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978-1-108-05733-2 - The Life of Sir John Falstaff: With a Biography of the Knight from Authentic Sources

Robert Barnabas Brough Illustrated by George Cruikshank

Excerpt

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SIR JOHN FALSTAFF:

A Biography.

BOOK THE FIRST.

1352—1365.

I.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

THE early lives of heroic personages, born at a date anterior to the invention of parish registers, police sheets, and such vehicles of subordinate renown, are usually enveloped in mystery. This remark (which is not offered merely as a specimen of the writer's originality) does not, of course, apply to that highly favoured class of heroes who may be said to be born to the business, and to note down whose earliest heroic throes and struggles official chroniclers have been retained in all ages; but exclusively to the work-a-day or journeyman hero, who has had to establish himself in the heroic line from small beginnings—who has had, as it were, to build his own pedestal in the Temple of Fame, finding his own bricks, mortar, and wheelbarrows. This kind of construction, in all ages, necessitating an immense deal of labour and application, we generally find that by the time the pedestal is finished and the hero ready to mount it, his condition of wind and limb is no longer such as to enable him to do so with any remarkable degree of alacrity; and that he has but little time and eyesight left to enjoy the prospect afforded by his eminent position. In other words, by the time a great man has acquired such dimensions as to make him an object of public attention, it is generally at the moment when—like an over-blown soap-bubble—he is about to collapse into nothing. And what man who has travelled to distinction on foot cares—when he has changed his boots—to talk or be reminded of the mud he has walked through?

B

These reflections are peculiarly applicable to the case of SIR JOHN FALSTAFF,—the individual hero whose career it will be the business of these pages to trace. That great man, at the date of those sayings and achievements which have gained him a world-wide celebrity, was—in spite of his pardonable reluctance to admit the fact—already advanced in years. His own accounts of his early life are meagre in the extreme, and, justice compels us to add, by no means authentic. They are, in fact, confined to a rather vague statement, that he was “born at three o’clock in the afternoon, with a white head,” and other physical peculiarities, which would lead to a suspicion that the knight was not wholly free from a weakness common to great men of his epoch, namely, an ambition for the doubtful honours of a prodigious birth. A further assertion of early injuries, received through too assiduous application to certain ecclesiastical duties, must be regarded as equally apocryphal. Of the place of his birth, he makes no mention whatever; nor do we find, in his admirable conversations immortalised by the historian Shakspeare—to whose dramatic chronicles we shall frequently have to confess our obligations in the course of this history—any allusion to the character and circumstances of his parents.

But should the Biographer recoil before this merely negative obstacle of barrenness, at the outset of his researches—as though a traveller, with his mountain goal in sight, should sit down and despair because he sees the plain beneath obscured by intervening mists? Has not the difficulty of finding a needle in a bottle of hay (which, by the way, has always appeared to us a remarkable article to be kept in bottle) been greatly exaggerated? All you have to do, is to make sure that the needle is really in the bottle. Patience and a microscope will lead you to its discovery. It may be stated that between Sir John Falstaff and a needle there is not much resemblance, and that an allusion to anything microscopic in his case is inappropriate. We merely anticipate the objection that we may pass it over. The fact that our knight lived to the age of threescore odd is a proof (by induction) that he must have been born somewhere, and at a date anticipatory by some sixty odd years of that of his death. That he had the usual number of parents is at least probable. That he had received a good education, for his time, we have ample proof. These are great data to go upon. The needle is in the bottle. All we have to do, is to separate carefully the musty hay of antiquity, aided by the glass of investigation; to plunge boldly into the mists of contradictory evidence, and push our way patiently till we get to the mountain,—which, with the full length and breadth of Mr. George Cruikshank’s faithful historical portrait on our opening page before us, is perhaps a better image than the needle.

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

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Reader! think not that we are going to trouble you to hunt with us. Deem not that we should have presumed to appear before you till we had found the needle, and cleared it from the last hayseed. Like Mohammed, of the Arabian desert, — or Mr. Albert Smith, of the Egyptian Hall, — we have been to the mountain; and, imitating the more modern popular leader, appear before you, wand in hand, ready to describe the particulars of our ascent, with illustrations. The amplest materials for the Life of Sir John Falstaff are in our possession — from his birth, even to the date of that morning when, at three of the clock, a small white head (we reject the accompanying phenomena) made its first appearance in the world; to his boyhood, — where the moving panorama will pause awhile, at the court gate, to show you Thomas Mowbray's page breaking Skogan's head, on that doubly memorable day that also witnessed an encounter between Master William Shallow and Sampson Stockfish, a fruiterer; on, past his summer of manhood, to his glorious autumn, when our knight reaped sheaves of golden renown at Gadshill and at Shrewsbury; to that second Indian summer, when Sir John Falstaff, round and glorious as the harvest moon, could still attract the gilding rays of sunny Mistress Page's view; down to that cold winter night, between twelve and one — e'en at the turning of the tide! — when those fingers that of old had grasped the hilt and managed the target, fumbled with the sheets and played with flowers — when that voice that had been the mouthpiece of Wit itself, the igniting spark of wit in others, could only babble of green fields — till Sir John Falstaff's feet grew cold as any stone, and so upward and upward till all was as cold as any stone, even as that which careless, laughing workmen fell to hewing and chipping on the following day!

And where found we all this knowledge? It is no matter. In the pursuit of our task, we shall reject the pitiful, inartistic plan of modern historians, who are ever in such trepidation to stop you with their authorities, (as though a man should wear his tailor's receipt pinned to the collar of his coat, to show that the garment has been honestly come by!) but will rather imitate the independent manly fashion of the old chroniclers, who told their stories in a simple, straightforward manner, never caring to say whence they had them, but throwing them down in the world's face, like the gages of honest, chivalrous gentlemen, whose word might not be questioned. This rule we intend observing scrupulously; except, indeed, on occasions of necessity, when we may think proper to deviate from it.

Our edifice once raised, we have removed the scaffolding. The public is invited to enter.

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II.

BIRTH AND GENEALOGY OF SIR JOHN FALSTAFF.

John Falstaff was born in the city of London, at the Old Swan Tavern, near the Ebgate Stairs, at the north end of London Bridge, on the 23rd of January, 1352. It is to be regretted that the place of his birth, which, though much decayed, and frequently altered, retained its ancient name and usage for more than three centuries after the event which shed such lustre on its humble walls, should have been destroyed in the great fire of London; whereby, as is well known to antiquarians, the wharves and buildings in that part of the town were burnt down to the water's edge. By those who believe in idle presages, this circumstance of birth in a tavern will be deemed prophetic of a life foredoomed to be for the most part spent in such places, and, indeed, to end in one. But such vain speculations are as unworthy the historian's attention as their conclusion is anticipatory of his object.

For the extreme minuteness of the details we have been so fortunate as to acquire on this important event,—even to a special mention of the very room in which our hero's first cry was heard,—we are indebted to the accidental preservation of a family letter. The publication of this document entire, with necessary orthographical and idiomatic modifications, will not merely simplify this portion of our biographical studies, but will also afford the biographer an early opportunity of asserting the independent course he means to pursue, by setting at glorious defiance the rule laid down by himself for his own observance in the closing remarks of the foregoing chapter.

*To my very dear sweet Wife, the Lady Alice Falstaff, of Falstaff in Kent.
This with haste.*

“Written at the Gate-house, in Westminster, Jan. 24. 1353.

“My dear Sweet,—I think I am the most wretched man in all England, I and no other am he. I must fain tell you the truth, which, in my great love and care for thy sweet peace, I have hitherto kept back, and would have done, cost me what might, had it been longer possible. I lie here at the suit of one Bruno, a Longobard, for a pitiful sum I was constrained to borrow of him, and for which he exacts fifty in the hundred usury. And for a miserable debt like this*, am I to be made wretched, and kept from my dear wife and child? Did I not say I was the most unhappy wretch in England? Oh! pity me, my dear wife; I am here in a foul room, with greasy rogues and villains. If I send out for civet to sweeten the

* It is worthy of remark that Sir Gilbert does not admit his lady so far into his confidence as to mention the amount.

LETTER TO LADY ALICE FALSTAFF.

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air, the knaves rob me in my exchange, and bring me in foul stuff. Truly I am in the hands of thieves and robbers; for they charge me sixpence the quart for thin drugged wine, when the best Gascon wine is but fourpence the gallon in the Vintry. Thou seest how impossible it is for me to send thee the money thou dost require. Already have I shortened my gold chain by four links, for meat and drink. I may not part with more, for there be here confined certain gentlemen of the court, before whom I am fain to keep up my estate. But for all their gentility, I suspect some of their number to be no better than false knaves and cogs. For last night, they decoyed me, through my distraction and unbearable misery on thy account, into play, and stripped me of my last gold Florence, as I do think by foul means. Oh, my dear wife! how thankful thou shouldst be to be spared the sharing in my troubles! Do not grieve nor fret at the thought that they were brought on by my great love for thee, as indeed they were; for was it not my zeal to have thee make a figure at court that first got me in such debt? But have I not cheerfully borne all for thee,—as thy love hath indeed well merited? Did I consider my rank and ancestry when thou didst witch me with thy rosy cheeks and blue eyes, though but the daughter of a low-born trader? Nay! I must dwell on it, for methinks thou dost sometimes rate my love too low. Did I not bear with thine ignoble kinsmen, till they took to reviling and slighting me? I believe thou art a changeling, thou pretty rogue! and none of their blood. I meant not to tell thee of this, but I am on the matter, and it must needs out. Yesterday, on my arrest, being at the end of my wits what to do, I sent a boy to thine uncle Simpkin the Tanner, saying, that in time of suffering, ill blood should cease, and I would be willing to forget all past differences so that he would come and release me with his surety. I shame to write his answer; but that thou shouldst know, for once and all, from what a churlish stock thy good fortune hath rescued thee, it must needs be told. He sent back word, that he had thought Sir Gilbert Falstaff had forgotten all past differences long ago, including a difference of a hundred and fifty golden marks; meaning the paltry sum I had of him on my receiving the grant of arms from the King's Majesty, whom heaven preserve! I could have wept for shame and vexation.

“And yesterday, our dear little Jack was a twelvemonth old! Pretty fellow, and I not near him, to load him with sweets and knick-knacks! He should go ever in Italian velvet and Flanders lace, had I my will. Thou shouldst know this, wife, without telling; and I own (though 'tis rarely I have to chide thee) there seemed lack of love and thoughtfulness in thy vexing me about trifling things amid all my troubles. With a heart breaking for lack of kindness and sympathy, I get a letter tormenting me about such petty grievances as hose and blankets. This was selfish, wife! The worst part of the winter is past, and the boy's homespun coat will serve well with a little piecing and darning; and for nether stocks, there is nothing like knitted wool. I must indeed urge thee to thrift, wife. It doth not behave a fallen house like ours, to waste in outward vanities; except, indeed, the wretched master, who is compelled to keep up a show in courts and cities. Thou knowest well the shifts I have been put to, to pass for a man of a hundred pounds a year, and avoid the sumptuary law. But these things are riddles to thee. I believe thou wouldst submit to see me forbidden the use of silk, gold, and silver, in my garments. Thou wouldst be content to see a man of my standing restricted to two courses of three dishes each. Well, it is not thy fault, but that of thy training.

“I would forgive thee in a greater matter than this, my sweeting, for the great love I bear thee; but I am nigh distracted with my sorrows, and know not what I write. Had it not been for those gentlemen knaves, who carried me to play with them last night (may the foul fiend seize them!), I should have gone mad. I thought of that time twelvemonth. The whole matter stood, as it were, on a picture before me. I remembered our landing at the Ebgate stairs, from the boat we took at Deptford, when thou wast taken ill. Say what thou wilt, thou shalt never persuade me but it was thy violence of temper hastened thy trouble. Thou wast well enough till it proved that I had brought thee to London without money, or preparation for thy condition. I acted (as I always do) for the best. Were there not brave rejoicings at Court, in honour of the new-founded order of knighthood, that I wished thee to see? and how

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could I get the money I wanted, from the churl, thy brother, which he refused, without thy presence? Thou dost not know, and never wilt know, what I suffered for thee at that time. I was too much moved to lend a hand, as they bore thee from the boat into the Old Swan. When they had taken thee up stairs, the hostess had to ply me with strong waters, in her little room, for more than an hour. They told me afterwards, I did nothing but exclaim, many times, 'The Flagon,— where the Flemish bed is!' which I had heard them name as the chamber thou wast to be carried to, and wherein our dear little Jack was soon afterwards born. (I pray you send down to Dame Cackle's orchard, and beg two of her finest last year's pears, the which present to master Jack as the gift of his good father.) How I rushed out of the house when I heard thy cries! I know not where I went, nor what company I fell into. I was as one possessed. And oh! what agonies I endured during the five days afterwards, when I was kept from visiting or having news of thee, through a rumour of the great pestilence breaking out again near London Bridge, for fear of bringing contagion in with me, which in thy weak state would have been fatal. Well! we shall all have our reward. But when I reflect that, during that trying time, none of thy heartless kinsfolk came near thee, I could even—— but 'tis no matter.

"But first to get me out of this accursed place. If I have not fifty silver marks by Wednesday, I am a dead man. I cannot longer endure the knowledge of thine unprotected state. Thou hast no great need of thy cramoisy velvet gown in thy secluded life. Lambert can dispose of it secretly in Sandwich, where we are not known. (Thou seest I am thoughtful to spare thee shame.) Let him also ride to Canterbury, with thy golden bracelets, and little Jack's baptism cup and trencher. They will fetch together some ten silver marks. Thou canst borrow twenty marks from Dame Adlyn, the yeoman's wife. In times like these, we must not be over nice; and I withdraw the prohibition I have laid on this good woman's visits to Falstaff. Thou mayest even call her gossip at a pinch. Make up the rest as thou canst. Lambert himself must have saved money in our service. Promise him increase of wage (though, indeed, the last three years have been indifferently paid), and dwell upon a vassal's duty to his lord. At any rate, I *must have the money*. When thou hast raised it, let Lambert gallop post to London, and spare no expense, in order that he may arrive not later than Wednesday, for the river is already frozen over, and if the frost holds, there are to be sports on the ice, with the king and all the princes present, which I would not miss for a barony.

"I would answer thine inquiries about the blankets and under-clothing, but it is so cold in this detestable place, that I can no longer hold a pen. Happily thou art spared this.

"I commend thee to the care of Heaven, my beloved wife.

"GILBERT FALSTAFF,
" *Eques et armig.*"*

This Gilbert Falstaff was the tenth in lineal descent from Hundwulf Falstaff, the great Saxon leader who performed such signal service to William Duke of Normandy, on that prince's memorable invasion of England, and of whose exploits and succession it behoves us here to speak.

A numerous and well-armed troop of patriotic English noblemen had been enrolled some weeks for the purpose of resisting the invaders, but had been detained, debating, in a truly English manner, as to the constitutional means

* This remarkable epistle (which is justly esteemed the gem of the Stronggate Collection) appears rather to have owed its preservation to the fact of its being scrawled on the backs of leaves torn out of a costly illuminated chronicle of the period—the authorship of which is apocryphal,—than to any intrinsic merit of composition. This fact may be accepted as significant of the hereditary Falstaff character.—ED.

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ORIGIN OF THE FAMILY NAME.

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of choosing a leader, till news reached them of the landing of the Norman, at a distance of a hundred and fifty miles from their camp. They were about to disperse in a panic, when Hundwulf Falstaff appeared suddenly amongst them, and, by dint of much eloquence,—also, it must be added, of some secret influences in the camp, wherein he had skilfully introduced his agents,—succeeded in rallying these disheartened warriors, and inducing them to accept him as their leader. He led them by forced marches to the Isle of Thanet, where they bivouacked in a chalk pit; expecting to come up with the main Saxon army encamped near Hastings, under prince Harold, who was notoriously in want of soldiers, on the following day. Here, while divested of their armour—as had been preconcerted between Falstaff and Duke William—they were fallen upon by a superior body of Normans and cut to pieces.

For this admirable piece of generalship and loyalty, whereby the victorious Normans were spared the opposition of some hundreds of warriors, the flower of English chivalry, Hundwulf Falstaff—contrary to the general treatment of the Saxon proprietors—was allowed not only to retain his own lands (his title to which had, indeed, been disputed in favour of his nephew, Essel Falstaff, who, serving under his uncle, had been engaged in the action of the chalk pit, and died, leaving no issue), but to add to them the^apossessions of many gentlemen, his neighbours, who had perished in the glorious engagement above mentioned.

The Falstaff estates, on the settlement of the land, were found to be as spacious and wealthy as those of many powerful barons. Nevertheless, their holder was not suffered to take the rank of nobility, an honour he had been led to expect: nay, on his humble petition for the lesser dignity of knighthood—backed by a memorial of his services to the crown—he was informed that he should think himself fortunate to be allowed to retain possession of his estates, and that the honours of chivalry were not for a False Thief like him.

This *sobriquet* of *False Thief* stuck to him, and has been by many writers asserted to be the origin of the family name—corrupted into *Fals-taff*. Nothing is easier of refutation. In the first place, it is improbable that a gentleman should voluntarily adopt, as his family title, a term of ignominy and reproach. Moreover, the name is known to be of ancient Saxon origin, derived from *Fel-staf*—felling-staff, or cudgel; clearly tracing the antiquity of the house as far back as those barbarous times when the savage German warriors took their names from their favourite weapons. There is a curious old record (in the Strongate Collection), of the time of Edward the Elder, in which one Keingelt Felstaf appeals to the brethren of a Sodalitium, or fra-

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ternity of mutual protection, whereof he is a member, to subscribe two marks apiece towards the liquidation of a fine levied on him for the murder of three ceorles, which he is unable to pay, owing to the straitened circumstances of his family. He adds, that there is another fine against him for a like offence; but the victim in this case being only a Welchman, he believes he will be able to meet it without assistance.

Hundwulf Falstaff died in 1088, at the age of fifty-four, it is supposed of a broken heart, caused by the ingratitude of a monarch whom he had so efficiently and loyally served, aggravated by the unnatural conduct of his two daughters, whom, in pursuance of his cherished scheme of attaching himself to the Norman aristocracy, he had bestowed in marriage, with the dowry of a substantial estate apiece, on two poor knights of Guienne,—Philip le Borgne and Hugues le Bossu (surnamed Bandylegs). These ladies immediately after their marriage deserted their munificent parent for the gaieties of a court life; refusing even to recognise him in the public thoroughfares, except on pressing occasion for pecuniary assistance. The Falstaff possessions were further crippled in this reign by repeated gifts to divers Norman noblemen, who being chivalrous gentlemen, with an instinctive abhorrence of wrong, got up frequent agitations against Hundwulf; suggesting to their monarch the propriety of hanging up that chieftain for his glaring political immorality, and distributing his estates among themselves—men of spotless integrity. These agitations generally broke out at a time of national pressure, and Hundwulf found no means of allaying them but the one already alluded to. Thus, early after its acquisition, were the seeds of decay sown in the very system of the great Falstaff estate; which, as the sequel will prove, may be likened to a strong man attacked with a mortal disease, who may live and struggle for years, but whose every effort to recover strength serves to hasten his dissolution.

The Falstaffs, in every reign, were staunch courtiers. Hundwulf's son and successor, Aymer de Falstaffe (the name had been Gallicised by his father), was a great favourite with William the Second, by whom he was knighted. In proof of the good fellowship that existed between the monarch and subject, the latter is not merely known to have lent his royal master repeated sums of money (which, owing to the troubles of the reign, were never accounted for), but is rumoured to have embraced the Jewish religion with that humorous monarch. This calumny remained as a stigma on the family for three generations, to the great annoyance of its representatives. Any suspicion, however, of leaning to the tenets of Judaism was triumphantly refuted in the reign of Henry the Second, by Roger de Falstaffe (fourth in descent from Hundwulf), who, lacking the means of keeping up his dignity at court,

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PETER DE FALSTAFFE A POETASTER.

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entrapped two travelling Jews into his castle, whom, with a view to making them divulge the secret of their hidden treasures, he placed upon hot plates over a slow fire, having previously extracted their teeth, according to the custom of the period. The cries of these wretches (who, with the obstinacy of their race, declared they were only poor Jewish youths, driven out of the Empire and in search of help from a wealthy kinsman in London) attracted the attention of a passing troop of King Henry's private guards. The leniency of that monarch towards the Jews has been commented on with due severity by the clerical writers of the period. It is certain that his persistent protection of those outcasts, in their lives and properties, was difficult of explanation to all well-disposed thinkers of that time, except on the ground of an utter absence of religious principle. Be that as it may, the king's guards besieged Falstaff Castle, and took the two Jews off the fire ere they were half done. Roger was tried for the offence, and sentenced to perpetual banishment, with confiscation of his estates.

Peter de Falstaffe, his son, followed Cœur de Lion to the Crusades; and, in consideration of faithful services, was reinstated by that monarch in the possession of a considerable portion of his inheritance. Peter, who was an enthusiastic hero-worshipper, imitated his lion-hearted benefactor in everything—even to adopting the Royal mistake of wishing to be thought a poet. It was a received maxim among the critics of the period, that there was only one man living capable of writing worse poetry than the king's—that man being Peter de Falstaffe. Falstaff Park, in his time, was known by the ignominious title of Fiddler's Green, in allusion to the droves of minstrels, troubadours, and illuminators who, with their wives and families, flocked to enjoy the munificent hospitality of Peter's mansion, where (strangely belying their ancient nomadic reputation) they took up their quarters as a permanency. Peter died in 1132, much in debt to the Gascon merchants of the Vintry, and deeply regretted—by the minstrels and illuminators.

The first act of Haulbert, his son, was to clear the premises of those gifted occupants; in which work of ejection he was assisted by a faithful bulldog. He administered to his father's literary effects by tying them up in a bundle, and disposing of them for something under the cost price of the vellum to a Lombard broker in the city of London.

There is a blank in history as to the fate of Haulbert. He is known to have been a man of violent character, and to have died somewhere towards the end of Henry the Third's reign. In this reign, several noblemen and country gentlemen were executed for highway robbery.

Henry Falstaff (son of Haulbert, and seventh in descent from Hundwulf), in the time of Edward the First, restored the family name to its ancient

spelling. Inspired by the successful efforts of this prince to fuse the various elements of the nation into one common English whole, he attempted to restore the old Saxon ways on his estate. He called himself Hengist; and, amongst other obsolete institutions, revived the Hirlas Horn, with the customs of Drink Hael and Waes Hael. These—by way of enforcing precept by example—he made frequent use of in his own person; till, like many other inventors and reformers, he fell a victim to his own devices. His death, however, was accelerated by a singular circumstance. He had a number of brass collars made, intending to fix them about the necks of his tenantry, or, as he preferred to consider them, his ceorles, after the manner of the ancient Saxon proprietors. Meeting with a prosperous farmer on his estate, one Snogg, the son of Huffkin, he requested the latter to kneel down that he might affix the badge of servitude, which, he assured him in the blandest and most engaging manner, was the old English way of doing things. Snogg replied, that he knew another old English way of doing things, namely, the way to give anybody a good thrashing who attempted any liberties with a free-born Briton. Snogg explained this method of proceeding in a practical manner, and left his landlord (already enfeebled by copious reference to the Hirlas Horn) for dead on the field. Snogg's life was declared forfeit; but as he was very popular among his labourers, and had some excellent pitchforks at his disposal, he succeeded in keeping the forces of the sheriff at bay for a considerable period, receiving the extreme unction at the age of ninety-seven, in the reign of King Edward the Second.

Uffa, son of Hengist Falstaff, was a wit, and court favourite in the reign of Edward the Second. None of his good things have been preserved; but as a proof that his facetious powers were of no mean order, it is on record that towards the close of Edward's reign he received a crown from the privy purse for making that unhappy monarch laugh; an achievement which, considering his Majesty's lively position at the time, could not have been easy. What the exact jest was is unknown; but it seems to have been levelled at Roger Mortimer, the leader of the queen's faction. For, on the seizure of the king's person, as Falstaff (dreading the resentment of the victorious party) was hastening to conceal himself on his estate, he was arrested by Mortimer himself, at the head of a troop. On being told the name of his prisoner, Mortimer said, "So! this is the knave who got a crown for a jest at my expense. He owes me a crown in common equity; and by the Lord he shall pay it. Let his head be lopped off straightway." Which sentence was put into immediate execution.

The above anecdote is in part mentioned by Hume.

Geoffrey Falstaff, son of the sprightly but ill-fated Uffa, lost a limb in the