

FALSTAFF

Music by Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto by Arrigo Boito

Adapted from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry V* Parts 1 and 2

By William Shakespeare

SYNOPSIS

Act I

The Garter Inn. Sir John Falstaff is writing letters at his desk when the old Doctor Caius bursts in. He accuses Falstaff of breaking into his house the night before, and abusing his servants. Then he accuses Falstaff's cronies, Bardolfo and Pistola, of getting him drunk and picking his pockets. Pistola threatens the Doctor, and Falstaff tells him now would be a good time to leave.

Falstaff complains about the huge bill he has run up at the Inn, but he has a plan to raise the money. He will court Mrs. Alice Ford and Mrs. Meg Page, the wives of two wealthy Windsor merchants. He believes they hold the purse-strings of their households. He has written identical love letters to each of them. Bardolfo and to Pistola refuse to deliver the letters; Bardolfo claims that his honor forbids him. Falstaff give the letters to a page to be delivered. He then gives his two cronies a lecture on the subject of honor, and throws them out of his room.

The gardens of Ford's house. Meg Page and Mistress Quickly meet Alice Ford and her daughter Nannetta coming out of the garden. Meg and Alice are amazed to discover they have received identical love letters from Sir John Falstaff. They resolve to avenge themselves publicly—and merrily.

Alice Ford's husband enters with a group in tow... including Falstaff's cronies Bardolph and Pistol. Ford goes walking with Caius, whom he hopes will marry his daughter Nannetta... who is in love with young Fenton. Bardolfo and Pistola betray their master by telling Ford that Falstaff is after his wife. Jealous, Ford decides to disguise himself and pay Falstaff a visit.

The women, Meg and Alice, begin plotting. Everyone leaves except Fenton and Nannetta, who seize the moment for a kiss.

Act II

The Garter Inn. Bardolfo and Pistola are contrite... or at least pretending to be. They introduce Mistress Quickly. She pays her respects to Sir John Falstaff and gives him news: Alice and Meg are madly in love with him. Alice Ford will be the easiest to seduce, because her husband is always gone from two to three o'clock. But Meg Page will be trickier; her husband is nearly always home.

Ford, disguised as Master Fontana, arrives to visit Falstaff, with a jingling purse in hand. He professes to be madly in love with Alice Ford, but has had no success so far. If she could fall first for the more experienced Falstaff, he says, perhaps she could then fall for him. Falstaff accepts

the commission. In fact, he already has a rendezvous scheduled with her that afternoon. He tells the stranger that Alice will soon be in his arms.

A room in Ford's house. Alice, Meg and Quickly prepare the reception Sir John deserves. When Nannetta doesn't join in the women's laughter, she tearfully reveals that her father plans to marry her off to old Doctor Caius, while it is Fenton she loves. Alice tells her daughter not to worry.

The women keep watch for Falstaff's arrival. Sir John enters and tries to seduce Alice by boasting of his youth when he was a page to the Duke of Norfolk. Soon Quickly enters, announcing a distraught Meg. Meg says she has seen Alice's husband. He is furiously roaming in search of his wife. Terrified, Falstaff is hidden behind a screen.

Ford, Fenton, Caius and others burst in. Ford dumps out a basket of dirty linen, suspecting Falstaff is hiding in there. Meg pretends to be shocked at Falstaff's presence. As the men search the house, Meg, Alice and Quickly conceal Falstaff... barely... in the basket.

Suddenly Ford re-enters and knocks down the screen, only to find Nannetta and Fenton kissing. Ford is furious. But just then, Alice orders the basket to be lifted and dumped out the window into the brook below. Alice laughingly leads her husband to the window to see his "rival" spluttering downstream.

Act III

The Garter Inn. Wet and bruised, Falstaff is recovering with a glass of hot wine. Quickly brings him a letter from Alice inviting him to appear at the Great (haunted) Oak of Herne at midnight, disguised as the Black Hunter of Herne. He sputters his frustration at the day's events, but soon he reads with growing interest. Alice, Meg, Nannetta, Ford, Caius and Fenton, who have all been spying on him, disperse to prepare their costumes -but not before Quickly overhears Ford telling Caius to dress as a monk so that Ford can find him and Nannetta to marry them during the revels. Quickly hurries to warn Nannetta and Alice.

Herne's Oak, Windsor Park. Midnight. Fenton sings of his love. Nannetta arrives. Alice and Quickly tell Fenton to disguise himself as a monk.

Falstaff approaches, shivering in his cloak, and sporting enormous antlers. Alice runs to him and tells him Meg is following her. Meg's voice is heard saying she's being followed by witches. Falstaff hears fairy-songs and throws himself to the ground, knowing the sight of the spirit world can mean death.

Nannetta, disguised as the Fairy Queen, leads a troupe of children dressed as imps, nymphs and sprites. They cry out to discover Falstaff, a mortal on their grounds, and they set to kicking and punching him. During the roughhousing, Bardolfo loses his mask. Falstaff recognizes him and realizes he is the object of a grand joke. Ford asks him: "who's wearing the horns now?"

Quickly takes Bardolfo aside to cover him in a woman's gown and veil. Everyone unmask, and Ford calls for the nuptials to begin. Alice brings another masked and veiled couple before him

and asks for a double wedding. After Ford has married and blessed both pairs, they remove their veils. He has married Fenton to Nannetta and Doctor Caius to Bardolfo.

Falstaff asks Ford who's the dupe now. Nannetta begs her father's forgiveness. Ford gives her his blessing and invites everyone to supper. Falstaff leads a merry fugue: "All the world's a joke," he sings, "and only the jolly are wise. He who laughs last, laughs best."