

FALSTAFF

BY

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English Version by Donald Pippin

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Sir John Falstaff, a nobleman who has seen better days.

Ford, a prosperous merchant.

Alice Ford, his wife.

Anne Ford (Nannetta), their daughter.

Fenton, a young gentleman in love with Anne.

Meg Page, a friend and neighbor.

Dame Quickly.

Dr. Caius, an elderly physician.

Bardolph, follower of Falstaff.

Pistol, also a follower of Falstaff.

Burghers, servants, maskers (imps, elves, goblins and the like).

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ACT ONE

Life roars on full tilt at the Garter Inn, the somewhat seamy residence of Sir John Falstaff, a noble knight now fallen upon reduced circumstances -- reduced, that is to say, in fortune, not in bulk.

A scene of wrangling and squabbling. Accusations of pilfering, poaching, pick-pocketing bounce back and forth, along with charges of deception and skullduggery, a whirlwind in the midst of which Sir John sits calm and serene as a mountain peak rising above the squalls and tempests that rage on the lesser slopes. Monarch of the realm, he condescends now and then to dole out tips on the delicate art of theft to his two less gifted cronies, Bardolph and Pistol, while irascible Dr. Caius, helplessly fuming, vows never again to set foot in this filthy sty. In short, a typical normal day.

But what a sorry spectacle! What a comedown! Sir John Falstaff, designed by nature to be the center of the universe, a blazing sun around which the planets revolve, now forced by “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” to scrape by from day to day, to consort with riffraff, to wonder where the next pitcher of sack is coming from. Ah, but hope gleams on the horizon, a plan, a roadmap that will lead to the land of milk and honey. He has caught the eye of two fair ladies of Windsor, Alice Ford and Meg Page, matrons both, each married to a prosperous husband, each with a firm hand on the family purse strings. Surely they will not resist the fatal attraction of his magnetic personality. The majestic torso, the massive arm, the superbly rounded leg! With the mere delivery of two carefully crafted letters, Sir John will again be master of the high seas, with the wind in his sails.

Scene I

Scene: A room in the Garter Inn.

DR. CAIUS: *(entering)* Falstaff!

FALSTAFF: *(calling to waiter)* Oho!

DR. CAIUS: Sir John Falstaff!

BARDOLPH: Why all the shouting?

DR. CAIUS: You assaulted my servants!

FALSTAFF, *(paying no attention, Waiter!*
Some more of your best brand of sherry!

DR. CAIUS: In my woods you were poaching,
Don't deny it! My house you penetrated.

FALSTAFF But never your housekeeper.

DR. CAIUS: How obliging!
That befuddled old woman!
Sir High and Mighty!
If twenty times as noble
And twenty times inflated,
I'd challenge you to answer me.

FALSTAFF: No need to shout so loudly.
All this I did and proudly.
With pride and pleasure.

DR. CAIUS: Here is a case to settle in court.

FALSTAFF: Asking for trouble.
The judge you'll have in stitches.
Take my advice and drop it.

DR. CAIUS: (*turning on Bardolfo*)
Turning to you now!

FALSTAFF: Go hang yourself.

DR. CAIUS: Hey, Bardolph!

BARDOLPH: Learned doctor!

DR. CAIUS: Last night you had me reeling.

BARDOLPH: Unwisely. I'm still hung over. My head!
I need professional assistance
Even my guts are gutted.
The wine they poisoned by adding putrid water.
(*indicating his nose*) Look here, shinier than ever.

DR. CAIUS: A beacon!

BARDOLPH Red as a torch by night,
Like a fire ever flaming.

DR. CAIUS: To light you to the gallows

You got me drunk, you scoundrel ---
The two of you so clever! (*indicating Pistol*)
Soon as you saw me bleary eyed,
Yes, you emptied my pockets.

BARDOLPH: Who, me?

DR. CAIUS: (*to Pistol*) And you.

FALSTAFF: Hey, Pistol!

PISTOL: What is it?

FALSTAFF: Have you divested this doctor of some trifles?

DR. CAIUS: Yes, he's the one! Observe him.
That ugly face speaks volumes:
It tells me he's a liar.
I had collectors' coins
That dated back to Edward,
And six pieces of silver --
Not even one remaining.

PISTOL: (*grabbing a broom*) I'll sweep him out the door
For character assassination.
Sir, how dare you!

DR. CAIUS: You rubbish!
Bow down before your betters.

PISTOL: Donkey!

DR. CAIUS: You beggar!

PISTOL: Weasel!

DR. CAIUS: Leech!

PISTOL: Rat!

DR. CAIUS: You scarecrow!

PISTOL: Lizard!

DR. CAIUS: You feeble-minded parasite!

PISTOL: Me?

DR. CAIUS: You!

PISTOL: Repeat that.

DR. CAIUS: Yes!

PISTOL: By thunder!

**FALSTAFF: Hold on, you hotheads!
Come, let's avoid a scene Say, Bardolph!
Man to man, was it you who picked his pockets?**

DR. CAIUS: They both are guilty!

**BARDOLPH: He was boozing, hitting the bottle
Till he could barely stagger.
Now he's back with a fairy tale,
A flimsy fable
Dreamt while he snored
Under the table.**

**FALSTAFF: Hear ye! This man's veracity
Can hardly be disputed.
Your charges stand refuted.
So get along with you.**

**DR. CAIUS: Monstrous!
If you catch me again inside this filthy stable,
I'll confine my drinking
To pious and church-going people! *(He storms out.)***

BARDOLPH and PISTOL: Amen!

**FALSTAFF: Less of the liturgy!
Your fervor needs refining.
The fine art of theft is delicate;
To steal requires charm and poise.
Where was your sense of timing?**

BARDOLPH and PISTOL: A ---

**FALSTAFF: Hush! *(looking over his bill)*
Six chickens --- six shillings.
Thirty bottles of sherry -- two florins!**

Three capons Take a look in my wallet.
Brace of pheasants...one anchovy.....

BARDOLPH: A mark, a mark, a farthing.....
Next to nothing.

FALSTAFF: Shake it! Shake it!

BARDOLPH: I've shaken every penny out.

FALSTAFF: You have led me to ruin,
Costing a fortune
Just to keep you in service.
You guzzler! Often we weave and wander.
Roam from tavern to tavern nightly,
Guided by that flaming nose of yours
There burning ever brightly.
But what you save me in oil
You spend on sack and sherry.
Thirty years I've watered
That massive over-ripened berry.
(to Bardolf) Too expensive!
(to Pistol) You included!
(shouting) Waiter! Some more of the finest!
All I've got you've devoured.
A Falstaff worn and wasted
Is overlooked and under-valued.
By birth a noble,
I inspire tongues in chorus
To acclaim a girth so global.

PISTOL: Falstaff stupendous!

BARDOLPH: Tremendous Falstaff!

FALSTAFF: *(patting his abdomen)*
Here is my kingdom, and here I reign.

PISTOL: Stupendous Falstaff!

BARDOLPH: Tremendous Falstaff!

FALSTAFF: Today, though, our wits we have to sharpen.

BARDOLFO and PISTOL: You say the word.

FALSTAFF: Perhaps you know a local townsman
By name of Ford.

BARDOLPH and PISTOL: Yes!

FALSTAFF: A merchant born to prosper.

PISTOL: He's got more gold than Midas.

BARDOLPH: A Lord!

FALSTAFF: His wife a beauty.....

PISTOL: Who holds the purse strings.

FALSTAFF: Precisely! Ah, love! Those eyes that sparkle!
Her ample bosom! Her two lips a chalice!
A fragrant flower, her name is Alice.
One morning, strolling along,
She saw me and lingered, nodding, smiling....
A flame of passion ignited my heart.

The goddess cast a radiant dart
That landed on me, on me!
The stalwart shoulders, the massive torso,
On shapely leg, on arms still more so.....
Ample, capacious. And as we gazed,
Her eyes conveyed such fire
That I could read this message of desire:
"I'm yours alone, John Falstaff!"

BARDOLPH: Unquote.

FALSTAFF: There's also another.

BARDOLPH: Another!

PISTOL: Another!

FALSTAFF: The lady's name is Margherita.

PISTOL: Or Meg for short.

FALSTAFF: She as well has felt my fatal fascination.
The darling lady also holds the purse strings.

BARDOLPH and PISTOL:holds the purse strings.

**FALSTAFF: Together, they'll be my West and East Indies,
My Eldorado. My vessel goes sailing forth
To one and then the other
To explore for treasure.
See here, two enterprising letters.
(to Bardolph) Go, carry this to Meg.
Her virtue we shall test.
With zeal and zest
Your nose glows at the prospect.
(to Pistol) And this you'll deliver to Alice.**

**PISTOL: My sword I'll not dishonor.
I'm no conniving go-between. No, never!**

FALSTAFF: Good for nothing!

**BARDOLPH: Sir John, in such deception
I as well cannot participate. My conscience....**

FALSTAFF: Your what?

BARDOLPH: Refuses.

**FALSTAFF: (to a passing page) Hey! Robin!
I'm through with both of you!
You can go hang.
(to Page) Two messages....Letters for two fine ladies --
Deliver promptly.**

(back to Bardolph and Pistol, broom in hand)

**Hurry, run! Scamper! Go! Scurry!
Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!**

**FALSTAFF: Your honor! Scoundrels!
How dare you speak to me of honor?
You! You garbage from the sewers!
When even I at times
Have sacrificed my conscience.
Yes, even I I, too! I, too!
I have on rare occasions
Turned from the eye of heaven.
I have been forced to leave
The straight and narrow**

**To dabble in skullduggery and subterfuge,
Slight of hand, double-dealing.
You foul and filthy rabble,
In ragged cast-off clothing,
With shifty glances,
You dare to smirk and simper
About your honor! Have you no pride?
What honor? Go on, go on!
All bubble and babble.**

**Can your honor fill your belly when empty? No!
And can honor mend a leg that's broken? Oh, no!
An ankle? No! A finger? No! Or a whisker? No!
So honor's not a surgeon.
What is it? Only a word.
A word, and what is it made of?
Only air floating onward.**

**Handy dandy!
This honor....does it endure hereafter? No!
Valued by the living? Unlikely!
Because inflated by flattery and fawning
Or corrupted by envy,
Then swallowed up by slander.**

**I will have nothing of it, no!
I'll not have it, no, no!
But turning back to you, oh vipers!
I've been too indulgent;
The party's over!**

**Away! Faster, faster!
On the gallop, on the gallop!
Noose and halter will end your career.
Faster, faster, faster!
Off you go, on the gallop!
Robber! Rascals! Vipers! Vermin!
Hurry up! Hurry up!
Out of here! Out of here!**

SCENE II

A highly untypical day for Alice Ford and Meg Page, each the recipient of a most extraordinary, most unexpected letter -- no less than a declaration of passionate love. Naturally, they can't wait to tell each other. Unfortunately, the two letters are written in

the same hand, by the same person. Worse yet, they are identical, line for line, word for word. A gross insult! An assault upon their good sense! An outrage! Falstaff has taken on the wrong women. In plotting vendetta, these ladies are not faint of heart.

Meanwhile, Bardolph, Pistol and Dr. Caius, united by a fervent wish to bring Falstaff down a peg or two, have alerted Mr. Ford to pending danger. “Though around your gold he hovers, first he’ll plough beneath your covers.” Ford, a husband absurdly prone to jealousy, by no means inclined to shrug off such threats with a careless laugh, immediately envisions himself bedecked with horns, that infamous symbol of cuckoldry. And like his wife, he believes in counterattack. It becomes increasingly evident that Falstaff’s courtship will not be a case of clear sailing. He is heading, quite literally, into rough and dangerous waters.

Amid this hurly burly, a real romance has budded and blossomed. Anne, the lovely daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ford, has found in ardent young Fenton the man of her dreams. As Shakespeare himself has said, the course of true love never runs smooth. But that was a different play. Here we can hope.

Meg Page and Dame Quickly enter, and approach the house, thus meeting Alice Ford and her daughter Anne, who are on their way out.

MEG: Friend Alice!

ALICE: Meg.

MEG: (to Ann) My pretty.

**ALICE: I just was stepping out
To share a laugh with you.
Good day, Dame Quickly.**

QUICKLY: May the Lord make you merry.

***(pinching Ann’s cheek)* Sweet Anne, my rosebud.**

ALICE: (to Meg) Excellent timing! The most fantastic tale I have to tell.

MEG: So have I.

QUICKLY: No!

ANN{ You also?

ALICE: Dear, you go first.

MEG: After you.

ANNE and QUICKLY: Tell us, tell us!

ALICE: But swear not to breathe a word.

MEG: Me gossip?

QUICKLY: Me talk? My goodness!

ALICE:

**To strike a shameless bargain with the devil,
My rank would be upgraded
With the name of Lady.**

MEG: Mine also.

ALICE: You're joking!

**MEG: If proof be needed,
Instead of talking, behold!
I've a letter indisputable.**

ALICE: I also. Read it.

MEG: (*exchanging letters*) Read it.

ANNE and QUICKLY: Ha!

**MEG: "Radiant Alice...Love I offer...."
Good heavens! A second copy!
But for the name
The words are the same.**

ALICE: "Radiant Meg....Love I offer....."

MEG: "Burning passion...."

ALICE: Here Meg....There Alice.

**MEG: Letter for letter.
"Ask not the reason why,
Say only...."**

**ALICE: "I love you."
I never once led him on!**

MEG: A story stranger than fiction.

QUICKLY: Proceed with caution.

MEG: The same profusions.

ALICE: The same malarkey.

QUICKLY: Look at the writing.

ANNE: Even the paper.

ALICE and MEG: “As a fun-loving couple,
Our pleasures then we can double.
Love, we are made for one another.”

ALICE: So!

ANNE: He, she, you!

QUICKLY: A pair of three.

ALICE: “A pair united
By passion fierce though gentle....
A gorgeous lady,

QUARTET: A man so monumental.”

ALICE: “My lovely Venus,
Allow your eyes to dwell
On your admirer,
Or with a glance
There cast your lasting spell.”

ALL: *(laughing)* Ha ha ha ha ha!

ALICE: “From one who loves you dearly,
John Falstaff, yours sincerely.”

ALL: Monster! Monster! Monster! Monster!

ALICE: We’ll make him tremble.

ANNE: And then display him.

ALICE: High time we teach him better.

ANNE: Uproar and mayhem!

QUICKLY: What a pleasure!

ALICE: Ah, vendetta!
The four ladies sing simultaneously:

ALICE: The tankard, the barrel!
As dashing young lover
In purple apparel
His heyday is over.

QUICKLY: A flounder, a whopper!
A would-be wife-swapper,
A whale of a fellow,
Professedly smitten,
Cast up from the ocean
To land in Great Britain.

NANNETTA: Vendetta now plotted
I'm in on the party,
A promise of laughter
Triumphant and hearty.

MEG: A whale of a fellow,
Professedly smitten,
Cast up from the ocean
To land in Great Britain.
A flounder, a whopper,
As I know and you know.
A would-be wife-swapper,
A challenge to Juno.

ALICE: A man of immensity,
A mass of molasses,
He has a propensity
For rude and lewd passes.

MEG: Besides eccentricity,
He's laden with vices,
But for his duplicity
He's headed for crisis.

NANNETTA: Despite his pomposity
He's bloated with gases

**That make this monstrosity
A king among asses.**

QUICKLY:
**As boldly he swaggers
His ardor increases,
But wait till our daggers
Have ripped him to pieces.**

ALICE:
**The rogue will come wooing.
Though adept at rascality,
His agile mentality
Will prove his undoing.**

MEG:
**We women are wily;
Our weapons bear watching.
We'll test his agility
At ducking and dodging.**

NANNETTA:
**We'll win willy-nilly
And drive him to insanity
By stoking his vanity
However so slyly.**

QUICKLY:
**Confronted with folly,
Our tongues with dexterity
Will foil insincerity --
No time to move slowly.**

ALICE:
**The man will be vexed to see
The cards that I deal.
His head, not from ecstasy,
Will spin like a wheel.
Like a wheel, like a wheel.**

MEG:
**I say in all modesty
We'll humble the heel.
Subdued, from this odyssey
Back home he will steal,
Homeward bound he will steal.**

NANNETTA:
**So smothered in fantasy,
He'll come when we call,
And then is the man to see
How far he can fall,
Just how far he can fall.**

QUICKLY:

We ladies move warily
With eyes on the ball.
We later can merrily
Walk seven feet tall.

As the ladies leave, the five men enter, all clustered around Mr. Ford, and all whispering to him simultaneously.

DR. CAIUS

He's a thief, a thug, a vandal,
A repugnant slug, a rabid rat.
His behavior reeks of scandal;
He invaded my own habitat.

A revolting dolt, and furthermore,
For deceiving, bragging, boasting,
I would gladly leave him roasting
Over fires of hell forevermore.

(Indicating B. & P.) With these rascals I'm also acquainted.

What a lot! A motley crew!
No, sir, not exactly sainted,
Both are knaves and rascals, too.

BARDOLPH:

To Falstaff, sir, pay attention.
(I repeat, pay close attention.)
He is dabbling in skullduggery
Of concern to you, unluckily --
A misdeed too dark to mention.

I'm a soldier, plain, outspoken,
Never known to lie or fabricate,
And I'm not the man to abdicate
When a code of honor's broken.

Mister Ford, I've told my story
But the rest is up to you.
On your mettle, rise to glory!
Give the dirty dog his due.

PISTOL:

He has planned a fate too horrid --
Yes indeed, a fate too horrid,
And for you, sir, in particular.
I foresee upon your forehead
Something standing perpendicular.

Mister Ford, be my confessional:
On that scoundrel I attended,
Rendered services professional --
Praise the Lord, my ways I've mended!

Further shame can be averted
And you know what must be done.
Heed a warning, stand alerted!
Better yet, go get a gun.

FENTON:

If you wish, I hereby volunteer
To restore this man to reason;
Either brain or brawn will season
The conniving, thriving cavalier.

Though of storm ahead I sniff a scent,
It will give me special pleasure
Taking on the monster's measure,
His dimensions so magnificent.

With a show of manly muscle
If persuasion doesn't do,
I shall toss him in a tussle
From Peru to Timbaktu.

FORD:

By a horde of hornets buzzing on
I'm surrounded and tormented.
Like a storm, a tempest closing in
With a roar unprecedented.

I am lost at sea and terrified --
Has my wife acquired a lover?
And until the truth is verified
Over me these clouds will hover.

Four I say is three too many --
How they hammer at my brain!
Not a nut and not a ninny,
They are driving me insane.

.FORD:

Again, sir.

PISTOL:

To put it briefly,
Old Falstaff's plan is chiefly

ANNE: (*seeing Fenton*) Himself!

FORD: (*seeing Alice*) Herself!

ALICE: (*seeing Ford*) Himself!

DR. CAIUS: (*pointing to Alice*) Herself!

MEG: (*indicating Ford*) Himself!

ALICE: (Little suspecting!)

ANNE: Careful!

ALICE: The less he knows the better.

 (*Ford, Caius, Bardolph and Pistol leave.*)

MEG: Your husband jealous?

ALICE: Insanely.

ANNE: Quiet!

ALICE: We'll slip away.

 (*Alice, Meg and Quickly go out, leaving Anne and Fenton.*)

FENTON: Pst, Ann! My darling! Come here!

ANNE: Careful! For what?

FENTON: Two kisses.

ANNE: Then hurry!

FENTON: I'll do so!

ANNE: Burning like embers,

FENTON: Scented with flowers,

ANNE: Lips that can offer
 Sun after showers.

FENTON: Guarding a coffer

Sparkling and pearly,
Trading in whispers
Love long remembers.
Lips soft and tender!

ANNE: Hands too aggressive!

FENTON: Eyes that say yes, if
The heart surrenders.
Darling!

ANNE: Too impatient. No!

FENTON: Just another!

ANNE: Rascal!

FENTON: What could be sweeter?

ANNE: Intruders!

FENTON: Lips that are kissed stay enchanted forever.

(As the women re-enter, Fenton hides in the shrubbery. Anne continues his song as she approaches the other women)

ANNE: Kin to the moon, ever reborn in splendor.....
In eternal splendor

ALICE: Falstaff has tried to trick us.

MEG: And he deserves no mercy.

ALICE: What if I send a letter? Yes.

ANNE: By messenger is better. Yes.

MEG and QUICKLY: Yes! Yes!

ALICE: *(to Quickly)* The perfect person is you,
And lure him toward me by proposing
A sweet rendezvous.

QUICKLY: I shall die laughing.

ANNE: Measure for measure.

ALICE: First , to disarm the man
 The flattery we'll pour on.

ANNE: And then?

ALICE: And then we'll turn him into jelly.

QUICKLY: We've got a merry war on.

ALICE: The scoundrel!

MEG: His perfidy is proven.

ALICE: Our web shall be woven

MEG: We'll make him shake and shiver.

ALICE: He's a glutton who squanders
 All on his pampered belly.

MEG: We'll toss him in the river.

ALICE: We'll roast him in the oven.

ANNE: How charming!

ALICE: Seer and baste him!

ALL: Enjoy it, enjoy it, enjoy it!

MEG: *(to Quickly)* We count on you to give a prize performance.

QUICKLY: *(noticing Fenton)* Who's hiding?

MEG: An agent come to spy.

(Alice, Meg and Quickly exit rapidly.)

FENTON: Back into battle.

ANNE: Duly alerted, I challenge!

FENTON: Onward!

ANNE: Your plan's subverted.
 The rules of love are topsy-turvy,

**A crazy game where the weaker one
Conquers the stronger.**

FENTON: **Now is the archer's
Eye on the sparrow.**

ANNE **So I'm the target.**

FENTON: **I draw the arrow.
See! Now aimed at your silken tresses,
Shot with a kiss, it turns to caresses.**

ANNE: **I've caught the sinner.**

FENTON: **Who's now surrounded.**

ANNE: **My heart you've wounded,
Yet I'm the winner.**

FENTON: **You've won the bout.
Oh, help me recover.
So now.....**

ANNE: **So now?**

FENTON: **I choose starting all over.**

ANNE: **Love in surrender
Is sweet and tender.
Truce!**

FENTON: **I adore you!**

ANNE: **I said it before you. *(She hurries out.)***

FENTON: **Lips that are kissed stay enchanted forever.....**

ANNE: *(within)* **Kin to the moon, ever reborn in splendor.....
In eternal splendor.....**

(Fenton withdraws. Ford, Bardolph, Pistol and Dr. Caius reenter; Fenton soon rejoins them.)

BARDOLPH: **To put up with his braying
Would make a man a martyr.**

FORD: You mentioned where he's staying --
 Tell me.

BARDOLPH: An inn they call the garter.

FORD: To him I'll be presented,
 But as it were, reinvented.
 The name of Brooke enables
 A turning of the tables.
 But -- keep it confidential.

BARDOLPH: Discretion most essential.
 You can count upon Bardolph.

PISTOL: And depend upon Pistol.

FORD: Incognito!

BARDOLPH: Your secret is safe and sound.

PISTOL: Our lips are sealed.

FORD: We'll proceed together,
 Garter bound!

The men again cluster around Ford, again singing simultaneously. The women reenter, but stay in the background.)

DR. CAIUS: After careful, close analysis
 I can hardly help from wondering
 If a doctor's diagnosis
 Would endorse the risk you run.

 Though averse to mere paralysis,
 Till you're double sure that Alice is
 In a cloud of wine and roses,
 I suggest you hold the gun.

 With these two I'm also acquainted.
 What a lot! A motley crew!
 No, sir, not exactly sainted,
 Both are knaves and rascals, too.

BARDOLPH: Mister Ford, you face disaster,
 But the cure requires no miracle.
 You must show them who's the master;

You must prove yourself a man.

**Otherwise, this gallant noble
With a shape so nearly spherical
And a belly truly global
Gaily carries out his plan.**

**Mister Ford, I've told my story
But the rest is up to you.
On your mettle, rise to glory!
Give the dirty dog his due.**

PISTOL: **Come with wine, find out his favorite.
While he's sipping, you can flavor it
With discreetly loaded questions
On his amorous activities.**

**Oh, the fellow loves to live at ease
In the flow and glow of wine.
If you follow my suggestions
He will lay it on the line.**

**Further shame can be averted
And you know what must be done.
Heed a warning, stand alerted!
For the game has just begun.**

FENTON: **As these angry men are muttering,
Seeds of fear and doubt are planted.
Women on the side are tittering;
Agitation fills the room.**

**Yet with love too deep for uttering
Here I breathe an air enchanted.
Near my darling, calm and silence take over;
The glory of heaven opens, flowers bloom.**

FORD: **You will see with what agility
I'll confound this aging lover;
With a show of sham civility
His maneuvers I'll uncover.**

**If I make of him a mockery,
Toil and sweat are not in vain.
When the guessing game is over
He will bear the ball and chain.**

Falstaff's second visitor is none other than Ford himself, incognito. Passing himself off as Mr. Brooke, new to Windsor, he comes with an outlandish offer that few men, least of all Falstaff, could resist. But Mr. Ford is being too clever by half. While congratulating himself on his ingenuity at setting a trap, he has unwittingly walked into it himself.

Scene: Inside the Garter Inn.

BARDOLPH & PISTOL: *(beating their breasts)*
Take us back, sir!
We'll try harder.

FALSTAFF: Sinners return to vice
Like mice to the larder.

BARDOLPH & PISTOL: Oh, if we only again could serve you!

BARDOLPH: Oh, sir!
Outside a lady waits, requesting to see you.
Shall we ask her to enter?

FALSTAFF: My pleasure!

QUICKLY: *(Entering, with a deep bow)*
Save your reverence!

FALSTAFF: Good day, my worthy woman.

QUICKLY: Save your reverence!
Indulgent, sir, and lenient,
You'll grant me, when convenient,
Some words alone in private.

FALSTAFF: I'm now at leisure.
(to Bardolph & Pistol) Allow us

QUICKLY: Save your reverence!
I come from Mistress Ford.

FALSTAFF: *(all eagerness)* Indeed?

QUICKLY: Alas! Unhappy woman!
You're a wicked seducer!

FALSTAFF: Perhaps. Continue.

QUICKLY:
In pain and despair,
Head over heels so in love with you.
She said, while kissing your letter tenderly,
Quietly mention
That my husband heads off for hunting,
Leaving daily at two.

FALSTAFF: Leaving daily at two.

QUICKLY:
He'll be gone for at least an hour.
I call to your attention,
You'll then be free to enter.
She will be waiting.
Unhappy woman!
The cruel agonies she suffers
With a husband so jealous!

FALSTAFF:
Leaving daily at two.....
Go and tell the lady
I'll be counting the hours
Until that blissful rendezvous.

QUICKLY:
So virile!
Humor me again, I beg,
For I've one more message.

FALSTAFF: Have you?

QUICKLY:
From lovely Meg --
An angel, also a heart you have broken.
She sends an urgent message
Full of desire unspoken,
Pained that her husband stays at home
And leaves the house but rarely.
Unhappy woman!
A flower patiently pining, unless.....
How you bewitch the women!

FALSTAFF:
No witching powers I claim,
Yet I've a certain *je ne sais quoi*,
I confess.
Tell me --
Neither knows of the other?

QUICKLY: Good Lord! Are women born so foolish?
Never fear it.

FALSTAFF: Kindly take this small reward.

QUICKLY: To sow seeds of love
Is reward enough.

FALSTAFF: Ah, winged Cupid's carrier!
My greetings to the ladies.

QUICKLY: Your servant. *(She bows and leaves.)*

FALSTAFF: A double triumph!
Well, gallant knight....well, well!
Onward to glory!
This old but sturdy body
Can yet still manage
To stir the sleeping fire,
Women all over
Racing to their ruin,
Bedazzled by desire.
How grand to be Sir John
And so well nourished!
Thus I have flourished!

BARDOLPH: *(entering)*

Sir John! A certain Mister Brooke is waiting,
Most desirous of your company.
Though not yet acquainted,
He invites you, sir, to breakfast
On a choice wine of Cyprus.

FALSTAFF: Mister Brooke understands me.

BARDOLPH: Yes.

FALSTAFF: Any river, stream or brook is welcome
That flows with wine so well-fermented.
Bring him.
So, gallant knight,
Onward to glory!

FORD: *(entering)* Oh, sir! May heaven bless you!

FALSTAFF: I wish the same for you, sir.

FORD: I'm simply a plain, outspoken fellow,

Loath to bow, scrape and pander,
So do forgive my candor
In coming to the point
With no beating about the bush.

FALSTAFF: Your frank approach I welcome.

FORD: In me you see a man
On whom the Lord has showered
An overflow of treasure,
A man who spends without a thought
On truffles and trifles,
Or -- whatever suits my pleasure.
Call me Brooke, new to Windsor.

FALSTAFF: *(with the utmost cordiality)*
Dear Mister Brooke, my greetings.
From the start
You've made an excellent impression.

FORD: Worthy Sir John,
Then may I count on absolute discretion?

BARDOLPH: *(in the background, quietly to Pistol)*
Attention!

PISTOL: Softer!

BARDOLPH: Watch him! And wait!
See the old flounder
Snap at the bait.

PISTOL: Ford will befuddle him.

BOTH: Softer! Softer!

FALSTAFF: *(fortissimo!)* Are you still here?
(quietly to Ford) Go on, sir.

FORD: Sir John, I dare refer to
A time-honored cliché too often told:
When the key is of gold
All doors will fly open.
To gold in shining splendor
Do one and all surrender.

FALSTAFF: **Gold is king of the mountain.
The conquering hero.**

FORD: **It happens --
The sack of gold I carry
Weighs far too much for me.
Sir John, would you be kind enough
To share the burden?**

FALSTAFF: **No need to ask!
But why, my friend,
Have I been chosen for the honor?**

FORD: **Let me explain:
In Windsor lives a lady,
Lovely and oh so charming!
Her name is Alice,
And married to a certain Ford.**

FALSTAFF: **Poor lady!**

FORD: **I love her -- she's noncommittal.
My letters she dismisses;
My fervor matters little.
I plead, but still no kisses.**

**The gold I've spent, though vital,
I've squandered to my sorrow,
While hoping still that, despite all,
She'll yield to me tomorrow.**

**In vain! Naught can persuade her!
My passion barely noted,
Rejected, yet still devoted,
I sadly serenade her.**

FALSTAFF: **"Oh, love! Oh, love!
Though ever we adore you,
For mercy we implore you.
For like a shadow.....**

FORD: **Try to leave you**

FALSTAFF: **You follow.**

FORD: **Try to hold you**

I'm met with stern resistance.
Her icy frown and flashing eyes declare
"Sir, keep your distance!"

But if you make her tumble,
You clear the way for me.
The wall then has to crumble.
And so? What do you say?

FALSTAFF: Wasting no words,
 No ifs, no buts, no maybes,
 Your gold, sir, I accept.
 Prompt service to you I'll render.
 We're not babies.
 That task is well within my power.
Yes, the fair Mistress Ford will knuckle under.

FORD: Bravo!

FALSTAFF: I'm far along already.
 (No need to hide my secret from you.)
 In half an hour
 I plan to enjoy the lady.

FORD: Who?

FALSTAFF: Dear Alice.
 This very day she sent a message
 Under cover,
To inform me that the nincompoop she calls a husband
 Goes hunting, leaving daily at two.

FORD: Leaving daily at two
 You're unacquainted?

FALSTAFF: To hell with him! Let him go to the devil,
 Damned by his own stupidity.
 So gullible! That knucklehead!
 Today, today, today, today
 We'll see him cuckolded
 Fairly, squarely -- A fate so torrid,
 I envy not the man that's worn
 Those horns upon the forehead.
 Blundering Ford's a moron,
 A moron! A moron!
 With him we have a war on.

Today, today, today
We'll see him cuckolded.
So gullible! The knucklehead!
Be patient. I soon shall return,
Garbed in stately garbage.
(He leaves, moneybag in hand.)

FORD: A nightmare? Or is it real?
Two ram like horns upon my forehead have sprouted.
A dream, no?
Mister Ford! Mister Ford! Sleeping?
On your toes! Rise! Awaken!
Your wife corrupted, her vows invalidated,
Both your bed and your honor contaminated!

Messages bandied,
Their planning completed;
I am swindled and cheated.
And still they tell us
That the man who is jealous
Is demented.

All over town
Scorn and disdain, the knowing smile,
Idle banter, sly insinuation.....
Why did I marry?
The torture!
Women! All lusting!
Only a fool dares remain blindly trusting.

Sooner I'd trust my beer to a German,
Sooner a bone before a starving spaniel,
Or stake my life upon a lottery
Than trust a wife left alone.

A grim reprisal!
For each time I have chuckled
I'll be taunted:
"You cuckold!"
Branded! Accursed!
Laughter unwanted.
Ah! You cuckold! You cuckold!

Now let him fear the worst! Ah!
Lecher! Glutton!
Too soon you crow and cackle!

First let them couple, then I shall tackle.
They couple, I tackle, I tackle!
I tackle.

I shall avenge betrayal!
I praise that jealous fever
That made my doubting heart
A disbeliever.

FALSTAFF: (*returning*) Here I am, dressed and ready.
Do join me, my good fellow.

FORD: You first and I shall follow.

FALSTAFF: After you.

FORD: After you.

FALSTAFF: No, no! You're my guest of honor.
Lead on, sir.

FORD: *You* first.

FALSTAFF: The lady We mustn't keep her waiting.

FORD: I bow unto my better.

FALSTAFF: You lead, sir. I follow.

FORD: No, sir.... You, sir.....

FALSTAFF: Well, then.....

BOTH: (*illumination!*) We'll leave together!

(*They exit arm in arm.*)

ACT II ---- SCENE 11

In her own living room, Alice Ford prepares for her tender rendezvous with Sir John Falstaff. Plans have been carefully laid: the rendezvous is to be interrupted by Meg Page, who will burst in with the announcement that Mr. Ford, breathing fire and thunder, is on the way. However, the plan does *not* include the frantic appearance of Dame Quickly a few seconds later with the staggering news

**“Save your reverence!”
I make a curtsy,
Oh, so very prim and proper!
Then soon we settle down to business.
Your message follows.
So eager for the bait, he swallows
Every whopper.
In short, to end the story,
He believes that you both
Find his features so enthralling
That, basking in the glory,
Soon you will see him falling,
Falling, falling at your feet.**

ALICE: **Lovely!**

QUICKLY: **Coming here!
Two o’clock on the dot.**

ALICE: **It’s two already.**

ALICE, QUICKLY & MEG: **Two o’clock on the dot!**

ALICE: **Ola! Ned! Will!
My men are put on notice.
(calling) Bring in the laundry basket with the washing.**

QUICKLY: **Sir John will take a spill.**

ALICE: **My daughter, you are not laughing.
Are you ill? So tearful!
What is wrong? Come, tell your mother.**

ANNE: **My father my father**

ALICE: **Go ongo on**

NANNETTA: **My father says I’m to marry
That old Doctor Caius.**

ALICE: **That dusty fossil?**

QUICKLY: **Oh, dear!**

MEG: **That eccentric?**

**Neighbors united!
With chuckles and chortles,
Join the brigade
Of fun-loving mortals
Storming the portals
Of pomp and of pride.**

**Be merry!
Discreet or outrageous,
The joy is contagious
And spreads far and wide.
Alert!**

(to Meg) **So you know what to do and when to do it?**

MEG: **You may come to rue it if the game goes awry.**

QUICKLY: **I'll stand on alert.**

ALICE: **Be quick if I whistle.**

ANNE: **I'll wait by the window
To spy and survey.**

ALICE: **To those that carp and cavil, we say merely
Consider well before you condemn a lady,
For the women most prone to frown severely
Are those most likely shady.**

ALICE, MEG, ANNE: **You merry women of Windsor,
High time that with laughter
We topple the braggart that swaggers,
Our arsenal loaded with darts but no daggers.**

QUICKLY: **On your mark! Get set!**

ALICE: **He's here?**

QUICKLY: **Too close for comfort.**

ANNE: **Hurry!**

QUICKLY: **He is on the stairway.**

ALICE: **Over here! Over there!**

ALICE, MEG, ANNE: On duty! On duty! On duty! (*Alice, left to herself, takes up the lute and strikes a few chords.*)

FALSTAFF: (*entering*) At last to gather
My fragrant flower My treasure!
Now I can die with heart contented.
Why live a moment longer
After this hour in the arms of love?

ALICE: Oh, my tender Sir John!

FALSTAFF: My lovely Alice!
Though my talents are minimal;
There is no man alive milder and sweeter.
Yet I confess
To a secret highly criminal.

ALICE: My word!

FALSTAFF: I wish,
I wish that Mister Ford
Now stood before St. Peter.

ALICE: But why?

FALSTAFF: But why? You're asking?
Then you could be my Lady,
And I could be your Lord.

ALICE: Lady unworthy of you!

FALSTAFF: Worthy of a king!
My coat of arms, embellished by your beauty,
Will glorify that bosom where all my passions lie.
Your jeweled hand I expect to see
In rare pearl and ruby splendor.
Your slippered foot -- sheer ecstasy! --
So delicate and slender.
Your eyes divine will far outshine
God's rainbows seen on high.

ALICE: Oh, lead me not unto temptation!
I've little need of gold, heaven knows,
And pay no heed to decoration.
Instead of furbelows, a simple rose

FALSTAFF: *(trying to embrace her)* Enchanting!

ALICE: *(piling away)* You go too far.

FALSTAFF: Alone together,
We need fear no intruders.

ALICE: You mean?

FALSTAFF: I love you!

ALICE: You're prompted by the devil.

FALSTAFF: True love must seize the all too rare occasion.

ALICE: Sir John!

FALSTAFF: A sin to find my true vocation?
Dazzled, I pursue my passion.

ALICE: Your flesh is weak,
Though seeming all too solid.

FALSTAFF: Way back in Norfolk, the darling of the Duke,
Serving as page, I was trim as a sparrow.
Quick on the mark,
And bright as a lark,
I was swift as an arrow.

Days of my youth, sweet May in all its glory!
Days full of love too fleet and transitory.
Then I was slender, oh yes! I was nimble,
Small enough to fit snug inside of a thimble.

Light as a feather, spry as a beetle,
Slim, I could slip through the eye of a needle.

ALICE: However charming,
I've heard a different story.
That other woman!

FALSTAFF: Who?

ALICE: Meg.

FALSTAFF: That shrew!

Her face would scare an ogre.

ALICE: Sir, do not sport with me.

FALSTAFF: For this sweet moment
A thousand years I've waited.
I love you!

ALICE: Do have a heart!

FALSTAFF: Always!

QUICKLY: *(from outside)* Good Mistress Alice!

FALSTAFF: Who is that?

QUICKLY: Good Mistress Alice!

ALICE: What now?

QUICKLY: *(rushing in)* Oh, my lady! Our neighbor Meg!
She said it's urgent!
Shaking staggering
Looking frantic!

FALSTAFF: Speak of the devil.

QUICKLY: I made her wait,
But she demands to see you.

FALSTAFF: Where can I hide?

ALICE: Here behind the screen.

(As Falstaff hides behind the screen and Quickly leaves, Meg rushes in, apparently in panic.)

MEG: Friend Alice! Pandemonium!
Disaster! Rack and ruin!
You must not waste a second. Flee!

ALICE: Oh, heaven help me! What's happened?

MEG: Your husband's coming,
And he cries "Bloody murder!" Swearing

ALICE: (Speak even louder.)

MEG: He'll slice the man to ribbons.

ALICE: (Stop laughing so.)

MEG: Swearing he will storm the house,
He's stark raving mad,
And hurling curses
On daughters all of Satan.

ALICE: Oh, Lord, have mercy!

MEG: He claims that you're concealing a lover,
A knave that he'll uncover and kill.

Quickly returns in the greatest agitation.

QUICKLY: He's on the warpath! Your husband's here.
Go instantly! He's wilder than a tiger.
Snarling and scowling, sputtering.....
Transformed into a savage,
Hurling abuse and howling.

ALICE: (I'd almost think you meant it.)

QUICKLY: (Believe it!)
He's made his way through the hedge around the garden
With half the men of Windsor.
A riot! An insurrection!
And as we speak, they charge toward the door.

FORD: *(from outside)* Open, open!

FALSTAFF: *(Having stepped tentatively from behind the screen, he listens and hastily returns to his hiding place.)*

The devil ups the ante.
They've caught me *in flagrante*.

FORD: *(bursting in, Caius, Fenton, Bardolph and Pistol close upon his heels)*

The door's to be bolted,
The stairway surrounded.
The hounds and the hunters
Will capture the quarry.

(to Doctor Caius) Go sniff out the animal's traces.
(to Fenton) You search every corridor.

BARDOLPH & PISTOL: To action!

FORD: Cut off his escape,
 Look upstairs in my chamber.

ALICE: *(confronting Ford)* Sir, have you gone crazy?
 Or what?

FORD: Aha! What's in the basket?

ALICE: Tons of laundry.

FORD: Then clean up your conscience!

(giving a ring of keys to Caius, who runs out)

(back to Alice) Take over the keys
(kicking the basket) To the cupboards and closets.
(calling out) All your own doing!
 To hell with these tatters!
 Again, go and search out the garden.
 Some towels, some collars
 Yes, I'll skin you alive!
 Greasy napkins..... Out! Out!
 Smelly stockings I'll brain you!
 More linen and bundles of bedding
 Not there.

ALICE, QUICKLY, & MEG: Fire and thunder!

FORD: Look under the tables.
 Go inside and outside,
 The chimney, the attic and the cellar. *(He runs out shouting.)*

ALICE: Sheer insanity!

QUICKLY: Now's the moment!

ALICE: He must escape some way or other.

MEG: With the wash!

ALICE: No, too big for the basket,

He's far too hefty.

FALSTAFF: *(emerging)* I'll try! Come!
Help me! Help me!

ALICE: I'll go and call my servants. *(She runs out.)*

MEG: *(pretending surprise)* Sir John! You here? Well!

FALSTAFF: Angel! My one beloved!
Save me now! Help me out!

MEG & QUICKLY: Tuck in, tuck in!
Easy does it.

FALSTAFF: Ahi! Ahi! I'm in! Now cover me.

QUICKLY: Lower! And hold your nose!

(While they are busy stuffing things back into the basket, Fenton and Anne enter quietly and cautiously.)

ANNE: This way

FENTON: What fury!

ANNE: Such a commotion!
Calling for caution.

FENTON: People gone crazy.

ANNE: Snapping and snarling,
They shout and shove.
They burn with anger.

FENTON: We burn with love.

ANNE: *(leading him behind the screen, where they hide)*
Follow close, my darling.

FENTON:and stay unseen.

ANNE: Here we can linger.

FENTON: Saved by the screen.

ANNE: Away from the action....

FENTON: In my protection.....

ANNE: Here is safe haven.

BOTH: Praise be to heaven!

DOCTOR CAIUS: (*shouting from offstage*) Keep searching!

FORD: (*also from offstage*) Find the bounder!

DOCTOR CAIUS: (*running across*) Draw and quarter him!

FORD: Surround him!
(*to Pistol, who enters*) Yes?

PISTOL: No.

FORD: (*to Bardolph, who also enters*) Yes?

BARDOLPH: No luck. None.

FORD: Tear down the house if you have to.
(*Pistol and Bardolph go out.*)

DOCTOR CAIUS: He's not up the chimney.

FORD: For sure,
Here in this house he is hiding,
No question about it,
No question about it.

DOCTOR CAIUS: Sir John, I will dance the fandango
The day that you hang, oh you rascal!

FORD: Come out, you old lecher,
Or I'll leave nothing standing.

DOCTOR CAIUS: Surrender!

FORD: This time I'm demanding, demanding!

PISTOL & BARDOLPH (*returning*) Absconded!

FORD: Try harder, keep searching.
Surrender! We've found you!
Not there!

DOCTOR CAIUS: Come out here! Not there!
Bloated boozer, you souse,
Oh, beware!

FORD: You boozer, you bounder,
I warn you, beware!

BOTH: You boozer, you bounder, beware!
(*Anne and Fenton, behind the screen, kiss audibly.*)

FORD: Ha!

DOCTOR CAIUS: Ha!
(*Ford & Dr. Caius slowly, cautiously move toward the screen.*)

FORD: When I catch you....

DOCTOR CAIUS: When I nab you.....

FORD: When I grab you....

DOCTOR CAIUS: When I snatch you....

FORD: I will crush you.

DOCTOR CAIUS: I will beat you black and blue.

FORD: Your bones I'll bury.

DOCTOR CAIUS: On your knees...

FORD: Pray to St. Mary.

QUICKLY: Attend to the wash
And watch out for surprises;
Our labors are lost
If the basket capsizes.

MEG: The game has begun
So be bolder, be braver;

**A small pinch of pepper
Enhances the flavor.**

QUICKLY: **The trouble is triple --
 A man with a gun,
 A wife in the middle,
 A rogue on the run.**

MEG: **No matter the pressure,
 We'll not be undone.
 The risk is a pleasure
 And part of the fun.**

DR. CAIUS: **Oh, beware! You!**

FORD: **At last! Now for vendetta!
 I will grab you....**

DR. CAIUS: **I will crack you....**

FORD: **I will whack you....**

DR. CAIUS: **I will stab you.**

(Bardolph and Pistol return.)

BARDOLPH: **Not a trace.**

PISTOL: **Not a glimmer.**

FORD: **No matter! I have got him.
 With my wife, he's there in hiding.**

BARDOLPH: **Oh, the drunken dirty mongrel!**

OTHERS: **Quiet, quiet, quiet!**

FORD: **Quiet! Hold down the thunder.**

FALSTAFF: *(from the basket)* **I'm stifling....I'm choking.**

QUICKLY: **Stay under, stay under!**

FORD: **With a kiss they've come uncovered.**

FALSTAFF: **I'm roasting.**

MEG: Be careful, stay covered.
Stay under, stay under.

QUICKLY: Be careful, you're dead if discovered.

BARDOLPH: Catch the greedy rat with ease
While he's nibbling at the cheese.

FORD: Not so fast!
For greater luster
We require a plan of battle.

OTHERS: Bravo, bravo!

DR. CAIUS: A man of bluff and bluster
You can soon derange and rattle.

(Fenton and Anne are concealed behind the screen.)

FENTON: The pain is over!
I gaze in wonder
As you surrender
To your true lover.

I fell in love
The moment we met,
And you were smiling
Because you knew.

ANNE: While busy people
Bluster and blunder,
Blinded by passion
And torn asunder,
Love does not hear
The crashes of thunder;
Floating in bliss,
At peace, we gaze in wonder.

FORD: Neighbors, now that we have found him
Bit by bit the plan enlarges.
From the right you circle round him;
From the left you lead the charges.
When supporting forces enter
We attack him from the center.

OTHERS: Count on us for satisfaction!

DR. CAIUS: You will sound the call to action.

OTHERS: Bravo, bravo!

FALSTAFF: I'm stewing, I'm roasting.

MEG: So a fan we're expected to furnish?

FALSTAFF: I smother for air, in these odors I drown.

QUICKLY: Speak one other word and you're finished.

MEG & QUICKLY: Down! Down! Down! Down!
Keep watch and speak softly --
A battle of nerves.
To stew in the basket
Is what he deserves.

FENTON: I dream of marriage,
The candles lighted....

ANNE: An airborne spirit
Of love requited.....

BOTH: While they go crazy,
In bliss we wander,
Serene and lazy,
Gathering flowers of love.

FENTON: Tell me again, is it true?

ANNE: Yes, my dearest, I love only you,
Only you.

FENTON: Only, only you.

SERVANTS: If they catch you all is over;
You are lost beyond recall.
Even Lucifer discovered
Pride can take a mighty fall.

FORD: Put your ear a little closer.
They prepare their own undoing.
Now the turtle doves are cooing
But a storm will end the song.

PISTOL: *(to Bardolph)* **Trouble for the great seducer!
And the lesson will be hard.
Even now the storm is brewing --
Woe to lovers caught off guard!**

DR. CAIUS: **Listen, listen, I can hear them,
And all too clearly.
The skullduggery,
The deceit of women all!**

BARDOLPH: **It's the lady, billing, cooing,
And her lover going strong.**

FORD: **Quiet, stand by!**

FALSTAFF: **Ouf! Blasted old basket!**

ALICE: *(reentering)* **Stay quiet!**

FORD: **Now is the moment.
Quiet! Attention!**

FALSTAFF: **I ask you!**

FORD: **The time has come.....**

DR. CAIUS: **Tell us when.**

FORD: **One....two.....three....**

MEG & QUICKLY: **You're lost if you shout.**

FALSTAFF: **I only want out!**

MEG & QUICKLY: **He's madder by the minute.**

FALSTAFF: **Oh, spare me! Have mercy!**

Oh, spare me!

(The screen falls; the lovers are discovered.)

DR. CAIUS: **Who are they?**

OTHERS: **The guilty couple!**

FORD: *(to Anne)* **A waste of breath to scold you!**

(She runs out in terror; Fenton leaves also.)

FORD: *(to Fenton)* **Be off, you're in the way!**
A thousand times I've told you
My daughter's not for you.

BARDOLPH: **He's there! Stop him!**

FORD: **Where?**

BARDOLPH: **Climbing the stairs.**

FORD: **Go after him!**

MEN: **Pursue him!**

QUICKLY: **A mad hunting party!**

(The men race for the stairs.)

ALICE: **Ned! Will! Tom! Little Jack!**
Come! Hurry, hurry!

(Anne reenters with menservants and a page boy.)

Take the basket and empty it into the river
That gurgles and gushes,
Close by the bed of rushes,
The place where women
Dump their dirty linen.

MEG, ANNE & QUICKLY: **Go, go, go, go!**

ANNE: *(as the servants struggle with the basket)*
A basket overloaded.

ALICE: *(to page)* **Go now and call your master.**
(to Meg) **For when he sees the gallant knight so dashing**
Deep in the water thrashing round and splashing,
Some profit he may reap from Sir John's disaster.

QUICKLY: *(to servants)* **Struggle!**

ALICE & MEG: **You'll manage!**

ANNE: I heard the bottom pop.

MEG, ANNE, QUICKLY: Up!

ALL: Keep trying! Keep trying!
A triumph! A triumph!
And ca-plop!

ACT 111 -- PART 1

Returning to the Garter Inn, we find Sir John Falstaff in a vile mood. Foiled on the brink of success, scared out of his wits, stuffed into a laundry basket of foul linen, nearly suffocated, then dumped into the river -- who would not conclude that the world is a sorry, rundown place, a cesspool of iniquity, a garden gone to seed, with no room for a virtuous man?

Scene: Outside the Garter Inn.

Falstaff is seated on a bench, alone, in somber mood. Rousing himself, he summons the host.

Hey! Get a move on!

He returns to his meditations.

**World of riff raff! World of corruption!
All rotten!**

The host comes out, takes the order, and goes back inside.

Bring a pitcher. Make it hot, make it mellow.

**Outrageous!
So after long years of service,
A cavalier, a fearless fighter,
I'm folded up and stuffed into a basket
With a foul load of linen
And tossed into the river,
Discarded like a litter of defective puppies.
Had not my belly saved me,
Ballooning like a buoy,
I'd have gone under,
Soaked in water,
Swollen and bloated.
World of scum! Garden gone to seed.
Where now is virtue?**

**Go, old Sir John,
Go, go, old and unwanted,
To death just around the corner.
With me, the last remains of manhood
Will vanish from the earth.
I was so close to winning!
The worst day yet!
I just get fatter
While my hair keeps thinning.**

But there is nothing like a spot of sherry for improving the disposition, for polishing up the outlook, for recharging the batteries, and sure enough, Sir John is soon ready for another go, another rendezvous with the insatiably amorous Alice Ford, this time in a far more romantic setting -- the royal park at midnight, near the ancient oak tree haunted by the ghost of Huntsman Herne.

(The host returns with a pitcher on a tray, then goes back inside.)

**To the waters of the Thames
Let us add a touch of sherry.**

He takes a sip, smacks his lips, unbuttons his vest, stretches out, drinks more deeply, and gradually becomes himself again.

**Splendid...
For wine is warmer than the glow of sunshine.
Full of summer!
Feel it smoothly sweeping away
The dust of gloom and vexation.
See how it lights up the eye,
Revives and kindles the brain,
There slyly instilling
Tremors tiny but thrilling,
The inner trilling of sweet intoxication.
Filling the soul with song,
A light-hearted breeze, mellow and balmy,
Makes the globe entire sing along,
Led by a wine-swilling goblin
That heads a willing army.**

**QUICKLY: (entering) Save your reverence!
 Our lovely Alice.....**

**FALSTAFF: To blazes with you and your lovely Alice!
 I'm on to your conivings,
 Your treachery and malice.**

QUICKLY: A dreadful error....

FALSTAFF:

**That Jezebel!
I'm in shock, badly shaken,
Buried live in a basket.
Oh, the toll that love has taken --
Crouching beneath the bedding!
A fatted heifer heading
For the butcher and the block,
Stuffed and stifled in a casket.
Barely breathing, nearly melted,
This torture was the limit --
By nature I'm a man
Sweating buckets by the minute.
Then to make the story shorter,
When roasted and suffocated.
Worst of all, freezing water!
Those vultures!**

(Alice, Meg, Nannetta, Fenton, Dr. Caius and Ford, one by one, peer out from the sidelines, listen briefly, then hide again.)

QUICKLY: **But she is blameless, entirely blameless!
You're much mistaken.**

FALSTAFF: **Off with you!**

QUICKLY: **Those idiotic servants
Made such a blunder.
Poor, wretched Alice!
Weeping, her eyes toward heaven,
Heart torn asunder.
Read this.....She loves you....
*(She produces a letter from her pocket.)***

ALICE: *(watching)* **Reading.**

FORD: **Reading.**

ANNE: **To him it's looking better.**

ALICE: **He has not learned his lesson.**

MEG: **Stay out of sight.**

DR. CAIUS: **Rereading.**

FORD: **The letter. Let us listen.**

FALSTAFF: *(reading)* “I’ll be waiting for you
 In the Royal Park at midnight.
 We shall meet underneath the spreading oak
 of Huntsman Herne.
 Come disguised as the Black Knight.”

QUICKLY: Romance revels in mystery.
 Eager to please, a bit overbold,
 Alice recalled a tale of old,
 For the oak’s a place bewitched and haunted.
 Found hanging from its branches
 The Black Knight’s body dangled.
 There his ghost nightly wanders, so I’ve been told.

FALSTAFF: Inside, we can pursue the matter.
 More of this bedtime story.....

QUICKLY: *(beginning in tones of mystery and awe)*

 When chimes of midnight toll the witching hour,
 Sounding a note of mystery and dread,
 Phantoms and ghostly forms emerge from shadows.....

(As Quickly and Falstaff enter the tavern, Alice takes up the tale in similar tone.)

ALICE: Joined by the Black Knight returning from the dead.
 As he advances slowly, slowly, slowly,
 Like death itself, whose horrors none should utter,
 He approaches stealthily.....

ANNE: By all that’s holy!

MEG: Frozen with fear, I shiver and I shudder.

ALICE: *(in her natural voice)*
 Palaver for little ones
 Concocted by nurses,
 Cadavers and curses
 To send them to sleep.

ALICE, MEG, ANNE: This meeting by moonlight
 We women will keep.

ALICE: *(resuming the awesome story)*
 He approaches stealthily
 The place grim and horrid

That sealed his grizzly fate.
Pale now with anger
His brow he clutches,
For on his ghostly forehead
Two horns grow longer, longer, longer....

FORD: Brava!
Oh, these horns that some other men must wear!

ALICE: Careful! Scorn not a punishment
You well deserve to share.

FORD: Oh, pardon!
Much at fault, I now am penitent.

ALICE: Beware! You'll suffer much hell
If you again maneuver,
Seeking out in the compass of a nutshell
Your wife and latest lover.
But we must hurry,
For time is ever fleeting.

MEG: Come along.....

FENTON: To prepare this midnight meeting.

ALICE: *(to Anne)* My darling.

ANNE: Ready for sport.

ALICE: You shall appear as the Queen of the fairies,
Your veil and mantle
White as mother of pearl
Sprinkled with roses.

ANNE: My realm of song
When all nature reposes.

ALICE: *(to Meg)* You will come as the green
Nymph of the forest.
What role for good friend Quickly?
The Witch of Windsor!

ANNE: Gala performance!

ALICE: A pick of playful pixies
 Will populate our revels
 With a pack of imps and devils
 All intent on mischief making.

 With Falstaff on the scene
 In horns and mantle,
 Together we'll surround him....

OTHERS: Teasing, taunting!

ALICE: We'll rattle and confound him
 Until with no mistaking
 Sir Knight has seen the light.

 After the masquerading,
 Before early dawn is breaking,
 We can merrily head homeward
 After a well-spent night.

MEG: But meanwhile lots to do!

ALICE: Beneath the oak tree at midnight we'll gather.

FENTON: By moonlight.

ANNE: In combination,
 Fun, romance and adventure.

ALICE, MEG, ANNE: Till later.

FENTON: Till later.

ALICE: *(calling after Meg)* More lanterns will be needed.

(As they leave, Quickly comes out of the inn. Seeing Ford and Dr. Caius talking together, she pauses to eavesdrop.)

FORD: Sir, have no fear.
 You'll wed tonight my daughter.
 Though in disguise,
 There you'll know her by the colors.

DR. CAIUS: Girded with roses,
 Gown and veil
 White as snowfall.

ALICE: *(within)* **Bring along capes and camouflage.**

MEG: **With rattles. And you bring sticks and whistles.**

FORD: **The ball is rolling,
My plan on target.
When the revels are ended
Bring Anne to me,
Your faces both well covered,
Hers with a veil,
Yours with a friar's mantle.
Joining hands,
I'll then sanction the marriage.**

DR. CAIUS: **Neat and simple.**

QUICKLY: *(as the two men leave)* **(You think so!)
Where are you? Anne! Oh, Anne! Pst!**

ANNE: *(within)* **Who calls? Who calls?**

QUICKLY: **Prepare your song as the Queen of the Fairies.**

ANNE: *(within)* **I've done so already.**

ALICE: *(also within)* **Let's not be late.**

QUICKLY: **We'll see which man she marries!**

(She hurries out.)

ACT 111 -- SCENE 11

The scene is the royal park of Windsor near the giant oak tree of Huntsman Herne, the ghostly habitat of goblins, witches, elves and demons, all of it barely visible in the pale moonlight. The hour is nearly midnight. So far, all quiet

Scene: The great park of Windsor, Herne's Oak in the center. It is close to midnight. Far off cries of watchmen are heard. The park is gradually lighted by rays of the moon. Fenton enters.

FENTON: **Into the dark my song of rapture rises,
Floating over the silent forest shadows
To where I hear another blending voice
That sweetly answers with responding fervor.**

A lonely signal in the night no longer,
A soothing harmony instead has sounded.
The drowsy air of dawn, open to love,
Comes alive, reawakened by the amorous echo.

Breathing as one, we sing, ending exalted
In the flame of a kiss, given and taken,
As my lips touch the lips of my beloved.
Lips that are kissed stay enchanted forever....

ANNE: (*within*) Kin to the moon, ever reborn in splendor,
In eternal splendor.....

FENTON: The throbbing song gives way as lips come closer.

(*Anne enters; they embrace. Alice, entering with Quickly, parts them and has Fenton put on the black robe of a friar.*)

ALICE: Ask no questions, but slip into this robe.

FENTON: What does this mean?

ANNE: You will know later.

ALICE: (*handing him a mask*) This also.

ANNE: (*looking him over*) A roving monk
Who's left the sheltered cloister.

ALICE: The sly maneuver my husband is planning
We shall turn
To our own sweet advantage.

FENTON: Explain yourself.

ALICE:
(*to Quickly*) Trust in our endeavor.
Tomorrow may be too late --
A case of now or never.
To play the bride whom have you chosen?

QUICKLY: A rogue with a big red nose
Who abhors the crusty doctor!

MEG: (*running in*) Imps and goblins I've hidden in the hedges.
We're ready.

ALICE: *(listening)* Quiet! Here comes the horned hunter. Hurry!

OTHERS: *(all scattering)* Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

(Falstaff enters, wrapped in a voluminous mantle, with two stag horns on his head. The chimes of midnight begin to sound.)

FALSTAFF: One....two....three....four....five....six....stroke of seven....
Ten....eleven....twelve o'clock....Midnight!
And here's the oak tree....
Mighty gods, oh smile on me.
Jove himself to attain Europa
Became a horned bull
And overpowered.
Inspired, who am I to be a coward?
The call of love
Has made a most amazing transformation.
I hear a step approaching....
(Alice appears.) Dear Alice! By love transported.
Closer! I burn with passion.

ALICE: Sir John!

FALSTAFF: My inspiration!

ALICE: Sir John!

FALSTAFF: My summer flower!

ALICE: You are my noble deer!

FALSTAFF: Closer! Come to my embraces....

ALICE: Sir John! *(always avoiding his embrace)*

FALSTAFF: Held in your power,
I am a beast,
Conquered by beauty.
Let the sky rain potatoes,
Cabbages and turnips,
On higher food I flourish.
On love I feast!
Alone here....

ALICE: No! There in the woods I've spotted

My neighbor Meg.

FALSTAFF: **Divide me down the middle;
Here's room for both.
The best for you.
My size and scope are double.
The rest for her.....
Sly Cupid here rewards my trouble.
So onward! So onward! I love you!**

MEG: *(within)* **The goblins!**

ALICE: *(pretending terror)* **A cry of alarm!**

MEG: *(within)* **Run for your lives!**

ALICE: **Oh Lord! Forgive me!**

FALSTAFF: **Goblins!**

ALICE: **May heaven pardon my transgression! *(She flees.)***

FALSTAFF: **I gladly would have yielded to temptation!**

(He braces himself against the trunk of the oak.)

ANNE: *(from afar)*

**Goblins! Gremlins! Pixies! Sorcerers and Sirens!
Bright rays from our enchanted star
Shine down upon us.
Arise, all you fairy phantoms!**

SPIRITS: *(from within)* **Goblins! Pixies and Sirens!**

FALSTAFF: *(throwing himself down flat on his face)*
**Demons and fairies!
To look but once, you die.**

(Enter Anne as Queen of the Fairies; Meg as the Green Nymph; Alice as a fairy; Bardolph in monk's habit, cowl pulled down, but unmasked; Dr. Caius in grey habit, also unmasked; Fenton in black habit but with a mask, Pistol as a satyr, little girls dressed as fairies, white and blue, nymphs, elves and imps. Falstaff remains motionless, face down.

ALICE: *(coming forward)* **Follow me.**

ANNE: *(also coming forward, with others, and seeing Falstaff)*
There he lies!

ALICE: Facing down.

ANNE: Frightened out of his mind.

SPIRITS: He is hiding.

ALICE: Mustn't clown. *(She leaves.)*

SPIRITS: No, no, no!

ANNE: Form a circle, and then
We begin!

SPIRITS: You say when.

ANNE: In breezes light as gossamer
The boughs and bushes tremble.
Hurry, before the moon is down,
Elves of the night, assemble!

You dancers, follow the music
That guides our fairy throng.
Magic and grace are blended
When dance adorns the song.

FAIRIES: The forest slumbers,
Subdued in dark of shrouded trees.
The heavy air envelops
A sylvan scene beneath the seas.

ANNE: By light of moon we wander
And roam among the flowers,
Gathering from each blossom
Nectar with healing powers.

Of daisies and of primroses
Our fairy spells we gather;
Held in a sprig of heather
Our sacred book reposes.

For you that dare to enter,
Eager to come and see
Our domain of wonder,

Flowers contain the key.

SPIRITS: Before the moon goes under
We cross through moss and fern
Toward the oak of the hunter
Bearing the name of Herne.

ANNE: To our domain
Flowers open the door.

*Alice and Quickly enter, both masked. Bardolph stumbles over Falstaff's body,
then stops everyone with a gesture.*

BARDOLPH: Spirits, halt!

PISTOL: Who is that?

FALSTAFF: Oy, vey!

QUICKLY: A human!

OTHERS: A man! A man!

FORD: The horns denote the devil.

PISTOL: A mortal or a mountain?

BARDOLPH: Get him ready for roasting.

PISTOL & BARDOLPH: Man or beast! Stand up!

FALSTAFF: You'll need a crane for hoisting
The body.

FORD: Too hard to handle.

QUICKLY: He is tainted.

OTHERS: And polluted.

BARDOLPH: He needs a thorough cleaning.
(with imposing gestures like a wizard)

ALICE: *(on the side to Nannetta)*
Daughter, a word of warning,
For Dr. Caius comes hunting.

ANNE: We'd better go in hiding.
(With Fenton, she moves discreetly to the back.)

QUICKLY: But stay alert, and come back when I call.

BARDOLPH: *(still energetically exorcising, over Falstaff's inert body)*

Elfin creatures! Mosquitoes!
Angry hornets and vampires!
Come, bugs and bats
From bog and belfrey recruited.
Pinch and pummel him,
Pepper and pickle him,
Prick out his vanity,
Needle and nettle.

FALSTAFF: Ah, me! Your smell will first drive me to insanity.

IMPS: Rumple and tumble him!
Rumple and tumble him!

ALICE, MEG, QUICKLY: Prick at him, tickle him,
Needle and nettle him.
Till you unsettle him
Hassle and heckle.

FALSTAFF: Ahi! Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!

IMPS & ELVES: We elfin community
Will rumple and tumble him,
A rare opportunity
To hassle and humble him.

Adopting a stronger line,
We'll turn him to jelly
By forming a conga line
Across his big belly.

You flies and mosquitoes
Of swamp and of jungle,
This mass of libidos
Is yet to cry uncle,
Is yet to cry uncle,
Cry uncle, cry uncle.

ALICE, MEG, QUICKLY: Smacking and whacking him,

FORD: Dare you deceive me?

FOUR MEN: You scum! Your time has come!

FALSTAFF: Not yet!

BARDOLPH: Reform or you'll be sorry.

FALSTAFF: You reek of sack and sherry.

ALICE, MEG, QUICKLY: Lord, for his wayward soul we pray.

FOUR MEN: Puffy and bloated,

FALSTAFF: Yes, I'll reform, but not today.

FAIRIES: Prick at him, pepper and pickle him.

ALICE, MEG, QUICKLY: Turning to Thee when hope is gone....

FOUR MEN: Long you have gloated.

FALSTAFF: I'll mend my ways, but later on.

FAIRIES: Puncture him, rumple and tumble him.

ALICE, MEG, QUICKLY: Lead him again to tow the line.

FOUR MEN: Old Casanova,

FALSTAFF: Oh, praise the Lord, but pass the wine.

FAIRIES: Puncture him, rumple and tumble him.

ALICE, MEG, QUICKLY: Show him the lighted path again.

FOUR MEN: That role is over.

FALSTAFF: I'll sin, but only now and then.

FAIRIES: Prick at him, pepper and pickle him.

FOUR MEN: Globe of iniquity! Your answer?

FALSTAFF: Right you are.

FOUR MEN: Mountain of loose debris, your answer?

FALSTAFF: Right again.

FOUR MEN: Barrel of old rot gut, your answer?

FALSTAFF: How well you put it.

BARDOLPH: King of the rounded,
Your trumpet's sounded.

FALSTAFF: Your breath, no doubt,
Will knock me out.

FOUR MEN: So dissipated! Degenerated!
Over-inflated! So dissipated!

FALSTAFF: What if I am?
Ahi! Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!

BARDOLPH: You and your luggage can go to the devil.

(In his excitement, his mask falls off.)

FALSTAFF: Viper! Imposter! Traitor!
You're the purse snatcher Bardolph!
Two-legged adder!
Rat from the gutter!
Blot on humanity!
Walking obscenity!
Scrawny beggar! Puny parasite!
You caterpillar.
Sack and sherry swiller,
You fever blister,
You wheezy fiddle.
You scaly, creepy, crawly, slimy lizard!
You vermin!
You heard me, and if unjust,
Divide me in two
And slice me down the middle.

ALL: *(excepting Bardolph)* Bravo!

FALSTAFF: I need time for breathing. What a night!

QUICKLY: *(softly, to Bardolph)*

Come, it is time to don that veil of white.

(Dr. Caius goes out to continue his search; Quickly and Bardolph disappear behind the trees.)

FORD: *(to Falstaff with an ironical bow)*

Well, well! After some time to think it over,
Sir John, tell me,
Who now wears the horns?

ALICE & MEG: Who now? Who now? Who now?

ALICE: You seem a little shaken.

FALSTAFF: Ah, Mister Brooke, here also.....

ALICE: The name you have mistaken.
Mister Ford. my dear husband.

QUICKLY: *(reappearing)* Sir, with deference.....

FALSTAFF: Save your reverence!

QUICKLY: So you fancied two women
So dimwitted that they were ready
To fall head over heels, hook, line and sinker
For an old clinker
Gone to seed and sweaty.

MEG & ALICE: A reservoir of vices,
Fountain of foibles.

FALSTAFF: Plain and simple.
But I'm starting to as well to see
I'm less of a lion than an ass.

ALICE: A donkey....

FORD: With antlers. A beast of fable.
A horny dragon.

OTHERS: A donkey with antlers.
Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

FALSTAFF: All this rabble of boobies and their brothers
Belittle, mock and malign me.

Fools that they are!
For I'm not only witty in myself,
But I create the wit in others.
Yes, I supply the salt
That seasons the pudding,
The zest and flavor
You lesser mortals can savor.

OTHERS: Well-spoken!

FORD: That will do.
Shut up before I salt and pepper *you!*
But onward:
Gather round for celebration.
Our masquerade draws near a grand conclusion:
Hail the betrothal of our fair Queen of the Fairies!

Enter Dr. Caius, masked, hand in hand with Bardolph, veiled in white as Queen of the Fairies.

FORD: Let us welcome the couple getting married.
Attention!

OTHERS: A wedding!

FORD: Look at her!
A radiant virgin in veil of white
And garlanded with roses.
Oh, lucky man to claim her
For his own in marriage!
Form a circle around them.

(Alice presents Anne and Fenton, who have just reentered, Anne wearing a thick blue veil, Fenton a dark habit and mask.)

ALICE: Another couple of lovers here come pleading,
Eager to be admitted into the holy bonds of marriage.

FORD: Delighted!
Tonight a double wedding!
So bring the lanterns closer.
Empowered by heaven
I pronounce you married.
Off with disguises!

At a sign from Ford, masks and veils are all removed, to great laughter, except from Dr. Caius, Bardolph and Ford

DR. CAIUS: Oh, horror!

FORD: Revolution!

OTHERS: Apotheosis!

FORD: Fenton and my daughter!

DR. CAIUS: I am married to Bardolph!
Disaster! Disaster!

OTHERS: We did it! Evviva! Evviva!

FORD: (still stupefied) Have I gone crazy?

ALICE: Be wary when you weave a trap for others
Lest you entrap the weaver.

FALSTAFF: Ah, dear old Mister Ford!
I pose the question:
Who now plays the fool?

FORD: (pointing to Caius) Him.

DR. CAIUS: (pointing to Ford) You.

FORD: No.

BARDOLPH: Both.

FENTON: Both.

DR. CAIUS: Me?

FALSTAFF: There's your answer.

ALICE: (including Falstaff) No! Three at least!
(to Ford) Turn now and be lenient --
So in love, so devoted!

ANNE: Pardon, pardon, oh father!

FORD: Out maneuvered, out smarted and out voted,
I'd better cry surrender.
Receive a father's blessing
And the blessing of heaven.

ALMOST ALL:

Evviva!

FALSTAFF:

A choral fugue will end the caper.

FORD:

Lead on, Sir Falstaff, and then it's off to supper.

FALSTAFF: *(followed fugally by everyone else)*

**Life is a laughing matter,
Man a bundle of folly,
Full of clamor and clatter, idle chatter,
Whether gloomy or jolly.
Lowly or mighty
Fickle and flighty,
We jesters are prone to bicker and brawl.
Ah, but the question yet festers:
Who will laugh last of all?
Now and hereafter,
Matter for laughter.**

FINE