ALFRED JOHN CHURCH

THE LIFE OF KING HENRY V

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Biography of England's Greatest Warrior King

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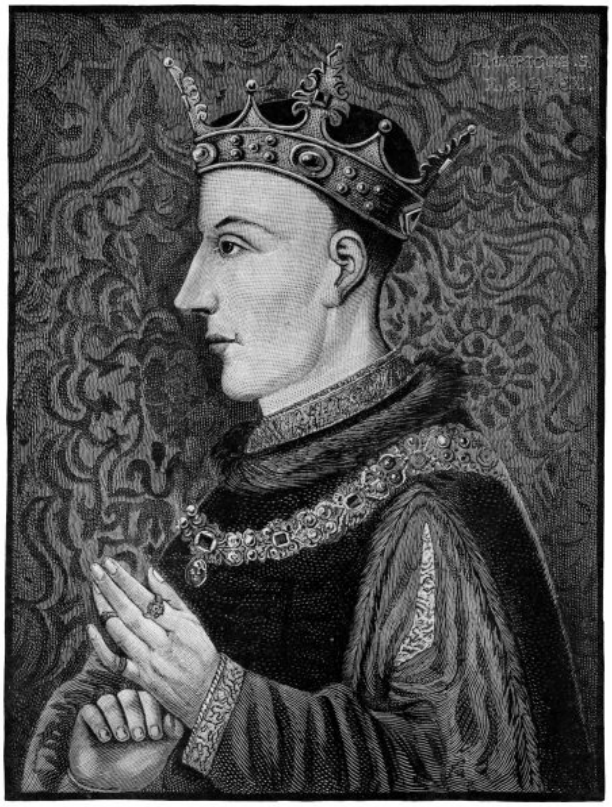

HENRY THE FIFTH

CHAPTER I
The Boyhood of Henry

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Henry was born in the castle of Monmouth on August 9th, 1387. He was the eldest of the six children of Henry of Lancaster by Mary de Bohun, younger daughter and co-heiress of Humphrey de Bohun.[1] Humphrey, as the last male descendant of the De Bohuns, united in himself the dignities and estates of the Earls of Hereford, Northampton, and Essex. The elder daughter, Eleanor, was married to Thomas of Woodstock, youngest son of Edward the Third. Eleanor's husband hoped to secure the whole of the Hereford estates, amounting, it is said, to fifty thousand nobles of annual income (not less, it may be calculated, than two hundred thousand pounds of money at its present value). He took charge of his sister-in-law, and had her carefully instructed in theology, intending that she should take the veil in a convent of the Sisters of St. Clare. John of Gaunt had other views for her future. He took occasion of his younger brother's absence in France to have her removed to Arundel Castle, where she was very soon afterwards married to his son Henry. She died in 1394 in her twenty-fifth year. She was better educated, it appears, than most of the ladies of her day, and it would seem that some of her taste for books descended to her son. The character of Henry of Lancaster has been variously estimated. He won in his youth a high reputation for enterprise and courage. We find him fighting against the Mahommedans in Barbary in one year, and in the next against the Pagan tribes of Lithuania. His skill in all martial exercises was conspicuously great. But, according to

one account, he was so stained with crime that his own father wished him to be put to death. He was a bold and probably an unscrupulous man, whom circumstances exposed to a very strong temptation. The weaknesses and vices of Richard the Second put the throne within his reach. We can easily believe that he really felt himself better qualified to rule than his feeble and capricious cousin, and it is just possible that he may have persuaded himself or been persuaded by others that there was something in his claim of hereditary right to the throne. The power unjustly gained was retained by the methods to which an usurper is commonly driven, by falsehood and by cruelty. Former friends were betrayed—as, for example, the Lollards, who certainly had helped him to the throne—and enemies were ruthlessly crushed. The power thus won and maintained descended to his son in happier circumstances. The younger Henry's title was not seriously questioned. There was, it is true, a conspiracy against him, but it was not supported by any formidable party in the nation. A great success, won early in his reign, made him the object of popular enthusiasm. At the same time he had the advantage of a singularly attractive exterior: the hereditary beauty of the Plantagenets was conspicuous in him. And he was *felix opportunitate mortis*: he died before the lustre of his achievements and the charm of his personal qualities were dimmed by failure and the corrupting influences that wait on power. It was with him as it would have been with the Black Prince if he had died after Poictiers. Yet, allowing for some differences of a finer organisation, it is not difficult to see some of the main characteristics of the fourth Henry in his more fortunate son.

If tradition may be trusted, the young Henry was a delicate child, and was put out to be nursed at a village near

Monmouth. The cradle in which he had lain was long shown as a curiosity at Bristol, and the name of his nurse, Joan Waring, appears in the public accounts, from which we learn that an annuity of twenty pounds was settled upon her after her foster-son’s accession to the throne.

The household-book of John of Gaunt gives some interesting glimpses of the lad’s education. We have an item of money paid for strings for his harp, and another of four shillings expended on seven books of grammar for his use. The continued weakness of his health may be seen in the payment of a courier who announced to his father the fact of his alarming illness.

He had just entered on his twelfth year when his father was banished. He remained in England, probably under the care of his grandfather. But John of Gaunt died in the February following his son’s banishment, and a few weeks afterwards Henry of Lancaster’s estates were seized by the Crown on the ground that he had slandered the King, and was consorting with his enemies abroad. The young Henry accompanied Richard to Ireland, and was sent to the castle of Trim in Meath, the ancient meeting-place of the Irish Parliament. He seems to have been kindly treated, and received the honour of knighthood from the King’s hands. He was left behind in Ireland in company with his cousin, the young Duke of Gloucester, when Richard returned to England in July. On August 18th Richard was made prisoner. The young Henry was immediately sent for, and was brought to England in a ship furnished by a citizen of Chester. At Chester he met his father, whom he accompanied to London. On September 29th Richard, who was now in the Tower, signed a deed of abdication: on the 30th Parliament met and declared him to be deposed; and

on the same day the Duke of Lancaster was seated on the throne by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.

Henry is said to have been created Prince of Wales by his father on the day of his coronation. At least we find him in possession of that dignity a fortnight afterwards, when the King grants to his “most dear eldest son Henry, Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, and Earl of Chester, the custody and rights of all lands of heirs under age in the principality of Wales and the counties of Chester and Flynt,” and also orders him to be put in possession of the revenues of the duchy of Cornwall. The Council also had to consider where he should reside, and what establishment should be kept up for him.

Before long negotiations were entered upon for his marriage. Towards the end of the year a mission was sent to the King of France, proposing in general terms alliances between the two royal families. The proposal was rejected contemptuously. The King of France knew of no King of England but his son-in-law Richard. Before many weeks were past, Richard was dead—by what means it does not belong to our present purpose to inquire—leaving a virgin widow, Isabella of Valois. Isabella, eldest of the five daughters of Charles the Sixth of France and Isabeau of Bavaria, was then in her thirteenth year. She had all the beauty of her race, and would be a richly-dowered bride. Henry lost no time in asking her hand for his eldest son. The demand was not welcome either to the French Court, which was not disposed to recognise Henry’s title, or to the young lady herself, who seems to have cherished a fond recollection of her husband. It was renewed more than once with the same ill-success. Henry was afterwards to win for himself by a very rough wooing a bride of the same house, the youngest of Isabella’s sisters.

If we are to believe a local tradition, the young Henry studied for a time at Queen's College, Oxford, under the care of his uncle Henry, afterwards Cardinal Beaufort, whom we know to have been Chancellor of the University during the two years 1397–8. The Chancellor was then a resident officer, performing the functions now delegated to the Vice-Chancellor.

Queen's College had been founded in 1341 by Robert Eglesfield under the auspices of Philippa, Queen of Edward the Third, and might therefore be considered a specially appropriate residence for princes of the Plantagenet line. A room in the college over the gateway that fronts St. Edmund's Hall was long shown as having been occupied by Prince Henry. His portrait was to be seen painted on the glass of the window, while an inscription in Latin recorded (it disappeared with the gateway early in the last century) the fact that "Henry V, conqueror of his enemies and of himself, was once the great inhabitant of this little chamber." This glass is now in the upper library. It is difficult to estimate the precise value of such a tradition. There is no documentary evidence to confirm it; on the other hand, it is not intrinsically unlikely. Henry had some of the tastes of a student. This fact and the academical standing of his uncle might have suggested a residence at Oxford as a useful way of employing some of his time. Such a residence, if it ever took place, must be assigned to some time between October 1399 and March 1400–1. At the latter date he had begun to take a part in public affairs, for we find on March 10th, 1400–1, that King Henry grants, "on the supplication of his most dear son, the Prince of Wales," a pardon to all the rebels of four counties of North Wales, with three exceptions, of whom Owen Glendower is one. Thenceforth

his name occurs, as will be seen, continuously in the State documents of the time.

CHAPTER II
Prince Henry and Prince Hal[2]

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He who would draw a portrait of Prince Henry finds himself anticipated by the work of a master hand, a work done in colours so fresh and vivid, and with outlines so firm, that rivalry is hopeless. Shakespeare's "Prince Hal," the reckless, brilliant lad, now bandying jests with bullies and sots in city taverns, now leading his troops to victory on the field of Shrewsbury, is one of those creations of genius which, be they true to history or untrue, never lose their hold on the minds of men. No sober description of the actual Henry, however accurately worked out of authentic details, can possibly supersede the figure which the great dramatist has made immortal. If I may borrow an illustration from literature, it is here as it is with Pope and the rival translators of Homer. Nothing could be more unlike the real *Iliad* than the polished epigrammatic rhetoric of Pope's version, yet it is so masterly a work, so splendid in style, so magnificent in versification that it is the despair of the most scholarly and the most faithful translators; whatever the learned may say, the world still reads "Pope's Homer." So the world will always think of Henry in his youth as the Prince Hal who spoils Falstaff of his ill-gotten booty at Gadshill, laughs at him and with him over his cups in Eastcheap, and soliloquises over his prostrate bulk at Shrewsbury. Many figures in history seem to bring up before us these curious *eidola*, which even the best information cannot wholly banish from our minds. Who can quite dissociate his conception of the first Cyrus from the figure

which Xenophon has pourtrayed in his philosophical romance, or forget, when he thinks of Tiberius, the gloomy profligate and tyrant who stands out so vividly from the pages of Tacitus?

The brilliant figure, then, of the first and second parts of *Henry the Fourth* is at least a literary fact. I do not propose to enter on a connected discussion of its authenticity. There are many genuinely historical details which we have about Henry's real personality, and we have at least some suggestions of the source from which the great dramatist drew his materials.

Of course it is easy to take Shakespeare too seriously. Supreme in genius as he was, he was also a playwright, had to do a playwright's work, and descend, if we must say so, to a playwright's arts. His audience had to be amused; and certainly no audience was ever better amused than were the pit and the galleries of the Globe by Prince Hal and Falstaff. The slender, graceful youth, with gay dress and plumed and jewelled cap, was the happiest foil to the huge "man mountain," with his untrussed hose and wine-stained doublet. The fancy, too, of the people was caught by the notion of this young heir to the crown drinking sherry-sack, as might any one of themselves, in an Eastcheap tavern. It was an excellent jest, with just a spice of romance in it, less familiar also than the manners of some of our heir-apparents since that time have made it. Shakespeare never could have dreamt that he was raising a grave question for historians to quarrel over.

The fact is that the great dramatist, whose genius was never more signally shown than in transmuting other men's lead into gold, found a play, dull enough in itself, which he fashioned into that masterpiece of humour, the comedy of *Henry the Fourth*. *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*

was possibly written by William Tarleton, a comedian who flourished in Elizabeth's reign. It is known that he acted in it, taking the part of Sir John Oldcastle. Of the real Oldcastle it is sufficient here to say that he was a man of lofty morality, who witnessed to his convictions by his death. In Tarleton's play—if it be his—he is a vicious buffoon and thief. He goes by the name of "Jockey," and he has two companions of similar character, who are known as "Ned" and "Tom." These are represented as the Prince's associates. And to mark more distinctly the true object of the play, which certainly was to bring the Puritans into ridicule, the other and principal character is one Dericks, a name borne by one of the Marian martyrs. This play was first acted before 1588, Tarleton dying in that year, and it was the play which Shakespeare adapted. But an English audience would be far less disposed to relish jests upon Protestant martyrs after the Armada and the Papist conspiracies of Elizabeth's latter days, and Shakespeare made a change to suit the altered taste of the day. Oldcastle and Dericks disappear: they are replaced, we may say, by Falstaff and Bardolf. Both were historical personages, and Shakespeare does them as much injustice as his predecessor had done to the Lollard martyr. Bardolf went more than once as ambassador to France in Henry the Fourth's reign, and in the time of his successor he was Lieutenant of Calais. Sir John Falstaff was a Knight of the Garter, a general of distinction, and a man of undoubted honour. There is not a shadow of reason for connecting either Bardolf or Falstaff with any disreputable proceedings. Shakespeare seems to have taken their names absolutely at random.

In the first part of *Henry the Fourth*, then, we see the Prince associating with boon companions, and spending his days in riot, until he is recalled to serious thoughts by his

mission to take high command in the army which his father is sending against the rebels in the north and west; and finally doing away with the discredit that had fastened itself on his good name by his gallant behaviour on the field of Shrewsbury. Now let us examine the facts.

First, the situation may be briefly described. Henry the Fourth was far from being safe on his newly won throne. Early in 1400 he had discovered a plot against his life. The Kings of France and Scotland had refused to recognise his title to the crown, and were even making preparations for an invasion of England. A more immediate danger also threatened him; Wales was in revolt. Here Owen Glendower, lineal descendant of the Llewellyn who had been defeated and slain by Edward the First, had been roused by private wrongs to assert the independence of his nation. And it was here that we find the young Henry employed by his father. That a boy so young—in the early part of 1400–1 he still wanted some months of completing his fourteenth year—should be put in a position of authority is remarkable; that the boy so trusted should have been a profligate simply exceeds belief.

The young Prince was apparently taking an active part in the conduct of affairs; in any case, he must have been on the spot, and not wasting his time in London. He was summoned to attend a Council to be held in London on August 15th, 1401. A month afterwards the rebellion in Wales broke out afresh, and the Prince was probably again engaged in active service. At least we find him in November with a small force of twenty men-at-arms and forty archers, in respect of which he received, by order of Council, the sum of one thousand pounds. In the following year we find him acting on his own account. He addresses (under date May 15th) a letter to the Privy Council, in which he gives an

account of his doings in Wales. Owen Glendower, it seems, had sent him something like a challenge. He had gone, accordingly, to Owen's principal mansion, but had found no one there. Thence he had proceeded to the Welshman's seat at Glendourdy, and had burnt it, capturing at the same time one of Owen's chief men. The prisoner had offered five hundred pounds for his ransom, but this was not accepted, and he was put to death. Henry had afterwards marched into Merionethshire and Powysland. This letter was written from Shrewsbury, and was followed by another about a fortnight later, in which he describes himself as being in great straits. His soldiers wanted to know when they would be paid; unless he had some money sent, he could not remain where he was; he had already pawned his jewels (*nos petitz joualx*). The castles of Harlech and Lampadern must be relieved without delay. But if help were given, things promised well for a suppression of the rebellion.

What reply the Prince received to these representations we do not know. The rebellion was not suppressed then, nor for many years to come. On June 25th something like a general levy was ordered, the King addressing precepts to the Lieutenants of many English counties by which it was enjoined that all persons liable to military service should meet him at Lichfield and march with him against the Welsh rebels. Similar documents were issued later in the year, in one of which all persons liable to serve in the counties of Derby and Shropshire were enjoined to meet "our very dear son, Henry, Prince of Wales" at Chester on August 27th.

It is needless to follow the King's proceedings in detail. His resources were not equal to the demands made upon them. New dangers started up in unexpected places, and he had to change his plans to meet them. But on March 7th, 1403, we come to an important document. It is an ordinance