

LAMENT FOR FALSTAFF

by BRANCH CABELL

WHEN you departed this life, Sir John—at your country place, in Norfolk in the November of 1459—none doubts that you died, as became a pre-eminently religious English gentleman, in the hope of a glorious resurrection. How very mercifully was hid from you the too speedy fulfilment of your aspirations! For you had looked to be revived by Dan Gabriel, his dreadful and holy trumpet: in no wild fever dream could it by any chance have occurred to you that a lewd heathen goddess, the Muse of Comedy, would prove your awakener—and to an apotheosis how incredible, how sordid, how cruel, how delightful!

If I become exclamatory, Sir, it is because no considerate person can regard the unfairness of your doom without giving a loose to some natural emotion. For eighty and more years you had lived with piety and intelligence and honor, with a clear conscience and your due of worldly success. You had been an admired soldier during at least thirty-five of these years. Throughout some two or three campaigns, indeed, you had commanded all the English expeditionary forces in the French wars, winning as generalissimo the great battle of the Herrings, in which you fought against the combined armies of Scotland and France; you had been governor of Maine and Anjou; you were a knight of the Garter; and toward the end of your life you had thrived notably as a retired capitalist, as an extensive landholder, as an open-handed philanthropist, and as a judicious patron of learning.

You had been yelped at, of course, by the envious, like any other prospering person; and a charge of military blunders you were once forced to repel—with entire success. The only failings more or less plausibly imputed to you appear to have been a certain rigor in your business dealings, as an unlenient creditor, and something of fanaticism in the practise of your religion. You inclined, in brief, to be a bit of a Puritan a good while before puritanism had been labelled. Such, then, was the honored and austere gentleman who died in the November of 1459; and whom that bad baggage, Thalia, saw fit to revive prematurely about a hundred and forty years later.

It skills not, Sir John, to repeat through what causes you were thrust up into a pillory originally meant for your colleague in arms, Lord Cobham. The point is that at this time, about 1599, a poet gave you new life upon earth, at a price which to a man of your known business principles, and of your painstaking respectability, might well have appeared exorbitant.

Since with your other virtues you combined a gentleman's share of scholarship (as befitted a co-founder of St. Mary Magdalen College) you will recall, no doubt, that of the great Greek captain Achilles it is recorded how, in Ades' dim realm, he declared to his former comrade, to wily Odysseus, that it was better to live in earth's sunlight as a slave than to be king over the shadowy nations of the dead. But I question if even this feebly whining Achilles (upon whose heroic nature death seems to have acted rather deleteriously) would have been content to live again as the Sir John Falstaff whom the last three centuries have known and—it is the bitter truth, Sir—have laughed at.

For the poet who revived you, Sir John, has left you not one shielding rag of gentility. He has set you a-stagger among us, an obscene gross belching tun-belly, out at the elbows, reeking of sack, gray with iniquity. Of the skilled and triumphant soldier this poet has made a faintheart; of the Puritan, a wench; of the magnate, a wastrel; and of the staid business man, a Dionysiac choregus of all riot, immortality's darling. He has made of you, in brief, a calumny so engaging to human fancy that by no chance will mankind ever give up this counterfeit Falstaff in order to accord you, Sir, the respect and the praise which, living, you earned amply.

Your case is outrageous; no man was ever libelled with more striking injustice; but your case is hopeless.

It is at all times the privilege of the artist to recreate history; provided only he has genius, he can elude punishment and compel belief; but I know of no instance in which this birthright has been abused more wantonly than when Shakespeare gave to the future his caricature of Sir John Falstaff. For Thackeray, or for Dumas, or for Maurice Hewlett—to cite but three pre-

varicators among thousands—when they libelled severally the Old Chevalier, Catherine de Medici, or Mary Stuart, there was at least the excuse that the story they had in hand moved on the hinges of calumny. The events of their victims' lives and the nature of their victims' characters have been somewhat misrepresented, for utilitarian ends, for the plot's sake; and at worst, the sin is an affair of recoloring and of shifted emphases.

But you, Sir John, have been endowed with all the vices you shunned; stripped of the many virtues which you practised faithfully throughout eighty and some years; and thrust into miry actions with which you had no more to do than had Aretino or King Arthur. As a member of the Protestant Episcopal Church, I cannot doubt that the soul of William Shakespeare is eternally damned for his parody of a devout Christian gentleman: and I doubt not, either, that upon holidays and the major saints' days you are permitted to peep in at his torments.

It is your full due.

Yet, as a writer, I am conscious of some little sneaking complacency. Heaven made the flesh and blood Falstaff of the very best human material, turning out an exceptionally fine specimen of divine craftsmanship. By-and-by (through what exact causes we shall not ever know) a mere writer, the approved captain of my clan, made us another Falstaff after his own notions, a lewd and thorough-going and high-spirited libel, a gay trucidation of truth. And promptly the romance drove the reality out of the field of human beliefs.

I educe a quaint moral which—to your somewhat puritanic ears, Sir John—it seems wiser not to express explicitly.

I educe also, Sir John, that your virtues have gone unrewarded, and that for once the memory of the just is not blessed.

And I educe, in taking leave of you, that the innate depravity of man's nature is well attested by the fact that before your undeserved obloquy we stand charmed, and applaud the outrage delightedly. For Heaven made you good and great and successful; but art has made you amusing.