

POOR JACK

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

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*“What, old acquaintance! could not all this flesh
Keep in a little life! Poor Jack, farewell!
I could have better spared a better man.”*

To R. D. L.:

“There are some ghosts,” said poor Jack, “that will not easily bear raising....”

Thus am I confounded by words of my own choosing, for in truth I have raised one; and not for me, as for Dame Sylvia, does Chivalry blow upon a silver horn to drown the squeakings of that folly. Which is merely another way of saying that those younglings we two know and love, and who fretted me into the writing of a play for their theatricals, have rejected the outcome after a tentative rehearsal, with certain remarks for my pondering.

Well might that fat wholesome man have been left to the undignified fate his creator had appointed for him!—or at least in the staid trappings wherewith I did gird his behemothian bulk in my story, *The Love Letters of Falstaff*. Decked for the stage and with bella donna in its eyes, my sketch, they tell me, is a ghastly remains to which the footlights would add but the effect of funeral candles. In fine, that which lacks both plot and action, and offers, in lieu of lusty characters, four gray ghosts, is not a play but an edifying exposé of the pitfalls and snares into which a romancist might be expected to stumble when he dons the habit of a playwright. These and many other complaints which I shall strive to live down in the years before me, conveyed a discomfiting unanimity of opinion on the part of my hopeful players.

With such humility as becomes one of our soberer estate in the presence of these, our juniors and betters, I pointed out that it was not my fault, assuredly, that Falstaff was no longer the merry taker of purses whose roaring oaths had filled all Gadshill. Nor that Will had never displayed any very hearty admiration for humanity nor found many more commendable traits in general exercise among its individuals than did the authors of the Bible: a spirit which, however distasteful to my palate, I was obliged in this instance to emulate! Yet I dared think (and my defense grew noticeably weaker under their incredulous stare) that old, gross and decayed as he had grown, the demiurge still clings to the old reprobate; yea, and the aura of divinity to Helen, whose beauty is drifting dust, so that Falstaff sees before him not Sylvia Vernon but Sylvia Darke.

Poor Falstaff. "Were't not for laughing I should pity him!"

But they had since ceased to listen. Vanished were they like the merry company whose mere names, thought Falstaff, were like a breath of country air. My script lay before me, eloquent in naught but their disillusion. Alone, I thought the fire winked knowingly at me, much like the one I had fanned from the embers of the past, as if it said: How old must a man become 'ere he shall be wise enough to content these sure young critics, so awfully and so inevitably right?

I should have dropped the record of my folly into the flames and so played out the last scene in my puppet's stead, had I not remembered in time my promise to you. Well!—you had expected to receive it worn from the caresses of eager thumbs, scented perhaps with the bouquet of reverent applause. It

comes to you fresh and unmarred by any defacing ardor; only
its theme is sere, only its author's vanity thumb-marked!

And remember: 'tis not a play you give to the world but rather
a spirit croaking to itself in a house where nobody has lived for
a long time.

J. B. C.

POOR JACK

(The curtain rises to show the Angel room of the Boar's Head Tavern in Eastcheap. 'Tis the private parlor of the mistress of the inn, DAME QUICKLY.

At the back is a high fireplace with heavy leaded diamond paned windows on either side. At the left is the doorway leading to the tap room, on the right a huge clothes press. When our play opens DAME QUICKLY is demurely stirring the fire while BARDOLPH is sorting garments which he takes from the press. We hear a quivery voice singing: "Then Came Bold Sir Caradoc" ... and SIR JOHN FALSTAFF fumbles at the door and enters. It is a FALSTAFF much broken since his loss of the King's favor and now equally decayed in wit, health and reputation. His paunch alone remains prosperous and monstrous and contrasts greatly with the shrunken remainder of the man. He is particularly shaky this morning after a night's hard drinking. Nevertheless he enters with what cheerfulness he can muster.)

FALSTAFF

(sings) Then came the Bold Sir Caradoc—Ah, Mistress what news?—and eke Sir Pellinore—Did I rage last night, Bardolph? Was I a Bedlamite?

BARDOLPH

As mine own bruises can testify. Had each one of them a tongue they would raise a clamor beside which Babel were an heir weeping for his rich uncle's death; their testimony would

qualify you for any mad-house in England. And if their evidence go against the doctor's stomach, the watchman at the corner hath three teeth—or rather, hath them no longer, since you knocked them out last night, that will willingly aid him to digest it.

FALSTAFF

(as he stiffly lowers his great body into the great chair that awaits him beside the fire and stretches his hands to catch the heat of the flames.) Three say you? I would have my valor in all men's mouths, but not in this fashion, for it is too biting a jest. Three, say you? Well, I am glad it was no worse; I have a tender conscience and that mad fellow of the North, Hotspur, sits heavily upon it, so that thus this Percy, being slain by my valor, is *per se* avenged, a plague upon him! Three, say you? I would to God my name were not so terrible to the enemy as it is; I would I had 'bated my natural inclination somewhat and slain less tall fellows by three score. I doubt Agamemnon slept not well o' nights. Three, say you? Give the fellow a crown apiece for his mouldy teeth, if thou hast them; if thou hast them not, bid him eschew this vice of drunkenness whereby his misfortune hath befallen him, and thus win him heavenly crowns.

BARDOLPH

Indeed Sir, I doubt....

FALSTAFF

(testily) Doubt not, Sirrah! *(He continues more calmly in a virtuous manner)* Was not the apostle reprov'd for that same

sin? Thou art a Didymus, Bardolph,—an incredulous paynim, a most unspeculative rogue. Have I carracks trading in the Indies? Have I robbed the exchequer of late? Have I the Golden Fleece for a cloak? Nay, it is a paltry gimlet, and that augurs badly. Why does this knavish watchman take me for a raven to feed him in the wilderness? Tell him that there are no such ravens hereabouts; else I had ravenously limed the house-tops and sets springes in the gutters. Inform him that my purse is no better lined than his own broken skull; it is void as a beggar's protestations, or a butcher's stall in Lent; light as a famished gnat, or the sighing of a new-made widower; more empty than a last year's bird's nest, than a madman's eye, or, in fine, than the friendship of a king.

MISTRESS QUICKLY

But you have wealthy friends, Sir John. (*She nods her head vigorously*) Yes I warrant you Sir John. Sir John, you have a many wealthy friends; you cannot deny that, Sir John.

FALSTAFF

(*He cowers closer to the fire as though he were a little cold*) I have no friends since Hal is King. I had I grant you, a few score of acquaintances whom I taught to play at dice; paltry young blades of the City, very unfledged juvenals! Setting my knighthood and my valor aside, if I did swear friendship with these, I did swear to a lie. But this is a censorious and muddyminded world, so that, look you, even these sprouting aldermen, these foul, bacon-fed rogues, have fled my friendship of late, and my reputation hath grown somewhat more murky than Erebus. No matter! I walk alone as one that hath the

pestilence. No matter! But I grow old, I am not in the vanward of my youth, Mistress.

(He reaches for the cup of sack that BARDOLPH has poured out and holds on a tray at his elbow.)

MISTRESS QUICKLY

Indeed, I do not know what your worship will do.

FALSTAFF

(Drinks the sack down and grins in a somewhat ghostly fashion) Faith! unless the Providence that watches over the fall of a sparrow hath an eye to the career of Sir John Falstaff, Knight, and so comes to my aid shortly, I must need convert my last doublet into a mask and turn highwayman in my shirt. I can take purses yet, ye Uzzite comforters, as gaily as I did at Gadshill, where that scurvy Poin, and he that is now King, and some twoscore other knaves did afterward assault me in the dark; yet I peppered some of them I warrant you.

BARDOLPH

You must be rid of me then, Master. I for one have no need of a hempen collar.

FALSTAFF

(stretching himself in the chair) I, too, would be loth to break the gallow's back. For fear of halters, we must alter our way of living; we must live close, Bardolph, till the wars make us Croesuses or food for crows. And if Hal but hold to his bias, there will be wars: I will eat a piece of my sword, if he hath not

need of it shortly. Ah, go thy ways, tall Jack; there live not three good men in England and one of them is fat, and grows old. We must live close, Bardolph, we must forswear drinking and wenching! But there is lime in this sack, you rogue, give me another cup.

(BARDOLPH draws and brings him another cup of sack which he empties at one long draught.)

FALSTAFF

I pray you hostess, remember that Doll Tearsheet sups with me tonight; have a capon of the best and be not sparing of your wine. I will repay you, upon honor, when we young fellows return from France, all laden with rings and brooches and such trumperies like your Norfolkshire pedlars at Christmas-tide. We will sack a town for you, and bring you back the Lord Mayor's beard to stuff you a cushion; the Dauphin shall be your tapster yet: we will walk on lilies, I warrant you to the tune of "hey then, up go we."

MISTRESS QUICKLY

Indeed, Sir, your worship is as welcome to my pantry as the mice—a pox on them—think themselves; you are heartily welcome. Ah, well, old Puss is dead; I had her of Goodman Quickly these ten years since;—but I had thought that you looked for the lady who was here but now;—she was a roaring lion among the mice.

FALSTAFF

(with great animation) What Lady? Was it Flint the Mercer's wife, think you? Ah, she hath a liberal disposition, and will, without the aid of Prince Houssain's carpet or the horse of Cambuscan, transfer the golden shining pieces from her husband's coffers to mine.

MISTRESS QUICKLY

(after due consideration) No mercer's wife, I think. She came with two patched footmen and smelled of gentility;—Master Dumbleton's father was a mercer; but he had red hair;—she is old;—and I could never abide red hair.

FALSTAFF

No matter! I can love this lady, be she a very Witch of Endor. Observe what a thing it is to be a proper man, Bardolph! She hath marked me;—in public, perhaps; on the street, it may be;—and then, I warrant you, made such eyes! and sighed such sighs! and lain awake o' nights, thinking of a pleasing portly gentleman, whom, were I not modesty's self, I might name;—and I, all this while, not knowing! Fetch me my book of riddles and my sonnets, that I may speak smoothly. Why was my beard not combed this morning? No matter, it will serve. Have I no better cloak than this?

MISTRESS QUICKLY

(who has been looking out of the window) Come, but your worship must begin with unwashed hands, for old Madame Wishfor't and her two country louts are even now at the door.

FALSTAFF

Avaunt, minions. Avaunt! Conduct the lady hither, hostess; Bardolph another cup of sack. We will ruffle it, lad, and go to France all gold like Midas! Are mine eyes too red? I must look sad, you know, and sigh very pitifully. Ah, we will ruffle it! Another cup of sack, Bardolph;—I am a rogue if I have drunk to-day. And avaunt! vanish! for the lady comes! (He throws himself into what he feels is a gallant attitude, but that is one that suggests to the audience a man suddenly palsied trying to imitate a turkey cock and struts to the door. The lady that enters is on the staid side of sixty, but the years have touched her with unwonted kindness and her form is still unbent, her countenance, although bloodless and deep furrowed still bears the traces of great beauty and she is unquestionably a person of breeding. SIR JOHN advances to her with his peculiar strut; indubitably he feels himself a miracle of elegance.)

FALSTAFF

See, from the glowing East, Aurora Comes! Madam permit me to welcome you to my poor apartments; they are not worthy...

LADY SYLVIA

I would see Sir John Falstaff, sir.

FALSTAFF

Indeed, Madam, if those bright eyes—whose glances have already cut my poor heart into as many pieces as the man in the front of the almanac—will but desist for a moment from such butcher's work and do their proper duty, you will have little trouble in finding the bluff soldier you seek.

LADY SYLVIA

Are you Sir John? The son of old Sir Edward Falstaff of Norfolk?

FALSTAFF

His wife hath frequently assured me so, and to confirm her evidence I have about me a certain villainous thirst that did plague Sir Edward sorely in his lifetime and came to me with his other chattels. The property I have expended long since; but no Jew will advance me a maravedi on the Falstaff thirst. It is a priceless commodity, not to be bought or sold; you might as soon quench it.

LADY SYLVIA

I would not have known you, but, I have not seen you these forty years.

FALSTAFF

Faith, Madam, the great pilferer Time hath taken away a little from my hair, and somewhat added—saving your presence—to my belly; and my face hath not been improved by being the grindstone for some hundred swords. But I do not know you.

LADY SYLVIA

I am Sylvia Vernon. And once years ago I was Sylvia Darke.

FALSTAFF

I remember. (His voice changes, he also loses his strut as he hands LADY SYLVIA to the great chair.)

LADY SYLVIA

(after a long pause) A long time ago. Time hath dealt harshly with us both, John;—the name hath a sweet savor. I am an old woman now. And you?

FALSTAFF

I would not have known you. *(Resentfully)* What do you here?

LADY SYLVIA

My son goes to the wars and I am come to bid him farewell; yet I should not tarry in London for my lord is feeble and hath constant need of me. But I, an old woman, am yet vain enough to steal these few moments from him who needs me, to see for the last time, mayhap, him who once was my very dear friend.

FALSTAFF

I was never your friend, Sylvia.

LADY SYLVIA

(with a wistful smile) Ah the old wrangle. My dear and very honored lover, then; and I am come to see him here.

FALSTAFF

Ay... 'Tis a quiet orderly place, where I bestow my patronage; the woman of the house had a husband once in my company. God rest his soul! he bore a good pike. He retired in his old age and 'stablished this tavern where he passed his declining years, till death called him gently away from this naughty world. God rest his soul, say I. *(aside)* God wot, I cannot tell her that the

rogue was knocked over the head with a joint-stool while rifling the pockets of a drunken roisterer!

LADY SYLVIA

And you for old memories' sake yet aid his widow? That is like you, John. (*There is a long silence in which the crackling of the fire can be plainly heard.*) And are you sorry that I come again, in a worse body, John, strange and time ruined?

FALSTAFF

Sorry?... No, faith! but there are some ghosts that will not easily bear raising and you have raised one.

LADY SYLVIA

We have summoned up no very fearful spectre, I think. At most no worse than a pallid gentle spirit that speaks—to me at least—of a boy and a girl who loved each other and were very happy a great while ago.

FALSTAFF

And you come hither to seek that boy? The boy that went mad and rhymed of you in those far off dusty years? He is quite dead, my lady, he was drowned, mayhap in a cup of wine; or he was slain, perchance, by some few light women. I know not how he died. But he is quite dead, my lady, and I had not been haunted by his ghost until to-day. (*He breaks into a fit of unromantic coughing*)

LADY SYLVIA

He was a dear boy. A boy who loved a young maid very truly; a boy that found the maid's father too strong and shrewd for desperate young lovers—eh, how long ago it seems and what a flood of tears the poor maid shed at being parted from that dear boy.

FALSTAFF

Faith! the rogue had his good points.

LADY SYLVIA

Ah, John, you have not forgotten, I know and you will believe me that I am heartily sorry for the pain I brought into your life.

FALSTAFF

My wounds heal easily—

LADY SYLVIA

For though my dear dead father was too wise for us, and knew it was for the best that I should not accept your love, believe me John, I always knew the value of it and have held it an honor that any woman must prize.

FALSTAFF

Dear Lady, the world is not altogether of your opinion.

LADY SYLVIA

I know not of the world, for we live away from it. But we have heard of you ever and anon; I have your life writ letter perfect these forty years or more.

FALSTAFF

You have heard of me?

LADY SYLVIA

As a gallant and brave soldier. Of how you fought at sea with Mowbray that was afterward Duke of Norfolk; of your knighthood by King Richard; of how you slew the Percy at Shrewsbury; and captured Coleville o' late in Yorkshire; and how the prince, that is now King, did love you above all other men; and in fine, of many splendid doings in the great world.

FALSTAFF

I have fought somewhat. But we are not Bevis of Southampton; we have slain no giants. Have you heard naught else?

LADY SYLVIA

Little else of note. But we are very proud of you at home in Norfolk. And such tales as I have heard I have woven together in one story; and I have told it many times to my children as we sat on the old Chapel steps at evening and the shadows lengthened across the lawn, and I bid them emulate this, the most perfect knight and gallant gentleman I have ever known. And they love you, I think, though but by repute.

(There is another long silence, finally—)

FALSTAFF

Do you still live at Winstead?

LADY SYLVIA

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