>3</sup> The name also appeared in England as the very full indices of the *Calendars of Close the Rolls* and *Calendars of the Patent Rolls* abundantly reveal. In fact, the name was so common that the researcher must discriminate carefully so as not to confuse the activities of several persons who went by the name of John Crabbe.

Although Crabbe probably began his piratical career earlier, our account of his fortunes begins with his forceful seizure near La Rochelle on the Bay of Biscay of a ship known as the *Waardebouwc* belonging to one John de le Waerde (Johannis de Wardre), a merchant of Dordrecht. With Crabbe were a 'filius Petri Crabbe', undoubtedly a relative and probably the Crabbekin described in a later document as his nephew, Baldwin de Camera, a number of companions who apparently habitually sailed with them, and several others — all from six Flemish towns whose names are not given, but which we may surmise to be Bruges, Damme, Sluis, St. Anna-ter-Muiden, Biervliet, Aardenburg, or Oostburg. They seized 160 tuns of wine and all goods on board, burned the ship, and kidnapped the sailors, the total damages being estimated at 2000 *l.* Tournois.<sup>4</sup>

To grasp the circumstances under which this robbery was perpetrated and the subsequent efforts to bring the culprits to justice and secure compensation we must examine the political situation in which the king of France, Philip the Fair (1285–1314), was involved with the count of Flanders, his vassal, and with William, the count of Hainault, Holland, and Zeeland. The chronic antagonism between the French kings and the counts of Flanders finally broke out in the epic struggle which reached its climax — catastrophic for Philip the Fair and his chivalry — in the Battle of Courtrai in 1302. This conflict came to a temporary halt when in June, 1305, the Peace of Athis was arranged. During this desperate struggle King Philip enjoyed the support of John of Avesnes, the count of Hainault, whose family for years had claimed parts of Flanders and who in 1299 succeeded to the counties of Holland and Zeeland. Count John thereby added a new

<sup>1</sup> *Inventaire des Archives de la Ville de Bruges Publié sous les Auspices de l'Administration Communale. I Partie: Treizième et Seizième Siècle. Table des Noms de Famille, Table des noms de Lieux et Glossaire Flamand*, par Edward Gaillard, Bruges, 1879–1882, p. 43, *sub voce* Crabe, Crabbe.

<sup>2</sup> N. de Pauw, *Cartulaire Historique et Généalogique des Arteveldes* (Brussels, 1920), p. 525. Other forms of the same name mentioned in this book are: Crabben and Crabbekine, the latter a familiar or diminutive form. Crabbe in Flemish is always dissyllabic. Some of the English documents spell the name 'Crab,' evidently because it was supposed to be monosyllabic.

<sup>3</sup> A Lambertus Crabbe, a merchant who traded with Bordeaux, lived in Middelburg in the county of Zeeland in 1340. See Z. W. Sneller en W. S. Unger, *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis van den Handel met Frankrijk*, I (The Hague, 1930), 17.

<sup>4</sup> H. J. Smit, 'Het Begin van de Regeering der Henegouwsche Graven, 1299–1320,' *Bijdragen voor Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde*, VII<sup>e</sup> Reeks, II (1931), 70.

quarrel to his ancient family feud with the ruling Dampierre dynasty of Flanders.<sup>1</sup> The perennial dispute between the counts of Holland and Zeeland and the counts of Flanders over the islands between the two arms of the Schelde — Walcheren, Noord Beveland, and Zuid Beveland — now broke out with increased fury.<sup>2</sup> Thus a bitter struggle ensued in which we behold a curious medley of motives — feudal, commercial, and the conflicts of urban groups. The contest lasted for years, broken by uneasy truces until finally it merged with the Hundred Years' War.<sup>3</sup>

It was under those circumstances, then, that John Crabbe attacked the *Waardebouwe* which, coming from Dordrecht, a town in the jurisdiction of the count of Holland and Zeeland and traditional enemy of Flanders, he regarded as legitimate prey. The unfortunate owner, John de le Waerde, at once took pains to secure from the citizens of La Rochelle and their provost a full statement of his losses as well as the nature of the outrage. This was the beginning of tedious negotiations which consumed no less than four years and cost him as much as 200 large florins.<sup>4</sup>

Tearfully and insistently De le Waerde sought the help of Philip the Fair, the ally of Count William of Hainault, Holland, and Zeeland — Count John, it should be noted, had died in 1304 — and soon a letter close was directed to Baldwin de Longo Vado (Lonc Wes), knight and king's captain in Douai, demanding<sup>5</sup> that he discover the names of the malefactors, inquire into their activities in order to punish them properly, and, if possible, cause the victims to be indemnified. On November 17, 1306, the king's captain requested Count Robert of Flanders to execute justice and provide compensation for the losses inflicted.<sup>6</sup> But it proved impossible to bring John Crabbe and his men to trial even after repeated summonses. Failing to appear, they were found guilty; and the unhappy John de le Waerde could collect no indemnity until, finally, in 1311 when political conditions were favorable Philip the Fair moved to arbitrate between Count William and Count Robert. This intervention resulted in the Treaty of Pontoise (June, 1312) by the terms of which both parties promised to accept Philip's decision. Among Count William's demands for damages was a long list of offenses in which his

<sup>1</sup> Ch. Duviol, *Les Influences Française et Germanique en Belgique au XIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle. La Querelle des d'Avesnes et des Dampierre jusqu'à la Mort de Jean d'Avesnes* (1257), 2 vols. (Brussels and Paris, 1894).

<sup>2</sup> H. Brosien, *Der Streit um Reichsflandern in der zweiten Hälfte des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1884); D. Bertin, 'Histoire du Lien Féodal entre la Flandre et la Zélande, Première Partie. Depuis les Origines jusqu'en 1245,' *Handelingen der Maatschappij van Geschied- en Oudheidkunde te Gent* x (1910), 73-163, 'Deuzième Partie, de 1245 a 1323,' *Bulletijn der Maatschappij van Geschied- en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, xix (1911), 225-274, 399-412; C. Sattler, *Die Flandrisch-Holländischen Verwicklungen unter Wilhelm von Holland, 1248-1256* (Göttingen, 1872).

<sup>3</sup> S. A. Waller Zeper, *Jan Van Henegouwen, Heer van Beaumont. Bijdrage tot de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden in de Eerste Helft der Vertiende Eeuw* (The Hague, 1914), pp. 1-71.

<sup>4</sup> H. J. Smit, 'Het Begin van de Regeering der Henegouwsche Graven, 1299-1320,' p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> This was a third or possibly fourth request, for the royal command reads: 'Ideoque sicut aliter pluribus vobis mandavisse recolimus, sic iterato districtius percipiendum mandamus. . . .'

<sup>6</sup> L. Ph. C. Vanden Bergh, *Gedenkstukken tot Opheldering der Nederlandsche Geschiedenis Opgezameld uit de Archieven te Rijssel en op Gezag van het Gouvernement Uitgegeven*, I (Leiden, 1842), 100-102. A better text is provided by Z. W. Sneller en W. S. Unger, *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis van den Handel met Frankrijk*, I, 4-5.

subjects had lost a total of 148,033 *l.* 11 *s.* 6 *d.* tournois. John de le Waerde's claim was the largest single sum, which undoubtedly accounts for the reason Crabbe's robbery received so much attention.<sup>1</sup>

During the few years following this daring robbery nothing further is heard about John Crabbe and his men beyond the fact that it was impossible to find them in Flanders. But in the spring of 1310 he struck again, this time seizing a ship carrying cloth, jewels, gold, silver, and other things valued at 2000 *l.* sterling belonging to Alice the Countess Marshall. This ship was sailing in the Strait of Dover between Dover and Whitsand on the way to London when Crabbe, master of the *De la Mue* (that is, Mude or Muiden) and his crew attacked it. He was accompanied by another ship from Biervliet (spelled 'Bereslet' in the document) commanded by a James Da . . . rson (there is a lacuna in the text) who, in spite of the loss in the text of part of the name, clearly was a Fleming. The men in Crabbe's ship all bore more or less typically Flemish names. One of them was Crabbekyn, described as a nephew of John Crabbe and who in all probability was the 'filius Petri Crabbe' mentioned above in John de le Waerde's complaint to Philip the Fair. The others were Milo de Utenham, Christian Tobbyng, John Labban, John le Wynter, Christian Jon Coppessone, Martin Cobbe, Lamberkyn Sotskyn de Heis, and his borther Michael. The ship from Biervliet carried, in addition to the master, William Comperling, John Martin, James Manesson, William Aumard, Robert Albut, Peter Calauud, Peter Poulesson, John Terning, John le Wylde, William Lebyn, Peter Holbyn, Henry Cumit and his brother Arnolf, John Peignard, Peter Moerman, Hugo Algo, William de Zerix (Zierikzee), Dedrik Berlandisson, and Peter Hedebraund. All these facts were stated in a letter close dated May 28, 1310, directed to Count Robert of Flanders, requesting an immediate answer stating what steps were being taken to bring the culprits to justice.<sup>2</sup>

As usual it proved impossible to secure prompt justice, and King Edward repeatedly requested Count Robert to take action.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in 1315, the count replied that a number of the culprits had been punished; but the question of restitution remained unsettled so that the king ordered his officials to levy upon the property of Flemings.<sup>4</sup> Obviously it had proved impossible to seize Crabbe, and for a good reason. He apparently had established himself in Aberdeen, Scotland, where, it is interesting to learn, there was a John Crabbe, a merchant, living in 1357 who with some citizens of Edinburgh, Perth, Dundee, and Aberdeen appears as one of the negotiators for the release of King David II of Scotland from his captivity.<sup>5</sup> While there is no proof that this John Crabbe was related to the pirate,

<sup>1</sup> This document, found in the State Archives in Ghent, was published by Dr H. J. Smit in the above mentioned article.    <sup>2</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1307-1313*, pp. 267-268.

<sup>3</sup> Th. Rymer, *Foedera*, III, 402-404; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1307-1313*, pp. 570-571.

<sup>4</sup> *Select Cases concerning the Law Merchant, A.D. 1270-1638*. Vol. I. *Local Courts*, ed. for the Selden Society, xxiii (London, 1908), 94-95.

<sup>5</sup> *Charters and other Documents Relating to the City of Edinburgh, A.D., 1143-1540*. (Edinburgh, 1871), pp. 20-21. See also *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum, The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, A.D. 1306-1424*. New ed. edited by J. M. Thomson (Edinburgh, 1912), pp. 251-253, 414-415.

some relationship is by no means impossible. Flemish merchants, it is well known, settled in the towns of Scotland, especially during this time, being encouraged to do so because of the hostile relations between the English and Scottish crowns.<sup>1</sup> Towns like Aberdeen became favorite abodes for Flemish merchants who found it profitable to prey on English merchants, plunder their ships on the high seas, and send their goods to Flemish ports where they could be sold without much risk.

We are not surprised, therefore, to learn that in 1311 Crabbe, supported by a number of fellow robbers from Flanders and others who lived in Aberdeen, stopped two ships belonging to a number of merchants, citizens of Newcastle-on-Tyne, on their way to Flanders, and seized 89 sacks of wool. Knowing that it was unsafe for him personally to appear in Flanders, Crabbe sent the wool on to Flanders by his Aberdeen friends. The complaints of aggrieved merchants caused Edward II to ask Count Robert for restitution and satisfaction, a letter which also was sent to the officials of Bruges with the added request that, in case the stolen wool were found in Bruges, it should at once be restored to the rightful owners.<sup>2</sup>

For several years we hear nothing further about John Crabbe, and so it is impossible to learn whether the Countess Marshall's goods ever were returned or paid for. But the brusque change in the political fortunes in 1315 between Flanders and the king of France, aided by Count William of Hainault, Holland, and Zeeland, apparently favored Crabbe's fortunes. Louis X, who had succeeded Philip the Fair in 1314, determined to settle his accounts with the Flemings once and for all, and advanced against Flanders from the south while Count William moved up the Schelde River past Antwerp. But the summer was extraordinarily wet so that the French army was bogged down in the mud east of Lille and could not advance further. Finally the king, burning his supplies and abandoning his munitions, beat a hasty retreat, and Count William followed his example as soon as he heard this news.<sup>3</sup>

Even Edward II prepared to move against the Flemings who were giving the English merchants no end of trouble on the high seas. For example, during the late summer or early autumn of 1315, a large number of Flemish ships were cruising in the North Sea off Great Yarmouth robbing cargoes and killing sailors so that the king was forced to order his admiral, Sir John Buteturte, to sail with the fleet along the east coast of England and destroy the plunderers.<sup>4</sup> And, further, the king, bound by treaties made by Edward I with the French crown, decided to listen to Louis X's urgent request that the Flemings be banished from England and their goods confiscated. He thought it good policy to listen to the French

<sup>1</sup> Th. Grey, *Scalacronica. The Reigns of Edward I, Edward II, and Edward III*, tr. by H. Maxwell (Glasgow, 1907), pp. 62-63, relates how 'a Fleming [named] Cryn, a sea captain, a pirate, who was a great partisan of Robert Brus' was slain near Berwick in some of the border fighting. Sir Herbert erroneously thinks this was none other than John Crabbe. It has proved impossible to trace this man Cryn. <sup>2</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1307-1313*, p. 436.

<sup>3</sup> For the invasion of Flanders in 1315 see S. A. Waller Zeper, *Jan Van Henegouwen, Heer van Beaumont*, pp. 45-46. <sup>4</sup> *Calendar of the Chancery Warrants, 1244-1326*, pp. 427-428.

king's plea, for he knew he might well need his help at some future time.<sup>1</sup> By writs bearing the date of September 1 and directed to his sheriffs, the warden of the Cinque Ports, the justices of North and South Wales, and the earl of Chester, he ordered proclamation be made everywhere that all Flemings were required to quit the realm within forty days after the Feast of the Holy Cross (by October 23) and that subjects of the English crown should not help the Flemings 'with arms, horses, victuals, or other things.'<sup>2</sup> Later, other writs dated November 19 ordered the sheriffs to enlist two knights in each shire to inquire whether any Flemings remained in the country after the date set for their departure and to determine which subjects of the crown 'have received, aided, or comforted them and to cause them and their goods to be arrested.'<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile the king had commanded his admirals, Humphrey de Littlebury and John de Sturmy, as well as other of his servants engaged in war against the Scots, to inflict as much damage upon the Flemings as they could.<sup>4</sup> But the six ships designated for this purpose failed to accomplish anything and returned to port at Sandwich.<sup>5</sup> And thus Flanders, nearly surrounded by hostile forces on land and sea, was saved by the violent rain and Edward II's ineffectiveness.

But another catastrophe confronted the Flemings — the disastrous famine which began in the autumn of 1315 and lasted for two years. The famine which raged throughout Europe north of the Pyrenees was particularly severe in the towns. In Flanders where a large part of the population made its living from industry and imported foodstuffs from distant parts—England, Scotland, Scandinavia, Germany, France, Spain, and Africa — the dearth of victuals caused by the incessant rains of 1315 resulted in a dreadful famine that grew in intensity during the spring and early summer of 1316.<sup>6</sup>

These circumstances — the war and the famine which followed — apparently made it possible for John Crabbe to return to Flanders. After all, he had repeatedly plundered subjects of the enemies of Flanders, so why should Count Robert punish Crabbe at a moment when these same enemies were united to destroy Flanders? Crabbe was a resourceful man; and count Robert, who urgently needed all the help he could get from whatever quarter, probably treated him with lenity, welcomed him back to Flanders, and even promoted him to a position of high trust. At any rate, Crabbe 'was admitted to the count's peace' as Edward II's writs of subsequent date to the bailiffs of Great Yarmouth expressed it, and, with the full consent of the count's council and undoubtedly also with that of his chief towns — Bruges, Ghent, and Ypres — was named admiral of a fleet of ships 'under orders to acquire victuals and other necessaries for the sustenance of the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>2</sup> Th. Rymer, *Foedera*, III, 533; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1313-1317*, p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> Th. Rymer, *Foedera*, III, 541; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1313-1318*, pp. 317-318.

<sup>4</sup> Th. Rymer, *Foedera*, III, 535-536.

<sup>5</sup> *Calendar of the Chancery Warrants, 1244-1326*, p. 432.

<sup>6</sup> H. S. Lucas, 'The Great European Famine, 1315, 1316, and 1317,' *SPECULUM*, v (1930), 343-377.

men of the county, where there was great need and famine, from enemies as prize of war, and from others for payment.<sup>7</sup>

Crabbe, of course, was the proper person to execute such a commission. Sailing westward from Flanders which he left on Ash Wednesday (February 25), 1316, he approached Dieppe in France on March 1 where he met two ships owned by merchants from Great Yarmouth, loaded with goods and merchandise at Rouen and proceeding to England. These ships belonged to some subjects of the enemy of Flanders; and Crabbe pounced upon them, seized the ships, and brought their cargoes to Flanders to be disposed of there. Such were the facts in due course brought out in an inquisition ordered by Edward II and held at Great Yarmouth.<sup>1</sup> It is not known what further steps were taken after the inquest had been made, nor whether these merchants ever received any compensation for their losses.

Meanwhile there was another change in the political scene. Louis X of France died in 1316, succeeded by Philip V who resolved upon a policy of conciliation with the Flemings, and made a treaty with them. Edward II in December of the same year rescinded his proclamation of banishment, replacing it by another whereby Flemings were permitted to come to England, trade in safety, and come and go unmolested.<sup>2</sup> Before this proclamation could be made, however, Crabbe and his crew, while sailing in the Downs off the Isle of Thanet, seized the ship *La Bona Navis de la Strode* chartered by Aymer de Insula of Bordeaux and Arnold Desoyngnone of Bazas, loaded with 86 tuns and 25 pipes of wine intended for the English market and valued at 788 l. sterling. The king accordingly ordered the sheriffs of Norfolk and Suffolk, London, and Lincoln to arrest goods belonging to Flemings, keeping them safely until they had taken enough to satisfy the claims of these men.<sup>3</sup> The ship itself belonging to a John Springere of La Strode, including tackle, chests, and other equipment, was valued at 14 l. sterling. These sums were based upon an appraisal made in an inquest conducted by the sheriff of Kent supported by the oath of a few aliens and some Englishmen from the neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

This robbery, long a *cause celebre* in the English chancery, was repeatedly brought to the council's attention and so became the subject of protracted representations to the count of Flanders during the next five years.<sup>5</sup> 'Considering that such rapine committed upon his merchants and within his power is not only to the detriment of the merchants but would also redound to his shame and contempt unless an opportune remedy be provided, and wishing to protect his subjects in his peace and protection from wrong and violence,' Edward asked Count Robert to make proper restitution or satisfaction not only for the cargo but also for the ship. But the count's reply was slow; and when it came proved unsatisfactory, for the count declared that although 'he was ignorant of the premises as

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous (Chancery)*, II, 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1313-1318*, p. 444.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 387-388.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 580.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 387-388, 457, 579, 580, 591-592, 536; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1318-1323*, p. 364. The case received the attention of the king and council as late as 1332. See *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330-1334*, p. 318.

he was not certified of the aforesaid deed nor of the persons who committed it,' he would apply fitting punishment — breaking on the wheel — should the culprit be found in his jurisdiction, which, as we have learned, was not likely as he had been banished as a murderer.<sup>1</sup> This statement astonished the king and his council because, they stated, John Crabbe was well known in Flanders where he lived 'whenever he wished.' Testimony had been offered that Count Robert had given the ship to the seigneur of Maldeghem<sup>2</sup> while the wine had been appropriated for the count's own use!

By this time Crabbe had won widespread notoriety as an energetic and heartless freebooter, for he undoubtedly was responsible also for other violent acts of which we have no record.<sup>3</sup> His fame spread far and wide, a fact which the Antwerp chronicler Lodewijk Van Velthem recorded in his account — one of the most remarkable chronicles of the day and particularly valuable for events which took place in the Low Countries and neighboring parts. After recounting the striking disasters of these years, the contested election of Louis the Bavarian in 1314, the misfortunes of the invasion of Flanders in 1315, and the terrible famine of 1315, 1316, and 1317, he made the following remarks<sup>4</sup> about the deprivations and elusive movement of John Crabbe:

Ende oec mede dese lede Crabbe  
Warp oec in sine swabbe,  
Dese dede opt water grote scade,  
Hine dede niemene genade,  
Alse nu was hi hier, alse nu daer,  
Men wiste sijns wachten waer,  
Alse nu was hi met enen here,  
Alse nu settihem ten kere  
Ende trac hem an een andren dan.  
Dits der quader rovers gespan,  
Sine houden niet datsi geloven  
Ende int leste bliven si bedrogen.

(And, in addition to the harm these men wrought, Crabbe also contributed his

<sup>1</sup> Public Record Office, London. *Ancient Correspondence*, xxxiii, No. 145. This undoubtedly is the document mentioned by Ernst Van Bruyssel, 'Liste Analytique des Documents concernant l'histoire de la Belgique, qui sont conservés au Record Office,' *Compte Rendu des Séances de la Commission Royale d'Histoire ou Recueil de ses Bulletins*, 3<sup>me</sup> Série, 1 (1860), 108. The document is difficult to read because of the parts which are faded. It is dated 'in capite Decembris,' without year. But it obviously was written in 1317. This letter is mentioned also in the *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, A.D. 1307-1357 (Edinburgh, 1887), 126.

<sup>2</sup> The documents (*Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1313-1318*, pp. 591-592, 536) refer to him as the 'lord of Meldyngham.' There was a Philippe, seigneur of Maldeghem, at about this time. See A. Wauters, *Table Chronologique des Chartes et Diplômes imprimés concernant l'Histoire de la Belgique*, VIII (Brussels, 1892), 545, 632.

<sup>3</sup> That there was much violence in the narrow waters between England and the Low Countries during this time is seen from the words of the Parisian chronicler John of St. Victor. See *Excerpta e Memoriali Historiarum Johannis a Sancto Victore*, in *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, XXI (Paris, 1855), 662.

<sup>4</sup> Lodewijk Van Velthem, *Voortzetting van de Spiegel Historiaal*, III (Brussels, 1938), 196.

share. He wrought great damage on the seas, showing mercy to no one. Now he appeared here, now there. Now he served one person, next he turned against him and sought the favor of another. Such is the evil company of robbers — they do not keep to what they promise; and in the end themselves are deceived.)

During the next decade we hear little about John Crabbe. Expelled from Flanders for murder, he retired to Scotland where he continued his robberies, taking advantage of the confusion created by the chronic feud between England and Scotland and repeatedly attacking ships of English subjects. Ever since the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 bitter fighting had troubled the Scottish border. Berwick, a town on the left bank of the Tweed, became an important outpost of Scottish rule, especially after the futile efforts of the English in 1319 to capture it. Its advantageous location from the standpoint of an enterprising freebooter appealed to Crabbe who settled in the town and even became a burgher, a step obviously dictated by good sense.<sup>1</sup>

Just when Crabbe took up residence in Berwick cannot be ascertained, but it is certain that he had already established himself there in 1318, according to a statement by John Barbour, the author of *The Bruce*, an important rhyming chronicle dealing with Scottish history from 1290 to 1332 and composed about fifty years after Bannockburn. Crabbe made himself indispensable for the defense of the town when the English in 1318–1319 tried to capture it. Walter the Steward who guarded the castle and town for Robert Bruce apparently considered him a most efficient purveyor of military supplies. Barbour's verses preserve something of the impression Crabbe made upon his contemporaries:

John Crab, a Flemyne, als had he,  
That wes of gret subtilite,  
Till ordane til make aparale  
For till defend and till assale  
Castell of wer or than cite,  
That nane slear mycht fundin be.  
He gert engynis and trammys ma,  
And purvait gree fyre alsua;  
Spryngaldis and schotis on seir maneris  
That till defend castell afferis,  
He purvait in-till full gret wane.<sup>2</sup>

While thus living in Berwick under the royal Scottish protection and enjoying the confidence of important persons like Walter the Steward, Crabbe continued to plunder the English on land as well as on sea, apparently with impunity. Of this activity we possess no official data, but such inference seems warranted because of the confirmed hostility of the English toward him and the express statements of chroniclers.<sup>3</sup> Always intent upon the major chance, Crabbe was able to

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330–1334*, pp. 553–554. The *Chronicon Domini Walteri de Hemingburgh*, ed. by H. C. Hamilton, II (London 1849), 305, refers to 'Johanni Crabbe, nautae cuidam experto apud Berewicum moranti.'

<sup>2</sup> J. Barbour, *The Bruce*, ed. by W. M. Mackenzie (London, 1909), p. 303.

<sup>3</sup> See *Chronicon de Lanercost, MCCI–MCCCXLVI* (Edinburgh, MCCCXXXIX), p. 270, which in

secure favors from the Scottish government. In 1327 he supplied the royal household with victuals — probably with stolen goods as once he had furnished wine for the count of Flander's table forcibly taken from ships belonging to citizens of Bordeaux and Bazas while sailing through The Downs. During this time also he sold ropes for the machines mounted on the walls of Berwick, for which he was allowed 7 l. 6 s. 2 d. in the Scottish exchequer. So highly were his services regarded that the same exchequer paid the claim of one Emericus Lombardus, amounting to 6 l. 13 s. 4 d., who complained of 'damages inflicted upon him on the sea by John Crabbe.' He also had something to do with the watches of the town, for which in 1331 he was allowed the large sum of 180 l.<sup>1</sup>

The next change in the political situation once more proved John Crabbe's remarkable ability to make himself useful, if not indispensable, to people in high places. In 1332 war again broke out between the English and the Scots. Edward III covertly supported Edward Bailliol, the claimant of the Scottish throne, who invaded Fife and defeated the Scots in the Battle of Dupplin Moor. The invaders next proceeded to Perth which they seized in spite of much resistance, and at once entrenched themselves. The Scots under Sir Andrew Moray, their newly appointed regent, began an investment from the west (24 August). Hoping to surround the English, they summoned John Crabbe from Berwick who came into the Firth of Tay with ten Flemish ships well equipped with warlike munitions and at once attacked the English vessels. Although taken by surprise, the English soon rallied and put up so stout a resistance that they destroyed all the ships in Crabbe's fleet while they themselves lost but one of their own. Crabbe managed to escape, but only with great difficulty and, fleeing to Berwick, reported to his fellow citizens the disastrous outcome of his expedition.<sup>2</sup>

Soon after this misfortune Crabbe's darkest hour seemed to strike. Perth fell on October 7; and King Edward retired southward to Roxburgh, taking up his residence in the nearby monastery of Kelso on the 14th. The regent Moray followed him with a force of Scots, among whom was Crabbe. There was a lively skirmish in which the English seized Moray.<sup>3</sup> Crabbe fell into the hands of Walter de Manny, the Hainault soldier of fortune who had identified himself with the English court ever since the marriage of Philippa of Hainault to Edward III.<sup>4</sup> The pirate, merchant, and adventurer now was in English hands; his fate seemed sealed, for the English chancery in that same year still troubled itself with the

referring to Crabbe states: 'qui per multos annos precedentes vexaverat Anglicos in terra et mari' and describes him as 'quidam pirata crudelis et solemnis.' See also *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, 196.

<sup>1</sup> *Rotuli Scaccarii Regum Scotorum. The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, ed. by J. Stuart and G. Burnett, I. A.D. 1264-1359 (Edinburgh, 1878), 80-81, 64, 213, 398.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronicon Domini Walteri de Hemingburgh*, II, 305; *Chronicon Henrici Knighton vel Cnithon, Monachi Leycestrensis*, I (London, 1889), 46-55. The Scottish Exchequer in 1337 compensated the Flemish merchants who lost their ships at Perth by paying them 300 l. 4 s. — See *Rotuli Scaccarii Regum Scotorum*, I, 450-451.

<sup>3</sup> *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, II (London, 1867), 366; *Chronicon de Lanercost*, p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland*, III, 196, *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1333-1337*, p. 459.

problem of securing a settlement of damages for Crabbe's robbery of the *Bona Novis de la Strode*,<sup>1</sup> perpetrated as long ago as 1316.

Edward had advokd Parliament to York on the octave of St Hilary (30 January), 1333.<sup>2</sup> Its members in no uncertain terms made known their feelings about Crabbe. As he had for years been a notorious enemy of the crown, had robbed merchants on land and sea, and hanged mariners from the masts of their captured ships, they petitioned the king to reward Walter de Manny properly and see that the culprit receive the penalty fitting his many crimes. The council agreed to this request; and the king in reply stated that Walter de Manny should have the 4300 marks already paid him, and even more should he succeed in extorting it. And, further, the king promised that Crabbe would be kept safely in chains and in prison until he had paid all that was demanded of him and would be guarded so carefully that he could not get away.<sup>3</sup>

Crabbe, however, knew how to draw advantage even from such a desperate situation. Probably he thought he could induce the king to receive him as a useful ally. He still was in Scotland, although of course kept in chains and closely guarded. He had excellent connections, for we learn that he was yeoman to the Scottish earl of Moray, lord of Man and Annan. Fearing the hatred of his English captors, he succeeded in getting the earl to ask a safe conduct to visit the royal court, until Michelmas, 1333. To this Edward agreed, saving the rights of the crown and the people, he added significantly.<sup>4</sup>

The adventurer had not miscalculated, for the king, advised by the council, decided to keep him in his power. Accordingly he settled with Walter de Manny for Crabbe's ransom — a tidy sum of 1000 marks — payable in installments.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile the English army had moved toward Berwick where at Halidon Hill on July 19, 1333, they met the Scottish forces and defeated them with much slaughter. Crabbe had to endure the sudden hatred of his fellow citizens in Berwick who refused to consider ransoming him, and in wrath slew his son.<sup>6</sup> This bit

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330-1334*, p. 318.

<sup>2</sup> *Rotuli Parliamentorum ut et Petitiones*, II, 68-69.

<sup>3</sup> *Rotuli Parliamentorum Anglie hactenus inediti, MCCLXXIX-MCCCLXXIII*, ed. for the Royal Historical Society by H. G. Richardson and G. Sayles, *Camden Third Series*, LI (London, 1935), 227, 229.

<sup>4</sup> Public Record Office, C81-188, No. 5253; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330-1334*, p. 258. The *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, 190, makes some mistakes in describing this document. The document belongs to the sixth year of Edward III, and the earl is not Thomas Moray who died in 1332. His son Thomas died in the Battle of Dupplin Moor. John Randolph, third earl of Moray, obviously is meant. See *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Sidney Lee, XLVII (London 1896), 275-278.

<sup>5</sup> *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, 196; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330-1334*, p. 459.

<sup>6</sup> *Chronicon de Lanercost*, p. 270. Referring to the capture of the two men, the chronicler comments: 'et ambo illi missi sunt ad regem Angliae, ut de illis faceret quicquid vellet. Ille tamen Crab, propter ingratitude Scotorum de Berwico, qui tempore obsidionis ejusdem villae postea noluerunt eum redimere, immo suum filium occiderunt, data sibi vita a rege Angliae, factus est postea persecutor accerrimus gentis suae.'

of information, recorded only by the author of the Lanercost chronicle, may be accepted as a fact. Crabbe had helped the king in the siege of Berwick, which, as we know, he was in a position to do; and, we can well understand why the burgesses were so angry with him. Unfortunately we have no way of telling how Crabbe assisted the king, but that it was important we may be certain; for subsequently Edward, because 'of his good service in the siege of Berwick,' pardoned all his homicides, felonies, and other offenses of which he might possibly be accused, whether on land or sea.<sup>1</sup> As a further proof of Edward's favor we learn that Crabbe received from the king a tenement in Berwick known as Le Whithalle, situated in Segrave Street.<sup>2</sup> And, finally, on June 24, the king had granted him for life the office of constable of Somerton castle in Lincolnshire, which included lands, meadows, rents, and other appurtenances, with an annual sum of 20 *l.*<sup>3</sup> For these he was to account with the exchequer, a requirement changed on May 2 of the following year (1334) when he was directed to answer to the chamber.<sup>4</sup>

Thus John Crabbe escaped from what perhaps was the most perilous situation in his entire career. Of course he still was a citizen of Berwick, and for at least eight years never severed his connection with that town. He disposed of his tenement in Segrave Street and his garden in Berwick to Thomas Ughtreth, knight, who also had found favor with Edward III.<sup>5</sup> Crabbe's future thus was assured, for he could look forward to favor from the English king. Edward found that the Scots, though defeated, continued to be troublesome. In 1334 he still was in negotiations attempting to establish peace. It was during such activities that he sent for John Crabbe whose advice, because of his acquaintance with Scottish men and affairs, might prove helpful. For Crabbe's going to Scotland and staying with the king at this occasion, Edward later granted him 10 *l.* to help pay his expenses.<sup>6</sup>

But it was chiefly in connection with military supplies and the preparing of ships that Crabbe proved most useful to his new master. As the war with the Scots continued and the danger of French support of their cause became more serious, Crabbe, together with James de Kyngeston, a clerk, was commissioned to collect ten ships from the ports on the east coast of England, chose a thousand mariners and archers to man them, provision the ships properly, and take them out to sea in the royal service. This task engaged his attention during February and March of 1335.<sup>7</sup> Later we again learn of Crabbe's help in strengthening the defenses of Berwick. It is interesting to learn that he never rose to the post of

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, 196.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 204; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330-1334*, pp. 553-554.

<sup>3</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1340-1343*, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of the Fine Rolls, 1327-1337*, pp. 407, 444. There is an interesting account (*Public Record Office*, E 101. 484. 11) amounting to 222 *l.* 8 *s.* 4 *d. ob.*, submitted by Crabbe for labor and materials in connection with Somerton castle from Sept. 29, 1334, to March 10, 1336. Similar expense accounts are to be found in the Issue Rolls of these years.

<sup>5</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1330-1334*, pp. 553-554. The original is in the *Public Record Office* among the Chancery Warrants, I, 214 (7888).

<sup>6</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1333-1337*, p. 290.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

chamberlain of Berwick or even of clerk of the king's works in the castle and town of Berwick. But these officials employed Crabbe on various occasions so that in 1337 the treasurer and barons of the exchequer paid him various sums — 100*s.* for expenses while staying in Berwick; 16*l.* 12*s.* ½*d.* for certain of king's works; 40*s.* for repairing the engines; and 16*l.* 5*s.* 2*d.* for the purchase of iron, timber, and other articles, and for the wages of carpenters and workmen employed in-repairing engines and other works.<sup>1</sup> In 1338 he erected engines and hoardings (*hurdis* in the original document) and provided necessaries in connection with them when the army of Lord Salisbury besieged Dunbar castle for nineteen weeks. For these services the exchequer was intructed, in February, 1339, to pay him part of the sum of 23*l.* 19*s.* 11*d.* due him for his labors.<sup>2</sup> About this same time the exchequer allowed him 100*l.* for repairing the houses of Somerton castle.<sup>3</sup> During these years Crabbe was repeatedly referred to as king's yeoman and at least once as king's serjeant — honorable appellations which clearly indicate the firmness with which he was entrenched in the royal regard.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile the Hundred Years' War which began in 1337 brought Crabbe into a yet wider arena of action. King Edward's strategy in opposing Philip VI was to use the Low Countries as a basis of operations. He intended to finance his military undertakings and win the support of reluctant princes like Duke John III of Brabant from the sale of the wool brought to Dordrecht and other places in accordance with the royal measures creating a staple.<sup>5</sup> It therefore was most necessary to keep the sea lanes between England and Dordrecht, Antwerp, and Bruges free from the marauding ships of France. The royal fleets, constantly on the alert, gave Crabbe an opportunity to serve the king, for he, probably better than any other person, knew the coasts of England, France, and the Low Countries, and he certainly was as able a seaman as lived in England. Accordingly we find him serving with Robert de Morely, Admiral of the fleet north of the Thames mouth, from April 4, 1339, to August 12. During the early part of this period, from April 4 to June 12, he commanded a hundred archers, and from June 12, when he set out from Great Yarmouth, eight men-at-arms, seventy archers, and seventy sailors.<sup>6</sup>

It is not known what fortunes befell Crabbe while engaged in these tasks, nor whether he served in the king's navy after August 12, 1339. But his name re-appears prominently in 1340 when Edward was preparing to cross over to Flanders. Philip had brought together a very large fleet from his Norman and other ports, concentrating them in the mouths of the Swin and the Schelde — to block the approaches to Bruges and Antwerp. Thus he hoped to prevent Edward

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1337-1339*, pp. 223-224.

<sup>2</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1339-1341*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1340-1343*, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1337-1339*, pp. 223-224; *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1339-1341*, p. 139; *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1340-1343*, p. 155, and p. 177 where he is referred to as 'king's serjeant.'

<sup>5</sup> H. S. Lucas, *The Low Countries and the Hundred Years' War, 1327-1346* (Ann Arbor, 1929), pp. 240-245.

<sup>6</sup> *Public Record Office*, E 101. 22/8 and E 372/184, membrane 45. See *Calendar of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, 239, and *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1339-1341*, pp. 11, 146.

from using the Low Countries as a spring-board for the coming offensive.<sup>1</sup> Edward had come to Orwell with his council. His fleet lay in the roadstead, his army was bivouacked in the neighboring countryside. Fearful of the terrific dangers which the king was risking, the chancellor — the archbishop of Canterbury — advised caution and urged delay so that a stronger fleet could be brought together. But Edward impatiently rejected his advice. Turning to his admiral, Robert de Morley, and to John Crabbe for their opinion, he was displeased to learn that they supported the archbishop's views. But this advice was really good, and orders were hurriedly sent to collect more ships from the ports nearby. Thus reinforced, the fleet sailed over to the mouth of the Swin.<sup>2</sup>

The battle began at about three o'clock in the afternoon of June 23, and by nightfall the French were nearly annihilated. Large numbers perished by the hail of arrows from English bows. Those who tried to escape by swimming were killed by the Flemings who stood on the dikes. Before day-break some ships, led by one Spoudevisch,<sup>3</sup> a notorious pirate, broke through the English lines and fled. The English, learning of their escape as soon as it was light, were determined to destroy them. Edward at once directed Crabbe to lead the chase with a large number of ships, as many as forty, according to the chronicle of Galfridus le Baker. This undoubtedly was a wise choice, for who could more surely run down the pirate Spoudevisch?<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately we hear nothing further about this episode, and so we pass on to Crabbe's next experiences.

After the Battle of Sluis Edward advanced to the siege of Tournai which, however, he was forced to raise because of disaffection among his allies just as the city seemed ready to fall into his hands. In all probability Crabbe accompanied Edward on this expedition, for his advice surely would prove helpful while the king was in Flanders. We are certain, however, that he retained the royal favor. Edward's finances were in a precarious condition, and his creditors became more and more disgruntled. The exchequer was bankrupt, and Edward's credit was reaching the vanishing point. At every turn the king faced people to whom he had lavishly promised money he could not pay. Crabbe himself had not for several years been paid the annual sum of 20*l.* on account of his office as constable of Somerton castle. Accordingly, Crabbe induced the crown to cancel the grant which had been made to him in 1333 in return for the 'custody of the castle with

<sup>1</sup> For the Battle of Sluis, see H. S. Lucas, *The Low Countries and the Hundred Years' War, 1327-1346*, pp. 395-403.

<sup>2</sup> Robertus de Avesbury, *De Gestis Mirabilibus Regis Edwardi Tertii*, ed. by E. M. Thompson (London, 1889), pp. 311-312.

<sup>3</sup> Spoudevisch is mentioned in the *Croniques de London depuis l'an 44 Hen. III jusqu'à l'an 17 Edw. III*, ed. by G. J. Aungier (London, 1844), Vol. xxviii of the *Camden Society's Publications*, p. 77, and by Jan Van Boendale, *Van den Darden Edewaert*, a chronicle published by J. F. Willems in *Belgisch Museum voor de Nederduitsche Tael- en Letterkunde en de Geschiedenis des Vaderlands*, iv (1840), 344.

<sup>4</sup> *Chronicon Galfridi le Baker de Swynebroke*, ed. by E. M. Thompson (Oxford, 1889), p. 69: 'die illucente et cognito quod triginta naves affugerunt, misset dominus rex xl naves bene munitas ad illas insequendas, quibus preposuit Johannem Crabbe, quem periciorem in arte navali et cognicione portuum Francorum Anglici reputarent; quorum tamen effectus ignoratur.' *Adae Muremuth Continuatio Chronicarum* (London, 1889), p. 107, reports this episode in practically identical words.

the lands, rents, liberties, and all other profits pertaining to the castle.' When the chancery was at Ghent, a patent covering these points was issued, dated October 10. The language of the document shows that Crabbe still stood high in the king's affection, for it states that this grant was made because of Crabbe's zeal in the royal service.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile Edward, forced to stay in Flanders to appease his clamoring creditors, found himself at the very brink of bankruptcy. The taxes voted by Parliament had not been collected and England was not in a pleasant mood. Efforts were made to encourage rapid collection and many messengers were sent out to the shires. John Crabbe was employed on one such mission, the purpose of which is not clear, to the important wool producing shire of Nottingham. With three companions he spent twelve days (4-12 December) in this business which included time spent in going from and returning to London.<sup>2</sup>

By 1341, it would appear, Crabbe's active years were drawing to a close. Since 1305 or 1306 when he first attracted attention by his robbery of a ship from Dordrecht near the harbor of La Rochelle he had been much in the public eye. The chanceries of France, Flanders, England, and Holland and Zeeland repeatedly had occasion to take note of his activities. As more than thirty-five years had passed since he began his career we may assume that the weight of years now was having its effect. But nowhere in the documents do we get much of an inkling as to his age. That he had just arrived at maturity when he began his destructive activity off the harbor of La Rochelle is likely. Probably he was an older brother of the Peter Crabbe mentioned in Philip IV's complaint of 1306. It is possible that the Baldwin Crabbe named in the statement of claims made about 1311 by the count of Hainault, Holland, and Zeeland to the count of Flanders was a younger brother.<sup>3</sup> It is probable that his nephew Crabbekin, who accompanied him when he robbed the ship of Alice the Countess Marshall, was the son of a younger brother. The form Crabbekin, a diminutive meaning 'little Crabbe,' may refer to his slight stature, to his youth, or possibly to both. From all these facts and observations we may conclude that in 1341 John Crabbe probably was approaching his sixtieth year.

But his career was not yet quite finished. He had proved a loyal and useful servant of the crown, and the personnel of the wardrobe and chancery had much confidence in him. So we note an item dating from the opening of 1341 of a mission undertaken with three associates on behalf of the king, and paid for in the wardrobe, to Somerton castle.<sup>4</sup> During the early spring he was charged to provide timber for the construction of engines in the royal manor of Langley Marsh on

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1340-1343*, p. 155.

<sup>2</sup> *Public Record Office*, E 101, 389/8: 'Johanni Crabbe et tribus sociis suis missis in negociis regis secretis de Londoniis usque Nottingham pro expensis suis et dictorum sociorum suorum a iij<sup>to</sup> die Decembris usque xij diem eiusdem mensis utroque computato eundo et redeundo per ix dies percipiendo per diem iij s., xxxvj s.' (sub. Dec. 26).

<sup>3</sup> H. J. Smit, 'Het Begin van de Regeering der Henegouwsche Graven, 1299-1320,' p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> *Public Record Office*. E 101, 389/8: 'Eisdem missis (*i.e.*, Johanni Crabbe et tribus sociis suis) usque castrum de Somerton in negociis ipsius regis pro expensis suis, xxij s. viij d.'

the Thames in Buckinghamshire. Later in the year he made some barricades or fences at Fauxhall and at several other places not designated. To pay for these services the crown authorized him to ship twenty sacks of wool from Kingston-upon-Hull after paying a half mark for custom dues assessed upon each sack. Crabbe apparently was to satisfy his claim by appropriating the tenth and fifteenth on wool authorized to the king in Parliament.<sup>1</sup>

Crabbe's services to the crown at this time covered more than supply and munitions, however. With four other men, in 1342, he was designated to collect all outstanding sums accruing from the ecclesiastical properties of the French bishop of Séz in England and taken into the royal custody at the opening of the war with France.<sup>2</sup> A year later, Crabbe was named, with sixteen other men, to restrain persons contesting the royal right to present to a prebend in St. Mary's church in Lincoln, seize them, and imprison them in Newgate prison in the custody of the sheriffs of London.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that he paid one more visit to the continent — while Edward was occupied in the siege of Calais (1346). This seems to be indicated from the royal pardon to one Gilbert Benet of Mene in Gloucestershire granted 'by the king and testimony of John Crabbe.'<sup>4</sup> It is to be noted, however, that Crabbe's testimony may have been submitted by letter, but its language does not preclude the possibility of Crabbe's presence in Calais.

The year 1346 was a stirring one for the English. For to the laurels won at Crecy and Calais was to be added the bloody defeat of the Scots at Neville's Cross near Durham on October 17. A large number of Scotland's best men lay dead on the field while many others, among them King David himself, were taken prisoner. They had been induced to invade England by the repeated urging of Philip VI who found himself hard pressed by the English. Edward in high dudgeon because he had been attacked at his back while engaged in France consigned the captives to the castles of the realm and refused to let them be ransomed.<sup>5</sup> To provide for the safe custody of all these notables required some planning. Various constables of castles were required to guard them. So Crabbe was summoned to appear before the council on August 20 'to do what shall be enjoined upon him.'<sup>6</sup> On that day he was given the custody of Walter de Maundeville who, together with other prisoners like the notable William Douglas, had until then been kept in the Tower of London. Thus once more his post as constable of Somerton castle proved important.<sup>7</sup>

This seems to have been the last noteworthy task Crabbe was asked to discharge. Apparently for some years he had lived retired from active participation in affairs at Somerton castle. But he was not forgotten in the council. There was a long standing grievance voiced by some men and tenants who had been de-

<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1340-1343*, pp. 177, 341.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>3</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1343-1345*, p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1345-1348*, p. 487.

<sup>5</sup> *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*, II (London, 1895), 41-44; *Liber Pluscardensis*, ed. F. J. H. Skene, *Historians of Scotland*, I. (Edinburgh, 1877), 292-295.

<sup>6</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1346-1349*, p. 373.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372; *Calendars of Documents Relating to Scotland*, III, 274-275.

prived of their right to common pasture at Boothby in Lincolnshire by a former constable of Somerton castle. The question having been brought up in Parliament because of a petition presented by the aggrieved persons, a commission was named in 1348 to make an inquest; and the sheriff of Lincolnshire was instructed to summon Crabbe to be present at the proceedings, 'if he will.'<sup>1</sup>

Four years later, early in 1352, John Crabbe closed his earthly career. The information that he died at that time we owe to the fact that ever since March 30, 1335, as constable of Somerton castle, he was required to render account to the royal chamber and not to the exchequer (the accounts of which have not been printed) as he had done during the few months previous since his appointment in 1334.<sup>2</sup> When the news of his passing was received in Westminster, two officers of the chamber were ordered to inquire into such property as he held in Lincolnshire.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the career of John Crabbe, described in so far as extant documents and references in chronicles permit us to reconstruct it. Much of his activity and practically all of his private life must remain hidden from us. A career so variegated and punctuated with remarkable changes in fortune is helpful to us as we try to reproduce in our minds the realities of a merchant's life as it was lived six centuries ago. But even though we can relate little about Crabbe's personality, family life, his attitude toward men and the affairs of his day, or what peace he may have made with his conscience, we should regard him as one example of how a man might profit from the many opportunities offered in a fluid and changing society, such as the fourteenth century presented, to serve his major chance and feather his own nest. Many men like him in England and elsewhere rose from the lower walks of life by taking advantage of the needs of ambitious rulers who, constantly broadening the scope of government, required in increasing numbers new talent which could be provided only by the practical men of the trading class. The recently published essays dealing with the administrative activity of the English government and its extensive personnel from 1327 to 1336 illustrate this point clearly.<sup>4</sup> Although John Crabbe hardly can compare with the Douai merchant Jean Boinebroke (d. about 1286),<sup>5</sup> or the politically active Jacob Van Artevelde of Ghent (d. 1345),<sup>6</sup> or the financier Jacques Coeur of Bourges (d. 1456),<sup>7</sup> he nevertheless deserves some study as an example of how in the fourteenth century a man of humble station might rise to important position.

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<sup>1</sup> *Calendar of the Patent Rolls, 1348-1350*, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> *Calendar of the Close Rolls, 1337-1337*, pp. 384-385; *Calendar of the Fine Rolls, 1327-1341*, p. 444.

<sup>3</sup> *Calendar of the Fine Rolls, 1347-1356*, p. 321.

<sup>4</sup> *The English Government at Work, 1327-1336*, ed. by James F. Willard and W. A. Morris, I. *Central and Prerogative Administration* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940). See also T. F. Tout, 'The English Service in the Fourteenth Century,' *The Collected Papers of Thomas Frederick Tout*, III (Manchester, 1934), 191-221.

<sup>5</sup> G. Espinas, *Sire Jehan Boinebroke, Patricien et Drapier Douaisien, ?-1286 environ* (Lille, 1933).

<sup>6</sup> H. S. Lucas, 'Activities of a Mediaeval Merchant Family: the Van Arteveldes of Ghent,' *The Pacific Historical Review*, IX (1940), 1-18.

<sup>7</sup> A. B. Kerr, *Jacques Coeur, Merchant Prince of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1929).