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Love-Letters of Falstaff

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I

IT was, indeed, Sir John Falstaff; very old now, and very shaky after a night of hard drinking. He came into the room singing, as was often his custom when alone, and found Bardolph bending over the chest, while Mistress Quickly demurely stirred the fire, which winked at the old knight very knowingly.

"Then came the bold Sir Caradoc," carolled Sir John. "Ah, mistress, what news?—And eke Sir Pellinore.—Did I rage last night, Bardolph? Was I a very Bedlamite?"

"As mine own bruises can testify," asserted Bardolph. "Had each one of them a tongue, they might raise a clamor whereby Babel were as 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, had until you knocked them out last night—that will, right willingly, aid him to digest it."

"Three, say you?" asked the knight, sinking into his great chair set ready for him beside the fire. "I would have my valor in all men's mouths, but not in this fashion; 'tis too biting a jest. I am glad it was no worse; I have a tender conscience, and that mad fellow of the north, Hotspur, sits heavily upon it; thus, Percy being slain, is *per se* avenged; a plague on him! We fought a long hour by Shrewsbury clock, but I gave no quarter, I promise you; though, i' faith, the jest is ill-timed. 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 some threescore. I doubt Agamemnon slept not well o' nights. Three, say you? Give the fellow a crown apiece for his mouldy teeth, an thou hast them; an thou hast not, bid him eschew drunkenness,

whereby his misfortune hath befallen him."

"Indeed, sir," began Bardolph, "I doubt—"

"Doubt not, sirrah!" cried Sir John, testily. "Was not the apostle reprov'd for that same sin? Thou art a very Didymus, Bardolph;—a very incredulous paynim, a most unspeculative rogue! Have I carracks trading i' the Indies? Have I robbed the exchequer of late? Have I the Golden Fleece for a cloak? Sooth, 'tis very paltry gimlet; and that augurs not well for his suit. Does he take me for a raven to feed him in the wilderness? Tell him there are no such ravens hereabouts; else had I long since limed the house-tops and set springes in the gutters. Inform him, knave, that my purse is no better lined than his own broken costard; 'tis 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-nest, than a madman's eye, or, in fine, than the friendship of a king."

"But you have wealthy friends, Sir John," suggested the hostess of the Boar's Head Tavern, who had been waiting with considerable impatience for an opportunity to join in the conversation.

"Friends, dame?" asked the knight, and cowered 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. 'Tis a censorious world: these sprouting aldermen, these bacon-fed rogues, have eschewed my friendship; 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 vaward of my youth, mistress."

He nodded his head very gravely; then reached for a cup of sack that Bardolph held at his elbow.

"Indeed, I know not what your worship will do," said Mistress Quickly, rather sadly.

"Faith!" answered Sir John, finishing the sack and grinning in a somewhat ghastly fashion, "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 needs convert my last doublet into a mask, and turn highwayman in my shirt. I will take purses yet, i' faith, as I did at Gadshill, where that scurvy Poins, and him that is now King, and some twoscore other knaves, did rob me; yet I peppered some of them, I warrant you!"

"You must be rid of me, then, master," interpolated Bardolph. "I have no need of a hempen collar wherein to dance on nothing."

"Ah, well!" said the knight, stretching himself in his chair as the warmth of the liquor coursed through his old blood, "I, too, would be loath to break the gallows' back! For fear of halts, we must alter our way of living; we must live close, Bardolph, till the wars make us either Croesuses or food for crows. Ah, go thy ways, old Jack; there live not three good men unchanged in England, and one of them is fat and grows old. We must live close, Bardolph; we must forswear drinking and wenching! There's lime in this sack, you rogue; give me another cup."

"I pray you, hostess," he continued, "remember that Doll Tearsheet sups with me to-night; have a capon of the best, and be not sparing of the wine. I'll repay you, i' faith, when we young fellows return from France, all laden with rings and brooches and such trumperies like your Lincolnshire peddlers 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 a tapster yet; we will walk on lilies, I warrant you."

"Indeed, sir," said Mistress Quickly, evidently in perfect earnest, "your worship is as welcome to my pantry as the

mice—a pox on 'em!—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 you looked for the lady who was here but now;—she was a roaring lion among the mice."

"What lady?" cried Sir John, with great animation. "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."

"No mercer's wife, I think," answered Mistress Quickly, after consideration. "She came in her coach and smacked of gentility;—Master Dombledon's father was a mercer; but he had red hair;—she is old;—I could never abide red hair."

"No matter!" cried the knight. "I can love her, be she a very Witch of Endor. 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 man, whom, were my besetting sin not modesty, 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? Have I no better cloak than this?"

"By'r lady!" said Mistress Quickly, who had been looking out of the window, "your worship must begin with unwashed hands, for the coach is at the door."

"Avaunt, minions!" cried the knight. "Avaunt! Conduct the lady hither at once, 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 threw himself into a graceful attitude, suggestive of one suddenly stricken with the palsy, and strutted like a turkey-cock towards the door to greet his unknown visitor.

II

She was by no means what he had expected in her personal appearance; for she was considerably over sixty. But time had treated her kindly: her form was still unbent, and her countenance, though very pale, bore the traces of great beauty; and, whatever the nature of her errand, the woman who stood in the doorway was unquestionably a person of breeding.

Sir John advanced towards her with such grace as he might muster; to speak plainly, his gout, coupled with his great bulk, did not permit an overpowering amount.

"See, from the glowing East Aurora comes," he chirped. "Madam, permit me to welcome you to my poor apartments; they are not worthy of your—"

"I would see Sir John Falstaff, sir," said the lady, courteously, but with great reserve of manner, looking him full in the face as she said this.

"Indeed, madam," suggested Sir John, "an those bright eyes—whose glances have already cut my poor heart into as many pieces as the man i' the front of the almanac—will but do their proper duty, you will have little trouble in finding the man you seek."

"Are you Sir John?" asked the lady, as though suspecting a jest, or perhaps, in sheer astonishment. "The son of old Sir John Falstaff, of Norfolk?"

"His wife hath frequently assured me so," said Sir John, very gravely; "and to confirm her evidence I have a certain villanous thirst about me that did plague the old Sir John 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."

"I should not have known you," said the lady, wonderingly; "but," she added, "I have not seen you these forty years."

"Faith, madam," grinned the knight, "the great pilferer Time hath since then taken away a little from my hair, and added somewhat (saving your presence) to my paunch; and my face hath not been improved by being the grindstone for some hundred swords. But I do not know you."

"I am Sylvia Vernon," said the lady.

"I remember," said the knight, and his

voice was strangely altered. Bardolph would not have known it; nor, perhaps, would he have recognized his master's manner as he handed the lady to a seat.

"Ah," continued the lady, sadly, after a pause during which the crackling of the fire was very audible, "time hath dealt harshly with us both, John;—the name hath a sweet savor. I am an old, old woman now."

"I should not have known you," said Sir John; then asked, almost resentfully, "What do you here?"

"My son goes to the wars," she answered, "and I am come to bid him farewell; yet I may not tarry in London, for my lord is very feeble now and hath need of me. And 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 was once my very dear friend."

"I was never your friend, Sylvia," said Sir John, softly.

"Ah, the old word!" said the lady, and smiled a little wistfully. "My dear and very honored lover, then; and I am come to see him here."

"Ay!" interrupted Sir John, rather hastily; then proceeded, glowing with benevolence: "A quiet, orderly place, where I bestow my patronage; the woman of the house had once a husband 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!"

This was a somewhat poetical version of the taking-off of Goodman Quickly, who had been knocked over the head with a joint-stool while rifling the pockets of a drunken guest; but perhaps Sir John wished to speak well of the dead.

"And you for old memories' sake yet aid his widow?" murmured the lady; and continued, "'Tis like you, John."

There was another silence, and the fire crackled more loudly than ever.

"You are not sorry that I came?" asked the lady at last.

"Sorry?" echoed Sir John; and, ungallant as it was, hesitated a moment before replying: "No, i' faith! But there are some ghosts that will not easily bear raising, and you have raised one."

"We have raised no very fearful ghost, I think," said the lady; "at most, no worse than a pallid, gentle spirit that speaks—to me, at least—of a boy and a girl that loved one another and were very happy a great while ago."

"Are you come hither to seek that boy?" asked the knight, and chuckled, though not very merrily. "The boy that went mad and rhymed of you in those far-off years? He is quite dead, my lady; he was drowned, mayhap, in a cup of wine. Or he was slain, perchance, by a few light women. I know not how he died. But he is quite dead, my lady; and I was not haunted by his ghost until to-day."

He stared down at the floor as he ended; then choked, and broke into a fit of coughing that he would have given ten pounds, had he had them, to prevent.

"He was a dear boy," said the lady; "a boy who loved a woman very truly; a boy that, finding her heart given to another, yielded his right in her, and went forth into the world without protest."

"Faith!" admitted Sir John, "the rogue had his good points."

"Ah, John, you have not forgotten, I know," the lady said, looking up into his face; "and you will believe me that I am very, very heartily sorry for the pain I brought into your life?"

"My wounds heal easily," said Sir John.

"For though I might not accept your love," went on the lady, "I know its value; 'tis an honor that any woman might be proud of."

"Dear lady," suggested the knight, with a slight grimace, "the world is not altogether of your opinion."

"I know not of the world," she said; "for we live very quietly. But we have heard of you ever and anon; I have your life quite letter-perfect for these forty years or more."

"You have heard of me?" asked Sir John; and he looked rather uncomfortable.

"As a gallant and brave soldier," she answered; "of how you fought at sea with Mowbray that was afterward Duke of Norfolk; of your knighthood by King Richard; and how you slew the Percy at Shrewsbury; and captured Coleville o' late in Yorkshire; and how the Prince,

that now is King, did love you above all men; and, in fine, I know not what."

Sir John heaved a sigh of relief; then said, with commendable modesty: "I have fought somewhat. But we are not Bevis of Southampton; we have slain no giants. Heard you naught else?"

"Little else of note," replied the lady; and went on, very quietly: "But we are very proud of you at home. 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 bid them emulate this, the most perfect knight and gallant gentleman that I have known. And they love you, I think, though but by repute."

Once more silence fell between them; and the fire grinned wickedly at its reflection in the old chest, as though it knew a most entertaining secret.

"Do you yet live at Winstead?" asked Sir John, half idly.

"Yes," she answered; "in the old house. It is little changed, but there are many changes about."

"Is Moll yet with you that did once carry our letters?" queried the knight.

"Married to Hodge, the tanner," the lady said; "and dead long since."

"And all our merry company?" Sir John went on. "Marian? And Hal? And Phyllis? And Kate? 'Tis like a breath of country air to speak the old names once more."

"All dead," she answered, in a hushed voice, "save Kate, and she is very old; for Robert was slain in the French wars, and she hath never married."

"All dead," Sir John informed the fire, very confidentially; then laughed, though his bloodshot eyes were not merry. "This same Death hath a wide maw. But you, at least, have had a happy life."

"I have been happy," she said, "but I am a little weary now. My dear lord is very feeble, and hath grown querulous of late, and I too am old."

"Faith!" agreed Sir John, "we are both very old; and I had not known it, my lady, until to-day."

Again there was silence, and again the fire leapt with delight at the jest.

The lady rose suddenly and cried, "I would I had not come!"

"'Tis but a feeble sorrow you have brought," Sir John reassured her; and continued, slowly, "Our blood runs thinner than of yore; and we may no longer, I think, either sorrow or rejoice very deeply."

"It is true," she said; "but I must go; and, indeed, I would to God I had not come!"

Sir John was silent; he bowed his head, in acquiescence perhaps, in meditation it may have been; but he said nothing.

"Yet," she said, "there is something here that I must keep no longer; 'tis all the letters you ever writ me."

So saying, she handed Sir John a little packet of very old and very faded papers. He turned them over awkwardly in his hand for a moment; then stared at them; then at the lady.

"You have kept them—always?" he cried.

"Yes," she said, very wistfully; "but I must not any longer. 'Tis a villanous example to my grandchildren," she added, and smiled. "Farewell."

Sir John drew close to her and caught her by both wrists. He held himself very erect as he looked into her eyes for a moment—a habit to which he was not prone—and said, wonderingly, "How I loved you!"

"I know," she answered, gently; then looked into his bloated face, proudly and very tenderly. "And I thank you for your gift, my lover—O brave true lover, whose love I was ne'er ashamed to own! Farewell, my dear; yet a little while, and I go to seek the boy and girl we wot of."

"I shall not be long, madam," said Sir John. "Speak a kind word for me in heaven; for," he added, slowly, "I shall have sore need of it."

She had reached the door by now. "You are not sorry that I came?" asked she.

Sir John answered, very sadly: "There are many wrinkles now in your dear face, my lady; the great eyes are a little dimmed, and the sweet laughter is a little cracked; but I am not sorry to have seen you thus. For I have loved no woman truly save you alone; and I am not sorry. Farewell." And he bowed his old gray head for a moment over her lifted shrivelled fingers.

III

"Lord, Lord, how subject we old men are to the vice of lying!" chuckled Sir John, and threw himself back in his chair and mumbled over the jest.

"Yet 'twas not all a lie," he confided, in some perplexity, to the fire; "but what a coil over a youthful green-sickness 'twixt a lad and a wench some forty years syne!"

"I might have had money of her for the asking," he went on; "yet I am glad I did not; which is a parlous sign and smacks of dotage."

He nodded very gravely over this new and alarming phase of his character.

"Were't not a quaint conceit, a merry tickle-brain of Fate," he asked, after a pause, of the leaping flames, "that this mountain of malmsey were once a delicate stripling with apple cheeks and a clean breath, smelling o' civet, and mad for love, I warrant you, as any Amadis of them all? For, if a man were to speak truly, I did love her."

"I had the special marks of the pestilence," he assured a particularly incredulous and obstinate-looking coal—a grim black fellow that, lurking in a corner, scowled forbiddingly and seemed to defy both the flames and Sir John: "not all the flagons and apples in the universe might have comforted me; I was wont to sigh like a leaky bellows; to weep like a wench that hath lost her grandam; to lard my speech with the fag-ends of ballads like a man milliner; and did, indeed, indite sonnets, canzonets, and what not of mine own."

"And Moll did carry them," he continued; "Moll that hath married Hodge, the tanner, and is dead long since." But the coal remained incredulous, and the flames crackled merrily.

"Lord, Lord, what did I not write?" said Sir John, drawing out a paper from the packet, and deciphering the faded writing by the fire-light.

"Have pity, Sylvia! For without thy door
Now stands with dolorous cry and clamoring
Faint-hearted Love, that there hath stood
of yore.
Though winter draweth on, and no birds
sing
Within the woods, yet as in wanton
spring

He follows thee; and never will have done,
 Though nakedly he die, from following
 Whither thou leadest. Canst thou look
 upon
 His woes, and laugh to see a goddess' son
 Of wide dominion and great empery,
 More strong than Jove, more wise than
 Solomon,
 Too weak to combat thy severity?
 Have pity, Sylvia! And let Love be one
 Among those wights that bear thee com-
 pany.

"Is't not the very puling speech of your true lover?" he chuckled; and the flames spluttered assent. "*Among those wights that bear thee company,*" he repeated, and looked about him. "Faith, Adam Cupid hath forsworn my fellowship long since; he hath no score chalked up against him at the Boar's Head Tavern; or, if he hath, I doubt not a beggar might discharge it.

"And she hath commended me to her children as a very gallant gentleman and a true knight," he went on, reflectively, then cast his eyes to the ceiling, and grinned at unseen deities. "Jove that sees all hath a goodly commodity of mirth; I doubt not his sides ache at times, as they had conceived another wine-god.

"Yet, by my honor," he insisted to the fire, then added, apologetically, "if I had any, which, to speak plain, I have not, I am glad; 'tis a good jest; and I did love her once."

He picked out another paper and read:

"My dear lady,—That I am not with thee to-night is, indeed, no fault of mine; for Sir Thomas Mowbray hath need of me, he saith. Yet the service that I have rendered him thus far is but to cool my heels in his antechamber and dream of two great eyes and the gold hair that curls so wondrously about thy temples. For it heartens me—' And so on, and so on, the pen trailing most juvenal sugar, like a fly newly crept out of the honey-pot. And ending with a posy, filched, I warrant you, from some ring.

"I remember when I did write her this," he explained to the fire, lest it might be disposed to question the authorship; "and 'twas sent with a sonnet, all of hell, and heaven, and your pagan gods, and other tricks o' speech. It should be somewhere."

He fumbled with uncertain fingers

among the papers. "Ah, here 'tis," he said at last, and read:

"Cupid invaded Hell, and boldly drove
 Before him all the hosts of Erebus.
 Now he hath conquered; and grim Cer-
 berus
 Chaunts madrigals, the Furies rhyme of
 love,
 Old Charon sighs, and sonnets sound above
 The gloomy Styx. Yea, even as Tanta-
 lus,
 Is Proserpine discrowned in Tartarus,
 And Cupid reigneth in the place thereof.

"Thus Love is monarch throughout Hell to-
 day;

In Heaven we know his power was al-
 ways great;

And Earth was ever his (as all men say)
 Since Sylvia's beauty overthrew us
 straight:

Thus Earth and Heaven and Hell his rule
 obey,

And Sylvia's heart alone is obdurate.

"Well, well," sighed Sir John, "'twas a goodly rogue that writ it, though the verse runs but lamely! A goodly rogue!

"He might," he suggested, tentatively, "have lived cleanly, and forsworn sack; he might have been a gallant gentleman, and begotten grandchildren, and had a quiet nook at the ingle-side to rest his old bones; but he is dead long since. He might have writ himself *armigero* in many a bill, or obligation, or quittance, or what not; he might have left something behind him save unpaid tavern bills; he might have heard cases, harried poachers, and quoted old saws; and slept through sermons yet unwrit, beneath his presentment, done in stone, and a comforting bit of Latin; but," he reassured the fire, "he is dead long since."

Sir John sat meditating for a while; it had grown quite dark in the room as he muttered to himself. Suddenly he rose with a start.

"By'r lady!" he cried, "I prate like a death's-head! I'll read no more of the rubbish."

He cast the packet into the heart of the fire; the yellow papers curled at the edges, rustled a little, and blazed up; he watched them burn slowly to the last spark.

"A cup of sack to purge the brain!" cried Sir John, and filled one to the brim. "And I'll go sup with Doll Tearsheet."