Epilogue

THERE was no jubilee in the year 1400. By that time the papacy had been split for twenty-two years and the situation looked more hopeless than ever. The rival popes, supported by their respective cardinals, had no intention of compromising, and the only chance for undercutting them seemed to lie in an agreement among the secular powers. But many of the major European states were at war with each other and all of them lacked the charismatic leadership needed to deal firmly with the problem.

A curious anecdote illustrates the plight of Europe at that time. In 1398, while the rival claimants to the papal chair were hurling anathemas at each other, the King of France and the Emperor of Germany decided to meet in an attempt to heal the Schism. Yet unfortunately each had his own weakness. Charles VI of France was a well-meaning man, but he suffered from periodic bouts of madness, while the Emperor Wenceslas, known by one tradition as the “Good,” was truly good at only one thing and that was drinking. Charles was not often lucid, but
his brain was usually clearer in the afternoon after he had digested a good meal. By that time, however, Wenceslas had started drinking and there was no talking to him. Thus the two monarchs never succeeded in communicating and the meetings were adjourned, leaving the Church as divided and Christendom as demoralized as before.

If this bizarre tale is accepted as a symbol of the dismal end of the fourteenth century, the contrast between the opening and the end of the period becomes immediately evident. In 1300, Rome seemed the capital of the world and Europeans seemed self-confident; in 1400, Rome was the outpost of a discredited papal faction and Europeans seemed exhausted by years of plague and war. Yet appearances were deceiving. As we have seen, the splendid jubilee of Pope Boniface VIII was an end rather than a beginning, for the decades after 1300 saw first the collapse of the universal papacy and then the coming of a time of troubles for the secular states. After 1400, on the other hand, the European situation slowly began to improve. In 1417, the papal schism was finally healed by the Council of Constance and unity was restored to Christendom. At the same time the attacks of plague began to taper off and both economic and political stability slowly returned to Europe. Italy was the first area to recover and push ahead in an outburst of creative enthusiasm that shaped one of the most glorious ages in her history.
Northern Europe followed more slowly. There war hampered the growth of the economy and aggravated political instability until the last decades of the fifteenth century. Thereafter, however, in a very short space of time the North rapidly outstripped Italy in economic, political, and cultural development and began to spread its hegemony over the globe.

How does the fourteenth century fit into this pattern? Was the age merely an intermission between the acts of mediaeval and modern accomplishment? In a sense it was, but it was also more than that. In the fourteenth century the civilization of the high Middle Ages was tested. Much that lacked durability was cast aside, but with great determination the men of the age held on to many of the positive mediaeval accomplishments and saved Europe from total collapse. At the same time adversity led to the shaping of new forms and ideas where they were needed, and many of them were passed on to the succeeding ages. None of us would have liked to have lived in the fourteenth century, for it was a trying period, but we may be glad that the men of that age who were so tried were not found wanting.