

The libretto in brief

Traduzione di Rodney Stringer

Act I

Part I

The Garter Inn, Windsor.

Sir John Falstaff is intent on sealing the envelopes of two letters, when a furious Doctor Cajus bursts in demanding an explanation for the outrage he has been subjected to: his house devastated, his servants beaten up, his mare illtreated. But Sir John gives him no satisfaction, admitting everything and indeed boasting of it all. Cajus grows even angrier, accusing Falstaff's servants, Bardolfo and Pistola, of having got him drunk and then robbed him. The two blackguards deny everything, and Falstaff abruptly dismisses Doctor Cajus, who goes off in despair, followed by jibes from Bardolfo and Pistola. At this point Falstaff berates the two servants for their coarse approach to the gentle art of theft, which should be practised "graciously and at the auspicious moment". Then he turns to his accounts at the inn. Realising that he is on his uppers, he takes it out on the two servants. But there is, perhaps, a way of replenishing his meagre finances. Sir John has in fact decided to pay court to two wealthy belles, Alice Ford and Meg Page. For this purpose he has prepared two love-letters. Bardolfo shall deliver the one addressed to Mrs Meg and Pistola the one to Mrs Alice. But the two scoundrels, who have until now followed their master's plans, disdainfully refuse to run these errands because their honour prevents them from obeying any such command. On hearing this word, Falstaff rises up indignantly. After entrusting the two letters to a page, he launches into a sarcastic lesson on the subject of honour and sends his two servants packing.

Part II

The garden of Alice Ford's house.

Alice and her daughter Nannetta are about to call on Meg when they bump into her in person, accompanied by Mrs Quickly, on her way to see them. Both Meg and Alice have received love-letters from Falstaff. When they tell each other about the contents they discover, with a mixture of amusement and disappointment, that the two letters are identical. The four women then decide to get their revenge on the rash suitor. They break into a lively concertato. A male quintet arrives on the scene, consisting of Bardolfo and Pistola, Doctor Cajus, the young Fenton, who is in love with Nannetta, and the extremely jealous Mr Ford, Alice's husband. The first two have decided to get their own back on Falstaff by warning Ford of the designs which their former master has on his wife. Bardolfo then lays it on thicker than ever, by talking to him of horns. Ford is now seriously worried. In the meantime Nannetta and Fenton manage to find a moment's privacy. The women reappear, and Alice informs them of her plan: Mrs Quickly shall go to Falstaff to invite him to a rendezvous with Alice, during which he will get what he deserves. The men now return, Ford having decided to confront the redoubtable seducer personally. With this in mind he asks Bardolfo and Pistola to contrive to regain Falstaff's trust and to introduce him, under a false name, to their master.

Act II

Part I

The Garter Inn again.

Bardolfo and Pistola declare themselves to be "repentant and contrite", and are duly taken back into Falstaff's service. Whereupon they bring in Quickly, who curtsies and invites the "great seducer" to an assignation at Alice's house "dalle due alle tre". She then informs Sir John that Meg also has succumbed to his charms, but unfortunately her husband is always at home. When Quickly has taken her leave, Falstaff savours the pleasure of his conquests. A Mr Fontana is now shown in, bearing a demijohn of Cyprus wine and offering Falstaff a bag of gold if he can seduce Alice Ford. Since he himself loves her unrequited, he hopes that, once her resistance has been broken down, the chaste Alice may be better disposed to his own advances. Falstaff takes the money and confides to Mr Fontana that he is already well ahead in precisely that undertaking: indeed he has a rendezvous with Alice. Then he goes out "to make himself attractive". Ford, convinced by now that his wife is deceiving him, sings a hymn to jealousy. Falstaff re-enters in all his finery, and the two men leave the inn together.

Part II

A room in Ford's house.

Quickly tells her friends how the conversation went with Falstaff, and together the women make their final preparations for the hoax to be played on Sir John. Only Nannetta stays sadly aside, for her father wants her to marry the old Doctor Cajus and cares nothing about her love of Fenton. Alice and the other women promise to help her. Mistress Quickly

announces Falstaff's arrival and hurries off to hide. Alice romantically strikes up her lute as if awaiting her lover. Falstaff enters and embarks upon a clumsy, pompous courtship, recalling the days of his youth. In reply to Alice's insinuations, he categorically denies any interest in Meg. Very much out of breath, Meg herself bursts in to announce that an enraged Ford is on his way. This is all part of their rehearsed practical joke. But now Mrs Quickly also rushes in, looking even more flustered: this time Ford is indeed approaching. Alice bundles Falstaff behind a screen as Ford enters in a fury, accompanied by Fenton, Cajus, Bardolfo and Pistola, and proceeds to ransack the house in search of the suspected lover. Taking advantage of the confusion, the women push Falstaff into a large washing basket, and cover him with dirty linen. Meanwhile Fenton slips behind the screen with Nannetta. From this hiding-place is then heard the loud smack of a kiss. Ford is sure he has at last found the culprit, and gets ready to catch him in the act. But behind the screen he discovers, to his great chagrin, only the young couple. The women profit by the ensuing hubbub and frantic renewed searching to have the basket and its contents thrown into the Thames. Alice summons her husband to the window and reveals the whole joke to him, thus managing to turn his jealousy into laughter.

Act III

Part I

Outside the Garter Inn.

Seated on a bench, Falstaff broods over the nasty adventure he has just been through, cursing the world, his fate, and the decadence of morals. He consoles himself by pouring "a little wine into the Thames water". Quickly enters to suggest another rendezvous with Alice, but Falstaff wants nothing more to do with her. Again however he falls into the trap: the assignation is arranged for midnight, at Herne's oak in the royal forest. Falstaff is to arrive disguised as the Black Hunter, that is to say wearing two large antlers on his head. Quickly and Sir John go into the inn and Alice, who has been keeping watch with her merry party, gives orders for the masquerade: Nannetta is to be disguised as the Queen of Fairies, Meg as a nymph, Quickly as a witch, and the others as sprites and elves. Everybody looks forward to plenty of fun. With Falstaff chastised, the marriage between Nannetta and Doctor Cajus can go ahead: or at least, that is Ford's secret intention. But Quickly has heard all, and hurries off to warn the merry wives.

Part II

The royal forest at Windsor, near Herne's oak, a few minutes before midnight.

Fenton sings his love for Nannetta, who enters disguised as the Queen of Fairies and joins him in his singing. While Alice puts the finishing touches to the hoax she also seizes the opportunity to alter the disguises, so as to thwart the designs of Ford and Doctor Cajus. Falstaff arrives, disguised as the Black Hunter. It is midnight. Alice pretends to welcome the fat man's impetuous advances; she even reveals to him that Meg also

has come to the assignment, since she too has been unable to resist the temptation of his charms. Falstaff barely has time to relish this fortunate situation before Meg lets out a scream: "Vien la tregenda!". The Queen of Fairies makes her entry, with her retinue of sprites and elves. Falstaff, knowing that according to tradition he whose gaze falls upon the magic procession is a dead man, flings himself face downwards onto the ground. The lively band of imps and spirits trip over Falstaff's body and begin to pinch and taunt the wretched knight while ordering him to repent. When he has finished confessing all his sins, poor Sir John suddenly recognizes Bardolfo. As it dawns on him that he has been made an object of ridicule, he nevertheless manages to muster some of his old truculence. Ford then announces the marriage between the two masked figures whom he believes to be Doctor Cajus and Nannetta. In the meantime another masked couple step forward to take advantage of the occasion. When the double marriage has been celebrated, Ford discovers to his dismay that he has just married Nannetta to Fenton and Doctor Cajus to Bardolfo! His surprise is transformed into general hilarity and the opera concludes with a grand final fugue: "Tutto nel mondo è burla".