

King Henry IV, Part I Summary

Act I.

King Henry IV opens the play by explaining that the recent civil war in England has left its mark on his kingdom. He hopes a much-delayed religious crusade will unite his people together once again.

Unfortunately King Henry IV learns of trouble in his land. First we learn that Mortimer, The Earl of March was captured in a battle with the irregular "Glendower," which resulted in a thousand deaths for Mortimer's men.

Next we learn that though Young Harry Percy (Hotspur) protected Holmedon from the Earl of Douglas in the north for the King, he has kept the prisoners for himself rather than give them over to King Henry.

King Henry IV is saddened that his own son is not nearly as capable as Hotspur and regrets that Mortimer's capture and Hotspur's insolence will force a further postponement of his religious crusade...

We are introduced to Prince Hal, or Prince Henry, or as King Henry calls him, Harry, the son King Henry IV wishes was more like the valiant Hotspur. Far from acting as a Prince arguably should, Hal is keeping company with petty thieves.

We are also introduced to Falstaff, one such thief and Poins who is planning a robbery at Gadshill (A location). Poins explains that he and Hal (both disguised) will steal what their friends have already stolen from carriages running along Gadshill and will enjoy a laugh at Falstaff's expense afterwards.

In an important soliloquy, Hal reveals that though he has been keeping bad company, he will soon show his true colors at the right time...

Meanwhile King Henry punishes the Earl of Worcester, The Earl of Northumberland and Hotspur (Northumberland's son) for forgetting their obligations to King Henry.

Hotspur and his father offer the prisoners gladly, arguing their refusal to do so was all a misunderstanding. King Henry disagrees, believing Hotspur wanted to use the prisoners to force King Henry to pay the ransom of Lord Mortimer, his brother-in-law. King Henry will not do this because Lord Mortimer betrayed his forces by marrying the daughter of Glendower, his enemy on the battlefield! Hotspur is ordered to hand over the prisoners but refuses.

Worcester suggests a plan to deal with King Henry, which involves Douglas, Glendower and the Archbishop of York siding against King Henry. Hotspur hands over the prisoners to buy time...

Act II.

Early in the morning, a Chamberlain, informs Gadshill at an Inn of a rich carriage heading their way, important information for their upcoming robbery...

Hal and Poins meet for their robbery of their friend's robbery takings. Poins explains that he has removed Falstaff's horse. The thieves spilt into two groups, Poins and Hal taking the low ground. Falstaff, Gadshill, Bardolph and Peto successfully rob several passing travelers and are then robbed themselves by a disguised Poins and Hal. With their horses taken, Poins and Hal will have to wait for their friends to meet them in London; they will have to walk there empty handed!

Hotspur reads a letter confirming that a nobleman they have approached will not join their cause against King Henry IV angering Hotspur. Hotspur worries that this nobleman will betray them, revealing their plans to King Henry. Hotspur's wife resents being neglected by her husband...

Hal and Poins are at an inn waiting for their luckless friends Falstaff, Gadshill, Bardolph, Peto to arrive and looking forward to laughing at Falstaff's lies as to how they allowed themselves to be robbed. In the meanwhile, Poins and Hal give inn servant Francis the run around and Hal reveals his disdain of royal title, displaying a common touch.

Tellingly, he reveals his envy of Hotspur, suggesting he wishes he was more like him... Falstaff and friends arrive, Falstaff being exposed as a liar to much amusement. Falstaff argues that he knew Hal was robbing him and thus allowed himself to be robbed.

Hal learns that Owen Glendower, his son in law Mortimer, Old Northumberland, his son Hotspur and Douglas have turned against King Henry IV (The Percy revolt). Falstaff is wanted for a robbery. Hal decides to pay back Falstaff's robbery victims and to have Falstaff lead troops against this revolt...

Act III.

The rebels divide up England. Mortimer is to have the south, Glendower the west and Hotspur who represents the Percy family will have the north. Glendower and Hotspur squabble over their territories but eventually compromise. Hotspur's wife Kate is not so blindly loving of her husband as is Mortimer's wife, Lady Mortimer...

King Henry criticizes Prince Hal for wasting time with his life. He warns that Hotspur may have a greater claim to be King of England by his actions than Hal will by right alone if Hal continues to waste time while men like Hotspur earn the people's admiration just as King Henry himself did which helped him to replace Richard II. Hal assures his father that he will defeat Hotspur, overjoying King Henry.

We learn that Douglas and the English rebels have met at Shrewsbury representing a very powerful force. Hal and father set off to meet this threat.

At the Boar's Head Tavern, Falstaff is told to pay his bills by an angry Mistress Quickly. Falstaff complains that he has no money, his pocket was picked, cursing Hal in the process. Hal arrives, explaining that he repaid those Falstaff stole from and that he was

the one who picked Falstaff's pocket. Falstaff is placed in command of some men, reluctantly becoming a soldier. Hal organizes preparations for the upcoming battle...

Act IV.

At the rebel camp, the rebels learn that they will be fighting weaker than expected; Hotspur's father, Henry Percy, The Earl of Northumberland cannot join them, owing to illness. Hotspur though disheartened quickly regains his enthusiasm.

Vernon arrives, announcing that not only do King Henry's forces number thirty thousand, but also Glendower's forces are unlikely to be available either since they need another two weeks time to be gathered. Hotspur now facing certain defeat, looks death in the eye, determined to win no matter what the odds...

Falstaff ashamedly leads his ragtag troops towards Coventry, pretending that he is not ashamed of them. Hal meets him, laughing at Falstaff's expense about his troops. Falstaff, Hal and Westmoreland head off together for Shrewsbury to meet the rebels in battle...

The rebels disagree on strategy. Douglas and Hotspur want to attack the King Henry's troops immediately at night, reasoning that these troops will be tired from their travels. Vernon and Worcester disagree, advising caution as their own troops are not yet fully gathered and King Henry's forces presently outnumber them.

Sir Walter Blunt arrives, offering a compromise from King Henry that could prevent war. Hotspur says no but adds that in the morning Hotspur's uncle (Worcester) shall meet King Henry to discuss matters further...

The Archbishop of York makes plans, making it quite clear that he knows Hotspur faces King Henry's forces without the help of Northumberland and Glendower. Sir Michael though, is confident of victory even when it is learned that Mortimer's forces will not be there either. The rebel forces will only number those men under Hotspur's, Douglas' Mordake's, Vernon's, and Worcester's control. The Archbishop knows the stakes are high should their rebellion fail...

Act V.

Worcester and Vernon speak with the King on behalf of the rebels. Worcester airs their grievances that King Henry has forgotten that they helped him achieve power and that King Henry has taken more than he originally promised.

King Henry offers a pardon to all the rebels to avoid a bloody war.

Hal shows his wisdom by predicting that Douglas and Hotspur confident of victory will not accept the pardon. Falstaff is reluctant to die, questioning the value of honour from battle...

Worcester decides not to tell Hotspur of King Henry's generous pardon offer, arguing that if they accept, they will never be trusted. Vernon disagrees. Douglas and Hotspur arrive,

Worcester lying to the two men that King Henry is merciless and also by not telling them of King Henry's pardon offer.

Worcester tells us that Hal has challenged Hotspur to single combat and both Vernon and Worcester sing Hal's praises showing just how far Hal has come since his days of stealing with Falstaff and company. Hotspur faces certain defeat but bravely starts battle...

The battle rages. Douglas kills Sir Walter Blunt, believing him to be King Henry. We learn that the King has several such impersonators on the battlefield to protect him. Douglas explains to Hotspur that he has only killed Sir Walter Blunt.

Falstaff is a worried man, barely three of his one hundred and fifty men have survived the bloodbath, Falstaff questioning again the value of honour if dies in war. Falstaff tells Hal that he has killed Hotspur. Hal does not believe him. Falstaff pledges to kill Hotspur but to save himself first...

King Henry IV tells his son to leave the battlefield. Hal does not want to, arguing that a scratch should not warrant his leaving the battle. Douglas fights King Henry, King Henry losing. Hal saves King Henry, Douglas running away. This redeems Hal in King Henry's eyes.

Hotspur and Hal at last fight, Hal first showing his respect for Hotspur. Falstaff cheers Hal on but Douglas returns, fighting Falstaff who falls to the ground, feigning death.

Hal kills Hotspur and mourns Falstaff's death. Falstaff rises, explaining that he faked his death to avoid a real one at the hands of Douglas.

Falstaff, fearing Hotspur is faking his death, stabs him and claims that he killed Hotspur, expecting to be made an Earl or a Duke. He explains that though he was on the ground like Hotspur, both rose up and Falstaff then killed Hotspur. The battle over, a general stand down is announced...

The rebellion defeated, King Henry reminds prisoner Worcester that he did offer the rebels a pardon to avoid war. Worcester and Vernon are to be killed, while King Henry decides the fate of the other prisoners.

King Henry allows Hal to set Douglas free. Attention now turns to the next battle to be fought, against Northumberland and Archbishop Scroop, who are arming themselves for war...

- Jay Ranpura