

# **The Merry Wives of Windsor**

**by William Shakespeare**

Presented by Paul W. Collins

© *Copyright 2012 by Paul W. Collins*

# **The Merry Wives of Windsor**

## **By William Shakespeare**

Presented by Paul W. Collins

**All rights reserved** under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this work may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, audio or video recording, or other, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Contact: [paul@wsrightnow.com](mailto:paul@wsrightnow.com)

*Note:* Spoken lines from Shakespeare's drama are in the public domain, as is the Globe edition (1864) of his plays, which provided the basic text of the speeches in this new version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. But *The Merry Wives of Windsor, by William Shakespeare: Presented by Paul W. Collins* is a copyrighted work, and is made available *for your personal use only*, in reading and study.

*Student, beware:* This is a *presentation*, not a scholarly work, so you should be sure your teacher, instructor or professor considers it acceptable as a reference before quoting characters' comments or thoughts from it in your report or term paper.

## Chapter One Confrontations

Waiting outside George Page's stately Windsor home this fine sunny morning is Hugh Evans, a kindly Welsh cleric. The parson hopes to resolve a complaint being made by the visiting uncle of a parishioner.

"Sir Hugh, persuade me not," insists the wizened old man, a veteran of the war, and now one of the keepers of the king's grounds. "I *will* make a Star Chamber matter of it! If he were *twenty* Sir John Falstaffs, he shall not abuse Robert Shallow, Esquire!"

Notes his flaxen-haired nephew, Abraham Slender, "In the county of Gloucester, justice of peace and '*coram!*'" Slender has moved here from the country to serve as the grammar school's teacher, for which he is provided room and board, and is paid well—£15 per year.

"Aye, cousin Slender," says Shallow, "and '*custalourum!*'"

"Aye, and '*rato-lorum,*' too—and a *gentleman* born, Master Parson, who writes himself '*Armigero,*' in any bill, warrant, quittance, or obligation! '*Armigero!*'"

"Aye, that I *do*—as have done any time these three hundred years!"

"All his successors gone before him hath done't," says Slender, "and all his ancestors that come after him may. They may give a dozen white *luces* in their coat!" He means *display symbols* of that fish in the family's coat of arms.

"It is an old coat," nods Shallow; he takes pride in his lineage.

The fish is a Christian emblem, Hugh knows. "The dozen white louses"—his far-western pronunciation—"do become an old coat *well*; it agrees well, *passant*; it is a familiar beast to man, and signifies *love*," he points out.

But *love* prompts wry grin from the old man. "*That* luce is the *fresh* fish; the *salt* fish is for an old coat." Such dried fish is called *ling*—also a term for *prostitute*.

Slender has been considering their lofty legacy. "I may yet quarter, coz"—partition the heraldic coat's escutcheon to accommodate new honors.

"You may, by *marrying*," notes his uncle, pointedly.

The Welshman nods. "It is marring indeed, if he quarter it."

"Not a whit!" protests Shallow.

"Yes, py'r lady! If *he* has a quarter of your coat, there is but three skirts for *yourself*, in my simple conjectures!

"But that is all one," he says, returning to the present issue. "If Sir John Falstaff have committed disparagements unto you, I am of the church, and will be glad to do my benevolence to make atonements and compromises between you."

"The *Council* shall hear it!—it is a *riot!*" charges Justice Shallow. That part of the judicial Chamber meets in London, which is twenty miles to the east along the Thames.

But the clergyman, thinking of his local church's leaders, shakes his head. "It is not meet the council hear a *riot*—there is no fear of *Got* in a riot! The council, look you, shall desire to hear the fear of Got, and not to hear a riot; take your vizaments"—advisement—"in that!"

Shallow scoffs at process: "*Hah!* On my life, if I were *young* again, the *sword* should end it!"

The peaceable Evans, hoping to settle the disagreement, persists. "It is petter that *friends* in '*Word*'—in God's divine Word—"end it!"

"And there is also *another* device in my prain, which peradventure prings goot discretions with it: there is Anne Page, which is daughter to Master Thomas Page, which is a pretty virginity!"

"*Mistress Anne Page*," says Slender reverently. "She has brown hair, and speaks small, like a woman...."

"It is that *fery person*, for all the 'orld, is just as you will *desire!*" says Evans. His eyebrows rise. "And seven hundred pounds of moneys in *gold* and *silver* is her grandsire upon his

death's-bed—Got deliver to a joyful resurrections!—give, when she is able to overtake seventeen years old!" The inheritance—£700, not the weight in bullion—will soon be hers.

The parson regards the old justice merrily. "It were a *goot* motion if we leave our *pribbles* and *prabbles*, and desire a *marriage* between Master Abraham and Mistress Anne Page!"

Master Slender is surprised. "Did her grandsire leave her seven hundred pound?"

"Aye—and her *father* is make her a *petter* penny!"

"I know the young gentlewoman," sighs the young teacher, already drifting into rapture, picturing her. "She has good gifts...."

"Seven hundred pounds and possibilities is *goot* gift!" says Hugh.

Shallow wants to proceed with his complaint. "Well, let us see honest Master Page. Is Falstaff there?"

Hugh had hoped to prevent the encounter. "Shall I tell you a *lie*?—I do despise a liar as I do despise one that is false, or as I despise one that is not true! The knight Sir John *is* there," he admits, "but, I beseech you, be ruled by your well-willers!"

"I will peat the door for Master Page." He knocks. "*What ho-a!* Got pless your house here!"

"Who's there?" calls George Page from inside, as he comes to open the door.

Sir Hugh Evans smiles at him. "Here is Got's plessing, and your friend, and Justice Shallow; and here young Master Slender—who peradventures shall tell you *another* tale, if matters grow to your likings!"

Page welcomes them all into his house. "I am glad to see Your Worships well," he says, as they file into the parlor. "I thank you for my *venison*, Master Shallow!"

Shallow nods, pleased. "Master Page, I am glad to see you! Much good do it your good heart! I wished your venison better—it was *ill-killèd!*" After an admonitory glance from the clergyman, he refrains from saying more.

"How doth good Mistress Page?" asks Shallow. He adds, ingratiatingly, "and I thank you always with my heart—*la!* with my *heart!*"—a jest on *hart*.

Page returns the smiles. "Sir, I thank you."

"Sir, I thank *you*," says Shallow, "by *yea* and *no* I do!"

Page, thanked quite enough, turns to the younger man. "I am glad to see you, good Master Slender!"

"How does your fallow greyhound, sir?" asks Slender, of the racing dog. "I heard say he was *outrun*, on *Cotsall*."

Page frowns. "It could not be judged, sir," he says glumly; the Cotswold-hills competition did not go well for him.

Slender is amused. "You'll not confess, you'll not *confess!*"—admit defeat.

Shallow laughs. "That he will not! 'Tis your fault, 'tis *your* fault," says the graybeard, scolding Master Page for the greyhound's deficient training. "'Tis a good dog!"

"A *cur*, sir," says Page, who lost money on a wager.

"Sir, he's a *good* dog, and a *fair* dog!—can there be more said? He is good and fair!" But Shallow realizes that he is not helping his cause, however fine looking the animal may be. "Is Sir John Falstaff here?"

Page nods. "Sir, he is within; and I would I could do a good office between you."

Hugh Evans smiles at them both. "It is spoke as a Christians *ought* to speak!"

Shallow is unwavering. "He hath *wronged* me, Master Page!"

"Sir, he doth in some sort confess it...." Page tells him.

"If it be confessèd it is not *redressèd!*—is not that so, Master Page? He hath wronged me; indeed he hath—at a word, he *hath*, believe me! Robert Shallow, Esquire, saith he is *wrongèd!*"

"Here comes Sir John," says Page, as a side door opens. The aging knight, surprisingly rotund, occupies considerable space in the room. Following him are his fellow former soldiers Pistol, Bardolph and Nym.

Falstaff challenges abruptly: he booms, "Now, Master Shallow, you'd *complain* of me to the

king?"

The king's keeper replies boldly: "Knight, you have *beaten my men, killed my deer, and broke open my lodge!*"

Gibes Falstaff, in mocking allusion to a rhyme, "But not 'kissed your keeper's *daughter*'?"

"*Tsk, a pin!*" The indignant official will not be distracted. "This shall be *answered!*"

"I will answer it straight: I have *done* all this," says the knight calmly. "That is now answered," he adds, dismissing the matter.

Shallow fumes. "The Council shall know this!"

Falstaff shakes his head. "'Twere better for you if it were known *in counsel*. You'll be *laughed at!*"

Hugh Evans wants calm. "*Pauca verba,*"—few words, "Sir John; *goot worts.*"

"*Good worts?—good cabbage!*" says the knight. He turns to the teacher, who had been with his uncle when they confronted the would-be poachers. "Slender, I broke your head—what matter have you against me?" he demands

"Marry, sir, I *have* 'mater' in my head,"—a play on *pia mater*, brains, "against you, and against your cony-catching"—*innocent-cheating*—"rascals, Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol!"

"You *Banbury cheese!*"—one known for its thinness, cries Bardolph, his complexion turning even redder than usual.

Slender glares back steadily at the graying soldiers. "Aye, it is no matter."

"How now, Mephostophilus!" growls Pistol menacingly.

Slender is unmoved. "Aye, it is no matter."

"*Slice*, I say, *pauca, pauca! Slice!*" cries Nym, with a slashing gesture. "That's *my* humour!"—his all-purpose term, which most often means *notion*.

But the young teacher looks around; he has a different, more urgent concern. "Where's Simple, my man? Can you say, cousin?" he asks Shallow. The servant, who sometimes carries Slender's sheathed rapier for him, and runs his errands, is twelve.

"Peace, I pray you," says Hugh mildly. "Now, let us understand. There is three umpires in this matter, as I understand: that is, Master Page, *fidelicet* Master Page; and there is myself, *fidelicet* myself; and the three party is, lastly and finally, mine host of the Garter." The Garter Inn is one of several hostelries in Windsor.

Page concurs. "We three to hear it, and *end* it between them."

"Fery goot," says Hugh. "I will make a prief of it in my note-book, and we will afterwards 'ork upon the cause with as great discreetly as we can."

Falstaff, impatient, cries, "Pistol!"

The short man winces. "He hears with *ears,*" he says, annoyed.

Sir Hugh, a collector of phrases and terms, takes out his pencil, delighted. "The tevil and his tam!"—the devil and his dam, his mother. "What a phrase is *this*, he *hears* with *ear!*—why, it is *affectations!*" he says, writing down the efficacious expression.

Falstaff proceeds. "Pistol, *did* you pick Master Slender's purse?"

"*Aye*, by these gloves, did he!" cries Slender, "or I would I might never come in mine own great chamber again, else!"—a somewhat grand term for his modest parlor back in Gloucestershire. He calculates the amount stolen: "Seven groats in mill-sixpences, and two Edward shovel-boards—which cost me an added two shillings and two-pence apiece from ye old miller, by these gloves!"—a genteel oath. Newly minted coins, not yet trimmed, unlawfully, of metal, cost a premium.

Falstaff asks the retired foot-soldier, "Is this true, Pistol?"

"True," says he.

Sir Hugh heard *true Pistol*. "*No!*—he is *false,*"—dishonest, "if he is a *pick-purse!*"

Pistol bridles at the Welshman's comment. "*Hah*, thou *mountain-foreigner!*"

"Sir John and master mine, I *to combat* challenge of this Latin bilbo!" He taps Hugh's note-book, demanding an entry. "Word of *denial* in thy *labras* here!—word of *denial!*" He regards

Slender. “Froth and scum”—top to bottom—“thou *liest!*”

“*By these gloves, ’twas he!*” says Slender.

Nym warns the teacher: “Be *avisèd*, sir, and pass *good* humours! I will say ‘Marry, *trap!*’”—*shut up*—“to you, if you run the *nuthooks* humour”—the *glove* oath—“on me!—*that* is the very nut of it!”

“By this *hat*, then, he in the *red face* had it!” insists Slender of the stolen money. “For though I cannot *remember* what I did when you made me drunk, yet I am not *altogether* an ass!”

Falstaff eyes his companions merrily. “What say you, Scarlet and John?” he asks, as if they were men of Robin Hood’s band.

Red-faced Bardolph shrugs. “Why, sir, for my part I say the gentleman had drunk *himself* out of his five sentences!”

Hugh makes another note. “It is his five *senses*—*fie*, what the *ignorance* is!”

“And being *fap*, sir, was, as they say, *cashiered!*—and so passed conclusions on these *carriers*,” explains Bardolph. He argues that Slender was so intoxicated as to blame the men helping him walk.

“Aye, you spake ‘in *Latin*’ then too,” mutters the schoolman. “But ’tis no matter. *I’ll* ne’er be drunk again but in the honest, civil, godly company of the *strict!* If I be drunk whilst I live, I’ll be drunk with those that have the *fear of God*, and not with drunken *knaves!*”

The parson is pleased. “So Got judge me, that is a virtuous mind!”

Falstaff turns to the referees, hands spread wide apart. “You hear all these matters *denied*, gentlemen; you hear it!”

Just then, Page’s daughter, Anne, returns home with her mother and a neighbor, Mistress Ford; they have been shopping in town in preparation for a meal after the men’s conference. The women pause in the corridor by the parlor, and Anne smiles.

Page motions her onward to the pantry at the back of the house. “Nay, daughter, carry the wine in; we’ll drink within.”

*Oh, heaven!* thinks Abraham Slender, with a deep blush, *this is Mistress Anne Page!*

Anne nods to the visitors and goes away, to the teacher’s relief and disappointment.

Page greets his neighbor. “How now, Mistress Ford.”

Falstaff is already at her side. “Mistress *Ford*, by my troth, you are *very well met!* By your leave, good mistress!” To her great surprise, he kisses her hand.

“Wife, bid these gentlemen welcome,” says Page. He invites the others: “Come, we have a *hot venison pie* for dinner! Come, gentlemen. I hope we shall drink down all unkindness!”

As they move toward the dining chamber, Robert Shallow holds a whispered conference with Hugh Evans.

Abraham is annoyed at having missed an opportunity with Anne. *I had rather than forty shillings I had my book of songs and sonnets here!* He sees that his servant has finally arrived. “How *now*, Simple!—where have you *been?* I must wait on *myself*, must I? You have not the book of *riddles* about you, have you?”

“Book of riddles? Why, did you not lend it to Alice Shortcake upon All-hallowmas last, a fortnight afore Michaelmas?” The wag has invented a borrower—and Michaelmas precedes the other holiday.

Shallow, standing with Evans at the door to the corridor, summons the shy, diffident Abraham. “*Come*, coz; come, coz; we *stay* for you. A word with you, coz,” he says, pausing before broaching a sensitive subject. “Marry, *this*, coz: there is, as ’twere, a *tender*—a *kind* of tender—made afar off by Sir Hugh here. Do you understand me?”

Abraham nods. “Aye, sir; you shall find me reasonable; if it be so, I shall do that that is in reason.”

“Nay, but *understand* me....” says Shallow.

“So I do, sir.”

“Give *ear* to his motions, Master Slender,” urges Hugh. “I will description the matter to you,

if you be capacity of it.”

“Aye, I will do as my cousin Shallow says. I pray you, pardon me: *he’s* a justice of peace in his country, simple though *I* stand here,” says Slender modestly.

Hugh is frustrated. “But that is not the question! The question is concerning your *marriage!*”

“Aye, there’s the *point*, sir!” says Shallow,

“‘*Marry’* is it,” says Hugh, enjoying his own jest, “the *very* point of it!—to Mistress Anne Page!”

Young Slender hopes his flushing face is blank—but his eyes open wider. “Why, if it be so, I will marry her, upon any reasonable demands.” At twenty, the teacher is still subject to the will of his elders.

“But can you *affection* the ’oman?” demands Evans. “Let us command to know *that* of your mouth—or of your *lips*, for divers philosophers hold that the lips is *parcel* of the mouth.

Therefore, precisely, can you carry your *good will* to the maid?”

“Cousin Abraham Slender, can you *love* her?” asks Shallow.

Slender nods. “I hope, sir, I will do as shall *become* one that would do reason.”

“Nay, Got’s lords and his ladies!” cries Hugh, “you must speak *possitable* if you can carry her your *desires* towards her!”

“That you must!” says Shallow. “Will you, upon good dowry, *marry her?*”

“I will do a greater thing than that upon *your* request, cousin, in any reason.”

Shallow is exasperated. “Nay, conceive me, *conceive* me, sweet coz! What I do is *to pleasure you*, coz! Can you *love* the maid?”

“I will marry her, sir, at your request,” Slender allows. He has read about what is expected of a bridegroom. He adds, in some trepidation, “Even if there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease it upon better *acquaintance*; when we are married and have more *occasion* to know one another, I hope that upon *familiarity* will grow more contempt.

“If you say, ‘Marry her,’ I *will* marry her—of that I am freely dissolved!—and dissolutely!”

Hugh, the word collector, chuckles. “It is a fery discretion answer—save that the fall is in the ’ort ‘dissolutely.’ The ’ort is, according to our meaning, ‘resolutely!’ His *meaning* is good.”

Shallow concurs. “Aye, I think my cousin meant *well*.”

Slender nods. “Aye, or else I would I might be hung.”

“Here comes fair Mistress Anne,” Shallow cautions, as she nears the door. He beams. “Would I were *young*, for your sake, Mistress Anne!”

Anne Page curtseys. “The dinner is on the table; my father desires Your Worships’ company.”

“I will wait on him, fair Mistress Anne,” says Justice Shallow, sidling awkwardly past her feminine form.

“’Od’s plessèd will,” says the pastor, “*I* will not be absence at the *grace!*” He follows Shallow.

Anne asks the backward young schoolmaster.. “Will’t please Your Worship to come in, sir?”

“No, I thank you, forsooth; heartily, I am very well.”

“The dinner *attends* you, sir...”

“I am not a-hungry; I thank you, forsooth.” Abraham Slender makes a point of sending his boy to the dining room. “Go, sirrah; for all that you are *my* man, go wait upon my cousin Shallow.” Peter Simple, scornful of his assignment, makes a face; but he trots off, intending to get some lunch for himself.

“A justice of peace sometimes may be beholding to his friend for a man,” Master Slender tells Anne, with careful casualness. “I keep but three men and a boy yet, till my mother be dead. But what, though?—yet I live like a poor *gentleman* born,” he says easily.

“I may not go in without Your Worship; they will not sit till you come...”

“I’ faith, I’ll eat nothing,” Abraham tells the girl. “I thank you as much as though I did.”

Anne is growing annoyed. “I pray you, sir, walk *in*.”

“I had rather walk here, I thank you. I bruised my chin th’ other day with playing at ‘sword and dagger’ with a ‘master of fence,’ and three venturers for a dish of *stewed prunes!*”—a dig at Falstaff and his disreputable cohorts, who frequent a brothel. “And, by my troth,” he says, thinking innocently of the king’s killed deer, “I cannot abide the smell of hot meat since.

“Why do your dogs *bark* so?” he asks. “Be there *bears* i’ the town?”

Anne Page suppresses a smile; *bears*—in *Windsor!* “I think there are, sir,” she says, watching the rustic swain. “I’ve heard them talked of.” She has—in a fatherly lecture about London’s Southwark, just across the Thames from the City of London proper, where such revolting pastimes as actors’ stage plays and bear-baiting are to be seen.

“I love the sport well, but I shall as soon quarrel about it as any man in England,” he says, affecting a worldly manner; it’s fashionable to speak against popular entertainments. “You are *afraid*, if you see a bear loose, are you not?”

“Aye, indeed, sir!”

“That’s meat and drink to *me*, now,” Slender assures her. “I have seen Sackerson loose twenty times, and have taken him by the chain!” In Southwark’s Bankside district, leading the famous tame, muzzled bear is a popular amusement—for children.

“But, I warrant you,” he confides, “the *women* have so cried and shrieked at it, that it *passed!*”—defecated. “But women, indeed, cannot abide ’em. They are very ill-favored, rough things!”

Anne assumes the inept youth means the bears.

Her father hurries down the corridor to the door. “Come, gentle Master Slender, *come!*—we stay for you!”

Abraham would demur. “I’ll eat nothing, I thank you, sir.”

Page jovially motions him forward. “*By cock and pie,*”—wryly, rooster and hen, “you shall not choose, sir! Come, *come!*”

Abraham, blushing, nods to Anne. “Nay, pray *you* lead the way.”

Page tugs at his arm. “Come *on*, sir!” he insists, eager to eat, and heads back to the dining room.

“Mistress Anne, yourself shall go first,” says Slender.

Anne doesn’t want him gazing from behind. “Not I, sir; pray you, keep on.”

He yields. “I’ll rather be unmannerly than troublesome,” he murmurs, following her father. “You do yourself wrong, indeed,” he adds politely.

Behind him, she is rolling her eyes. At last they can dine.

---

From the Pages’ kitchen, Hugh Evans sends Slender’s boy on an errand. “Go your ways, and ask of Doctor Caius’ house which is the way; in there dwells one Mistress Quickly, who is in the manner of his nurse, or his dry nurse; or his cook; or his laundry, his washer, and his wringer.”

Peter mumbles, “Well, sir.” He will get no food.

“Nay, it is *petter* yet! Give her this letter—for it is a ’oman that altogether’s acquainted with Mistress Anne Page, and the letter is to desire and require her to solicit your master’s desires to Mistress Anne Page!” The pastor is happily unaware of what *solicit* and *desire* might suggest. “I pray you, be gone!”

“I will make an end of my dinner,” he says, rubbing his hands together cheerfully as he returns to the table. “There’s *pippins and cheese* to come!”—a favorite treat in his native Wales. An apple’s firmness is an appealing complement to the soft richness of cheese.



## Chapter Two Courtships Begun

At the long and noisy bar of the Garter Inn, the establishment's proprietor finds Sir John Falstaff drinking, as is his custom, with longtime companions Bardolph, Pistol and Nym. The knight's young page, blond Robin, stands munching on a biscuit.

Falstaff begins: "Mine host of the Garter—"

"What *says* my bully-rook? Speak *scholarly* and *wisely!*"

But the pensioned officer, burdened with expenses, is downcast. "Truly, mine host, I must turn away some of my followers."

"*Discard*, bully Hercules!—*cashier!*" cries the ebullient innkeeper. "Let them *wag!*—trot, trot!"

"I sit at ten pounds a *week*," says Falstaff, bemoaning the money that lodging takes from his pension.

"Thou'rt an *emperor: seize 'er*,"—a play on Caesar, "squeeze 'er and freeze 'er!" cries the host. He thinks for a moment. "I will employ *Bardolph*—he shall *draw*, he shall *tap!* Said I *well*, bully Hector?"

Falstaff nods, pleased. "Do so, good mine host!"

"I have spoke; let him follow," says the host. "Let me see thee *froth* and *lime!*" he tells Bardolph. "I am at a *word: follow!*" He goes behind the bar.

"Bardolph, follow him," Falstaff advises. "A tapster is a good trade. An old cloak makes a new jerkin; a withered serving-man a fresh tapster. Go; adieu," says the knight sadly.

Bardolph, however, is delighted: "It is the life that I have desired! I will *thrive!*"

Pistol taunts the other old warrior: "Oh, base Hungary wight!"—a common jest on *hungry*. "Wilt thou the *spigot* wield?"—as opposed to the blade.

Bardolph makes a rude gesture and moves on, eagerly, to the line of taps and rows of bottles.

Nym shrugs and laughs. "He was *begotten* in drink!—is not the humour well *conceived?*"

"I am glad I am so acquitted of this tinderbox," Falstaff admits; Bardolph's complexion and temper are both fiery. "His thefts were too *open!* His filching was like an unskilful singer: he kept not *time.*"

"The *good* humour is to steal in a minute's *rest*,"—*unheard*, Nym notes.

Pistol objects: "'*Convey*,' the wise it call. 'Steal'—*foh!*—a *fico* for the phrase!"

Falstaff sighs. "Well, sirs, I am almost out at heels."

"Why, then let *kibes* ensue," says Pistol, blithe about another's blisters.

But Falstaff shakes his head. "There is no remedy: I must cony-catch; I must *shift.*" His *cony* will not be one of the tame rabbits raised for table, but a similarly defenseless victim.

"Young ravens must have food," says Pistol dryly, observing the fat graybeard's rounded jowls.

Falstaff asks the men, "Which of you know *Ford* of this town?"

"I ken the wight," says Pistol. "He is of substance good."

Falstaff motions the thieves closer. "My honest lads, I will tell you what I am about."

"Two yards, and more!" says Pistol scanning the knight's substantial middle.

"No quips, now, Pistol. Indeed, I am in the waist two yards about—but I am now about no *waste*, I am about *thrift!*"

"Briefly: I do mean to make love to Ford's wife! I spy entertainment in her: she expounds, she craves—she gives the leer of *invitation!* I can construe the action of *her* familiar style!—and the *hardest* voice of her behavior, to be Englished rightly, is: 'I am Sir John Falstaff's!'"

"He hath studied her well," Pistol tells Nym wryly, "and *translated* her will out of *honesty* into *English.*"

Nym can see that Falstaff is serious. "The anchor *is* deep!" He asks Pistol, "Will *that* humour

pass?”

His friend, weary of the term, makes a face.

Falstaff comes to the point. “Now, the report goes that she has all the rule of her husband’s purse—and he hath a *legion* of angels!”—gold coins stamped with angel images.

“As many *devils* entertain,” Pistol points out. “Then *to* her, boy, say *I!*”

“The humour rises; it is good,” nods Nym—adding, “Humour *me* the angels!”

Falstaff shows them folded papers. “I have writ me, here, a letter to her—and here another to *Page’s* wife, who even now gave me good eyes *too*—examined my parts with most judicious ocellades!”—glances. “Sometimes the beam of her view gilded my foot, sometimes my portly belly!” he says proudly.

Pistol adapts a maxim about Fate’s impartiality: “*Then* did the sun on dunghill shine!”

“I thank thee for that humour!” laughs Nym, clapping him on the back.

Falstaff continues. “Oh, she did so course o’er my exteriors, with such a greedy intention that the appetite of her eye did seem to scorch me up like a burning-glass!”

He shows them the missive for Mistress Ford. “Here’s a letter to the other; she ‘bears the purse’ too; she is a region in *Guiana*—all gold and bounty!

“I will be cheater to them both, and they shall be *exchequers* to me! They shall be my East and West Indies, and I will trade to them both!

“Go, bear thou this letter to Mistress *Page*; and thou, this to Mistress *Ford*! We will thrive, lads, we will *thrive!*”

But Pistol—a soldier, not a go-between—protests: “Shall I Sir *Pandarus* of *Troy* become, when by my side I wear *steel*? Then *Lucifer* take all!”

Nym concurs. “I will run no *base* humour! Here, take the humour-letter; I will keep the ‘havior of *reputation!*” he says haughtily.

Falstaff hands the papers to Robin. “Hold, sirrah; bear *you* these letters quickly! Sail like my *pinnacle*”—the term for warship-tender sounds like *penis*—“to these golden shores!”

As little Robin goes, wiping crumbs from his lips, Falstaff scowls at the men beside him. “*Rogues*, hence! *Avaunt!* Vanish like *hailstones!* *Go!*—trudge, plod away o’ the hoof; seek shelter, *pack!*”

“*Falstaff* will learn the ‘honour’ of the *age*: *French* thrift, you rogues!—myself and skirted *Page!*” he cries. And with that, he stalks out of the tavern.

“Let vultures grip thy guts!” retorts Pistol—after the knight is gone. “Fore gourd and fullam”—loaded dice, but suggesting *God and heaven*—“*he holds!*—and high and low *beguiles*, the rich *and* poor!” He grasps his heavy mug of ale, and says, sullenly, “Money *I’ll* have in pouch when thou shalt *lack*, base Phrygian Turk!”

They sit, ruminating about their rejection by Falstaff.

“I have operations which be humours of *revenge*....” says Nym.

“*Wilt* thou *revenge?*”

“By welkin and its stars!” vows Nym.

“With wit, or steel?”

“With *both* the humours, *aye!* I will discuss the humour of this ‘*love*’—with *Page!*”

Pistol laughs heartily. “And I to *Ford* shall too unfold: how Falstaff—*varlet vile!*—his dove will try, his gold will hold, and his soft couch *defile!*”

Drink does nothing to dilute Nym’s resolve. “My humour shall not cool! I will incense *Page* to *deal in poison*; I will *possess* him with *yellowness*,”—jealousy, “for a revolt of *mine* is *dangerous!* That is *my* true humour!”

Pistol’s mug rises in a slopping salute. “Thou art the *Mars* of malcontents! I *second* thee! *Troop on!*”

**W**hat, John Rugby!” calls Mistress Quickly. “I pray thee, go to the casement and see if you can see my master, Master Doctor Caius, coming! If he do, i’ faith, and find

anybody in the house, here will be an old abusing of God's patience and the king's English!"

The physician, a French gentleman of forty, has not yet returned home this evening, and his housekeeper has been engaged in an unsanctioned entertainment.

"I'll go watch," says Rugby, one of the household servants. Emerging from the bedchamber upstairs, he moves toward a front window to finish dressing.

Downstairs, she smiles. "*Do*, and we'll have a *posset* for't soon—in faith, a night' at the latter end of a *sea-coal* fire!"—a nightcap of spiced wine heated with milk, to accompany their embers.

Thinks Mistress Quickly of the man, *As honest, willing, kind a fellow, as ever servant shall come in house withal!*" She also means *work* there. *And, I warrant you, no tell-tale, nor no breed-bate!*

*His worst fault is that he is given to prayer; he is something peevish that way.* She straightens her gown; his most recent request, though, has been well answered. *But there's nobody but has his fault; let that pass.*

She regards the boy who has just brought a message. "Peter Simple, you say your name is?"

"Aye, for fault of a better"—the wrong of another peter.

"And Master Slender's your master?"

"Aye, forsooth."

Mistress Quickly squints, trying to picture the teacher. "Does he not wear a great *round* beard, like a glover's paring-knife?"

"No, forsooth. He hath but a wee face, with a little yellow beard—a cake-coloured beard."

"A soft-spirited man, is he not?"

"Aye, forsooth. But he is as *tall* a man with his *hands*"—as good at boxing—"as is any between this," he says, tapping a shock of brown hair, "and *his* head! He hath *fought with a warrener!*"—a game thief.

Mistress Quickly tries to place the schoolmaster. "How say you? Oh, I should remember him!—does he not hold up his head, and *strut*, as it were, in his gait?" She mimics a proud mince.

"Yes, indeed does he!"

She shakes her head. "Well, heaven send Anne Page no *worse* fortune. Tell Master Parson Evans I will do what I can for your master. Anne is a good girl, and I wish—"

Rugby calls down. "*Out! Alas*, here comes my master!"

"We shall all be shent!" moans Mistress Quickly. "Run in here, good young man!—go into this closet!" she tells Peter, as she shoves him in. "He will not stay long." She shuts the door before the boy can protest.

She calls, loudly, "What, John *Rugby!* *John!*" just as Doctor Caius opens the front door. "*What?*—*John*, I say! Go, John, go inquire for my master; I worry he be not well, that he comes not home!"

Rugby clumps down the stairs, singing to himself. "And down, down, *adown*...."

Doctor Caius glances over at him, annoyed. "Vat is you sing? I do not like dese toys."

Rugby shrugs and goes toward the back of the house.

The master motions to his housekeeper. "Pray you, go and vetch me in my closet *un boítier vert*—a box, a green-a box. Do intend vat I speak?"—*attend* his speech. "A *green*-a box!"

"Aye, forsooth," says Mistress Quickly gaily, "I'll fetch it you!" She opens the closet door a bit and reaches past Peter to grab the newly bought item. *I am glad he went not in himself!* she thinks, closing the door. *If he had found the young man, he would have been horn-mad!* Horns are a cuckold's emblem.

Caius is impatient. "*Fe, fe, fe, fe! Ma foi, il fait fort chaud! Je m'en vais à la cour—la grande affaire!*" Despite the spring's heat, he will pursue a major courtship. He is soon to meet with Mistress Page regarding her marriageable daughter, and will take a gift to the girl, one finished in her preferred color.

Mistress Quickly hands him the jewelry case. "Is it *this*, sir?"

"*Oui; mette le au mon pocket! Dépêche*—quickly! Vere is zat knave Rugby?"

She calls: "What, John Rugby! *John!*"

He returns. "Here, sir."

"You are John Rugby and you are *Jack Rugby!*" says Caius; the English nickname is also used as a term for a *rascal*. "Come, take-a my rapier, and come after my heel to the *court!*"—to the courting.

"'Tis ready, sir, here in the porch."

"By my trot, I tarry too long," grumbles Caius. "'Od's me, *qu'ai j'oublié?*"—God save me, what I have forgotten. "Dere is some simples"—dried aromatic flowers—"in my closet zat I vill not for the varld I shall leave behind!" He goes to open the door.

Mistress Quickly pales. *Ay me!*—*he'll find the young man here, and go mad!*

"*Oh, diable, diable!* Vat is in my closet?" cries the doctor. "*Villain! Larron!*"—thief. He pulls the wiry lad forth. "Rugby, my rapier!"

"Good master, be content!" pleads Mistress Quickly.

"Wherefore shall I be *content-a?*"

"The young man is an *honest* man!"

"What shall ze honest man *do* in my *closet?*" demands Doctor Caius. "Dere is no *honest* man zat shall come in *my* closet!"—also a term for bed-chamber.

"I beseech you, be not so phlegmatic!" says she. "Hear the truth of it! He came on an errand to *me*, from Parson Hugh!"

"Vell..."

"*Aye*, forsooth," says Peter, "to desire her to—"

Mistress Quickly interrupts: "*Peace*, I pray you!"

"*Peace-a* your *tongue*," Caius orders her. "Speak-a your *tale!*" he tells the boy.

"...to desire this honest gentlewoman, your maid, to speak a good word to Mistress Anne Page for my master, in the way of marriage," says Simple.

"This is *all* indeed, *la!*" says the woman quickly, despite Caius's frown. *I'll ne'er put my finger in the fire when need not!*

The doctor peers at Peter. "*Sir Hugh* send-a you?" He glares. "Rugby, *baille* me some paper!"

"Tarry you a little-a while," he tells young Simple. Caius goes into his study, sits at the desk, and soon begins to write.

Mistress Quickly tells the boy softly, "I am glad he is so quiet! If he had been thoroughly moved, you should have *heard* him!—so loud and so melancholy! But notwithstanding, man, I'll do you what good I can for your master!" She sighs. "And the very *yea* and the *no* is, the French doctor, my master—I may *call* him my master, look you, for I keep his house; and I wash, wring, brew, bake, scour, dress meat—and drink, make the beds, and do *all* myself!"

Peter grins at her knowingly. "'Tis a great burden, to *come* under one body's *hand!*"

She is surprised by the young fellow's lewd rudeness. "Are you *avisèd* o' that? You *shall* find it a great burden," she wryly tells the lad, whose puberty is clearly taking hold, "to be *up* early, and down *late!*"

"But notwithstanding, to tell you in your ear: I would have *no words of it*; my master *himself* is in love with Mistress Anne Page!

"And notwithstanding *that*, I know Anne's *mind*—" She shakes her head, thinking of the girl's own preferences. "That's neither here nor there..."

Doctor Caius has finished writing; he folds the sheet. "You, *jack'nape*," he says to Peter, "give-a this letter to Sir Hugh!—*by Gar*, it is a *shallenge!* I will teach the scurvy, jack-a-nape priest to meddle or make!—and I will *cut his throat* in dee park!

"You may be gone!—it is not good you tarry here! *By Gar*, I will cut all his *two stones!*—*by Gar*, he shall not have a stone to throw at his *dog!*"

Peter takes the note and goes to look for gentle Hugh Evans.

Says Mistress Quickly, "*Alas!*—he speaks but for his *friend!*"

"It is no matter over *dat!* Do not you tell-a me zat I shall have Anne Page for *myself?* *By Gar*,

I will *kill* ze jack priest!” He waves another note. “And I have appointed mine host of ze Jarter to measure our weapons!”—act as referee. “*By Gar*, I will myself have Anne Page!” he insists.

The housekeeper assures him, “Sir, the maid loves *you*, and all shall be well! We must give folks leave to *prate!*—*what the good year?*?”—why not?

“*Rugby*, come to the courting with me!” says Caius. He warns Mistress Quickly, “By Gar, if I have not Anne Page, I shall turn your head out of my door!”—dismiss her. “Follow my heels, Rugby!” As the doctor stalks away angrily, John follows, casting back a grin of satisfaction to her.

Mistress Quickly stands just inside the front door, furious with Caius. *You shall have a fool’s-head for your own!* she thinks, disgusted by his intention toward the much-younger woman.

*No! I know Anne’s mind for that! Never a woman in Windsor knows more of Anne’s mind than I do—nor can do more than I do with her, I thank heaven!*

As she turns back, she hears a call from the gate—a man’s voice: “Who’s within there? *Ho!*”

“Whoever’s *here*, I trow!” she gibes, still perturbed. “Come near the house, I pray you.”

Master Fenton, a handsome young nobleman of Windsor, comes to the door, smiling. “How now, good woman! How dost thou?”

Mistress Quickly curtsies. “The better that it pleases Your Good Worship to ask!”

“What news? How does pretty Mistress Anne?”

“In truth, sir, she *is* pretty, and honest, and gentle—and one who is your *friend!*—I can tell you *that*, by the way! I praise heaven for it!”

“Shall I do any good, thinkest thou?” Fenton has sought her help in courting her young friend. “Shall I not lose my suit?”

“Troth, sir, all is in his hands above!”—God’s. “But notwithstanding, Master Fenton, I’ll be *sworn on a book* she loves you!”

The tall man looks doubtful.

“Have not Your Worship a wart above your eye?” she asks.

He does sport a small mole. “Yes, marry, have I... what of that?”

“Well, thereby hangs a tale!” she laughs—at the *tail*, a hair, and at the tale she has to tell.

“Good faith, it is such *another* Nan!” she cackles, thinking of the frank—in private—Anne, “but, I detest, as honest a maid as ever broke bread! We had *an hour’s talk* of that wart! I shall never laugh but in that maid’s company!”

She notes his distress. “But indeed she is given too much to allicholy and musing....

“But as for *you—go to!*” she says, encouragingly.

“Well, I shall see her today.” Fenton opens a leather pouch and takes out two gold coins.

“Hold, there’s money for thee; let me have thy voice in my behalf,” he urges. “If thou seest her before me, commend me!”

“*Will* I?—i’ faith, that we *will!* And I will tell Your Worship *more* of the wart, the next time we have confidence. And of other *woovers*,” she adds.

Fenton frowns; he doesn’t wish to hear there are rivals—but he does want to examine that mole before seeing Anne Page again. “Well, farewell; I am in great haste now.”

“Farewell to Your Worship,” she cries, as he hurries away, touching at his face. *Truly, an honest gentleman!* she thinks to herself, holding the still-warm gold. *But Anne loves him not; for I know Anne’s mind as well as another does.*

She frowns, thinking. *Out upon ’t, what have I forgot?*

Fenton is to have no warning about a rival’s lethal anger.

Walking from her house down the tree-lined Windsor street early this cool morning, Margaret Page is again upset, thinking about the message she received late yesterday. *What?—have I ’scaped love letters in the holiday-time of my beauty, and am I now a subject for them? Let me see....*

She reads again: ‘*Ask me no reason why I love you; for though Love use Reason for his physician, he admits him not for his counsellor!*

‘*You are not young; no more am I; go to, then—there’s sympathy! You are merry; so am I—ha, ha!—then there’s more sympathy!*

‘*You love sack, and so do I!*’ In fact, she eschews the cheap, sweet wine. ‘*Would you desire better sympathy?*

‘*Let it suffice thee, Mistress Page—at the least, if the love of a soldier can suffice—that I love thee!*

‘*I will not say “pity me”—’tis not a soldier-like phrase—but I say, love me!*

‘*By me: Thine own true knight, By day or night, Or any kind of light, With all his might, For thee to fight!*—John Falstaff.’

She looks up, shaking her head. *What a Herod is this!*—a raver whose words are steeped in duplicity. *Oh, wicked world!*—one who is well-nigh worn to pieces with age, to show himself as a young gallant!

*What unweighèd behavior hath this Flemish drunkard picked—conjured, with the Devil’s name!—out of my conversation, that he dares in this manner assay me? Why, he hath not been thrice in my company!—and then I was frugal of my mirth! Heaven forgive me!*

*What should I say to him?*

Her anger rises. *Why, I’ll exhibit a bill in the Parliament for the putting down of men!*

*How shall I be revenged on him? For revengèd I will be, as sure as his guts are made of puddings!*

She sees a neighbor, Mistress Ford emerging, despite the early hour, from her home.

“Mistress Page!” cries Alice, hurrying forward. “Trust me, I was going to *your* house!”

“And, trust me, I was coming to you!” She regards her friend. “You look very ill”—distressed.

“Nay, I’ll ne’er believe that,” says Alice, who takes pride in her usually composed demeanor. “I have need to look the *contrary*.”

“Faith, but you *do*, in my mind—”

“Well, I do, then! Yet I say I could *show you something...*” She gathers her thoughts. “Oh, Mistress Page, give me some *counsel!*”

“What’s the matter, woman?”

“Oh, woman,” she begins, with a laugh, “if it were not for one *trifling* matter, I could come to such *honour!*”

“*Hang* the trifle, woman!—take the *honour!* What is it? *Dispense* with trifles; what is it?”

Mistress Ford blushes. “If I would go to Hell for but an eternal *moment* or so, I could be *knighted!*”

“*What?* Thou liest! *Sir Alice Ford!*” laughs Margaret. “These *knights* will *hack*,” she says sourly, “but *thou* wouldst not alter an *article* of thy gentry!”

“We burn daylight,” says Alice impatiently. “Here, read, *read!*—perceive how I might be *knighted!*” She hands her friend the letter Robin brought. “I shall think the worse of *fat* men as long as I have an eye to see *difference* in men’s looking!” she says, as Margaret glances over the paper—with increasing interest.

Alice is peeved. “If he would not *swear*—praised women’s *modesty*, and gave such orderly and well-behavèd reproof to all uncomeliness—I’d have sworn his disposition would have supported the *truth* of his words. But they do no more adhere and keep place together than the hundred *Psalms* to the tune of ‘Greensleeves!’

“What *tempest*, I ask, threw this *whale*, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at *Windsor?* How shall I be *revenged* on him?”

“I think the best way were to entertain him with *hope*—till the wicked fire of lust have *melted* him in his own *grease!*

“Did you ever hear the like?”

“*Letter for letter!*” says Margaret, “but that the name of Page in *Ford* differs! To thy great comfort in this mystery of ill opinions,”—strange set of affronts, “here’s the *twin brother* of thy letter!” She hands Alice her own. “But let thine *inherit* first, for I protest *mine* never shall!

“I warrant he hath a *thousand* of these letters, writ with blank space for different names!” says Margaret. “Surely *more!*—he will *print* them, out of doubt—and these are of the *second edition!* For he cares not what he puts into the *press*—where he would put *us two!*”

“I had rather be a *giantess* and lie under *Mount Pelion!*” she fumes, picturing the massive knight. “Well, I will find you twenty *lascivious* turtledoves”—a paradox; the birds are symbols of chastity—“ere *one chaste man!*”

Alice Ford has examined her friend’s letter. “Why, this is the *very same*—the very hand, the very words!” She looks up, aghast. “What doth he *think* of us?”

“Nay, I know not! It makes me almost ready to quarrel with mine own honesty! I’ll consider *myself* like one that I am not *acquainted* withal! For, surely, unless *he* know of some strain in me that I know not myself, he would never have boarded me in this fury!”

“Boarding’ call you it?” laughs Alice. “I’ll be sure to keep him *above deck!*”

“So will I!—if he come under *my* hatches, I’ll *never ‘to sea’ again!*”

Margaret regards her neighbor, thinking. “Let’s be *revenged* on him! Let’s appoint him a *meeting*, give him a show of comfort for his suit, and lead him on, finely baited, with *delay*—till he hath *pawned his horses* to mine host of the Garter!”

Alice agrees eagerly: “*Aye!* I will consent to act *any* villainy against him that may not sully the chariness of our honesty.” She shakes the egregious epistle. “Oh, if my *husband* saw this letter!—it would give eternal feed to his *jealousy!*”

Mistress Page glances down the street, where four men are coming around a corner. “Why, look where he comes—and *my* good man, too! *He’s* as far from jealousy as I am from giving him cause—and that, I hope, is an unmeasurable distance!”

“You are the happier woman,” Mistress Ford admits.

Meg motions Alice aside. “Let’s consult together against this greasy knight. Come hither,” she says, and they move behind some tall hedges fronting the Ford mansion.

As the men walk, Ford is listening to Pistol, while Page hears Nym.

“Well, I hope it be *not so...*” says Frank Ford.

“Hope is a *curtal dog* in *some* affairs!” says Pistol. “Sir John *affects thy wife!*”

They stop in front of the house. “*Why, sir?*” asks Ford. “My wife is not *young...*”

Pistol shrugs. “He woos both high and low, both rich and poor, both young and old, one with another, Ford. He loves the *gallimaufry!*”—stew-like variety. “Ford, *perpend!*”—consider.

Frank frowns. “Loves *my wife?*”

“With liver *burning hot!*” Pistol assures him. “*Prevent!*—or go thou like Sir Actaeon—with *Ringwood* at thy heels!”—the prototypical cuckold was pursued to his death by his own hounds. “Oh, odious is the *name!*”

“What name, sir?”

“*Of the horn*, I say!” cries Pistol. “Farewell! Take *heed!*—have open eye, for *thieves* do foot by night! Take heed ere *summer* comes, or *cuckoo*-birds”—cuckoldry’s heralds—“do sing!” He turns to the others. “Away, Sir Corporal Nym! *Believe* it, Page!” he urges. “He speaks sense.”

Ford’s jaws are clenched. *I will be patient! I will explore this!*

Nym is finishing with Page: “...and this is *true!*—I like not the humour of *lying!* He hath *wronged* me in some humours! I would have borne the humoured letter to her but that I have a *sword*—and it shall *bite* upon my necessity!

“He loves *your wife!*—there’s the short and the long! My name is *Corporal Nym*—I speak, and I *avouch:* ’tis *true* my name is Nym—and *Falstaff* loves *your wife!*”

“Adieu! I love not the humour of ‘bread and cheese,’”—meatless poverty, “and there’s the humour of it.” He looks expectantly from Ford to Page, but no gratuity is forthcoming. “*Adieu!*”

The cohorts return to their customary posts at the Garter Inn’s dark bar.

Page chuckles. “‘The *humour* of it,’ quoth ’a! Here’s a fellow frights English out of its wits!’  
But Ford is vowing to himself: *I will seek out Falstaff!*

“I never heard such a drawling, affecting rogue!” laughs Page.

Ford glowers. *If I do find it... well!*

“I would not believe such a scoundrel though the *priest* o’ the town commended him for a *true man!*” says Page.

But Ford, having just heard his fears spoken aloud, thinks grimly, *’Twas a good, sensible fellow. Well....*

The two matrons come forward, as if they were just leaving the Fords’ house.

Page smiles at his wife. “How now, Meg!”

“Whither go you, George?” she asks. “Hark you,” she says, drawing him aside.

“How now, sweet Frank!” says Mistress Ford to her husband. “Why art thou melancholy?”

“I *melancholy*? I am *not* melancholy!” says Ford. “Get you home!—*go!*”

Alice only laughs. “Faith, thou hast *some* crotchet in thy head! Now, will you go, Mistress Page?”

Margaret nods. “Have with you.” She wants her husband to return home by noon; “You’ll come to dinner, George.” She spots Mistress Quickly walking up the street.

— “Look who comes yonder,” she says privately to Alice. “*She* shall be our messenger to this paltry knight!”

— Alice whispers, nodding. “Trust me, *I* thought of her! She’ll *befit* it!”

Mistress Page asks the doctor’s housekeeper, “You are come to see my daughter, Anne?”

“Aye, forsooth!” says Mistress Quickly. “And, I pray, how does good Mistress Anne?”

“Go in with us and see!” says Margaret, cordially. “We’ll have an hour’s talk with you.” The three walk on along to the Pages’ house.

George sees the anger in Frank’s face. “How now, Master Ford?”

“You *heard* what this knave told me, did you not?”

“Yes, and *you* heard what the other told *me!*”

“Do you think there is truth in them?”

Page scoffs. “*Hang* ’em—*slaves!* I do not think the knight would offer it—and these that accuse him of this intent towards our wives are a pair of his *discarded* men!—very *rogues*, now they be out of service!”

“Were they *his* men?”

“Marry, *were* they!”

Ford is still worried. “I like it never the better for *that*. Does he lie at the Garter?”—reside there.

“Aye, marry, he *does!*”—a gibe about Falstaff’s well-known and colorful fabrications. “If he *should* intend this voyage towards my wife, I would *turn her loose on him!*—and what he *gets* from her more than *sharp words*, let it lie on my head!”

“I cannot be thus satisfied; I would have *nothing* lie on my head!” *Nothing* can be a term for cunt; but, considering his friend’s agitation, George refrains from teasing.

“I do not misdoubt *my* wife,” claims Frank, “but I would be loath to turn them loose together! A man may be *too* confident!”

Page points down the street. “Look where my ranting host of the Garter comes! There is either *liquor* in his *pate* or *money* in his *purse*, when *he* looks so merry!”

The ever-eager innkeeper, followed doggedly by Robert Shallow, who is staying at the Garter, hurries toward the neighbors.

“How now, mine host!” says Page.

“How now, bully-rook! Thou’rt a gentleman!” He turns to see if the white-haired J.P. has kept pace. “Cavaleiro Justice, I say!”

“I *follow*, mine host, I follow!” gasps Shallow, arriving out of breath. “Good even and twenty,”—many more, “good Master Page!” He smiles mischievously. “Master Page, will you go



with us?... We have *sport* in hand!”

“*Tell* him, Cavaleiro Justice; *tell* him, bully-rook!”

“Sir, there is a *fray* to be fought between Sir Hugh, the Welsh *priest*, and Caius, the French *doctor!*”

Frank Ford draws the innkeeper aside purposefully. “Good mine host o’ the Garter, a word with you....”

“What sayest thou, my bully-rook?” They talk privately.

Shallow asks George Page, “Will you go with us to behold it? My merry host hath had the measuring of their weapons,” he says, still trying to catch his breath, “but, I think, hath appointed them contrary places!”—sent them to different sites for the duel. “For, believe me, I hear the parson is no jester!” The man of the cloth is surprisingly adept with a sword.

“Hark, I will tell you what our *sport* shall be!”

Asks the host cautiously, “Hast thou no *suit* against my knight—my guest-*cavaleire?*”

“*None*, I protest,” Ford tells him. “And I’ll give you a pottle of burnt sack”—a half-gallon of sweetened wine—“to give me recourse to him, and tell him my name is ‘*Brook*’—only for a *jest*.”

The host loves a prank. “My *hand*, bully; thou shalt have egress and *regress!*—said I well?—and thy name shall be ‘*Brook*.’ It is a *merry knight!*” he says, of the generally genial Falstaff.

Turning back to Shallow, he asks them all, “Will you go and hear us?”

“Have *with* you, mine host!” says the justice of the peace.

Page is concerned. “I have heard the Frenchman hath good skill with his rapier....”

Shallow scoffs. “*Tsk!*—sir, I could have shown you *more!* In *these* times you stand on *distance*—your passes, *stoccardoes*, and I know not what!” he says, disparagingly. “’Tis the *heart*, Master Page!” he cries, a bony fist clenched at his chest, “’tis here, ’tis *here!* I have seen the time when with my long-sword I would have made your tall fellows *skip like rats!*”

“*Hear*, boys, *hear, hear!*” cries the host. He motions for them to follow him. “Shall we *wag?*”

“Have with you,” says George—but he notes, “I would rather hear them *scold* than fight.”

The host leads Page and Shallow southward, out of the town.

Frank, following, ruminates sourly: *Though Page be a secure fool, and stand so firmly on his wife’s frailty, yet I cannot put off my opinion so easily! She was in his company at Page’s house—and what they made there, I know not!*

*Well, I will look further into ’t! And I have a disguise to sound Falstaff.*

*If I find her honest, I lose not my labour; if she be otherwise, ’tis labour well bestowed!*

### Chapter Three Seductions

Falstaff and Pistol talk at a heavy corner table in an upstairs dining area of the Garter Inn. The knight is annoyed—and adamant. “I will not lend thee a penny!”

“Why then the world’s mine *oyster*—which I with *sword* will open!” mutters Pistol.

“Not a *penny!*” says Falstaff. “I have been content, sir, that you should lay my *countenance* at pawn!—I have grated upon my good friends for *three reprieves* for you and your coach-fellow Nym—or else you had looked through the grate”—prison bars—“like a geminy of baboons!”—twin apes. “I am damned in hell for swearing to *gentlemen*—my *friends*—that you were *good soldiers* and *tall fellows!* And when Mistress Bridget ‘lost’ the ivory handle of her fan, I took’t upon *mine honour* thou hadst it not!”

“Didst not thou *share?*” protests Pistol. “Hadst thou not *fifteen pence?*”—part of the proceeds.

“*Reason*, you rogue, *reason!*—thinkest thou I’ll endanger my soul *gratis?*”

“In a word: hang no more about me!—I am no *gibbet* for you! *Go!*—a short knife and a throng!”—*find the venue of a cutpurse*. “Go to your manor of *Pickt-hatch!*”

“*You’ll* not bear a letter for me, you rogue?—*you* stand upon your *honour!*” he growls, still irked by the man’s refusal. “Why, thou *unconfidable baseness*, it is as much as *I* can do to keep the precise terms of my honour! Aye, *I—I myself!*—sometimes leaving the fear of God on the left hand, and hiding mine honour in my *necessity*, am fain to *shuffle*, to hedge and to lurch! And yet *you*, you rogue, will ensconce your *rags*, your *cat-a-mountain looks*, your *red-lattice*”—whorehouse—“*phrases*, and your *boldly beating oaths* under the shelter of your *honour?*”

“*You* will not *do* it, *you!*” he bellows.

“I do *relent!*” cries Pistol. “What would thou *more* of a man?” he pleads, in a tone of wounded obeisance.

Robin leans in at the door. “Sir, here’s a *woman* would speak with you.”

“Let her approach,” he tells the boy grandly.

Mistress Quickly soon arrives, puffing, after climbing the stairs, and she curtseys. “Give Your Worship good morrow!”

He rises at the table. “Good morrow, good wife.”

“Not *so*, an’t please Your Worship!” she says demurely, making eyes at him. She is dressed in her most revealing frock—a stunning image, if one less than alluring.

“Good *maid*, then.”

“I’ll be sworn,” she nods, affirming chastity, “as my *mother* was, the first hour I was born!”

“I do believe a *swearer*,” says Falstaff dryly. “What with me?”

“Shall I vouchsafe to Your Worship a word or two?”

“Two *thousand*, fair woman! And I’ll vouchsafe thee their hearing!” He sits, and motions for her to join him and Pistol at the table. Robin waits nearby—listening.

“There is one Mistress Ford, sir,” she says, taking a seat. “I pray, come a little nearer this way....” She hopes to stir his interest. “I *myself* dwell with Master Doctor Caius....”

“Well, *on*. Mistress Ford, you say.”

“Your Worship says very true!” She slides closer. “I pray Your Worship, come a little nearer this way!”

Falstaff scans the dim room, and declines. “I warrant thee, nobody hears. Mine own people, mine own people.” He takes a swig of ale.

“*Are* they so?” She eyes the idlers, smiling but thinking, *God bless them and make them his servants!*

“Well. Mistress Ford—what of her?”

“Why, sir, she’s a good creature! Lord, *Lord!* Your Worship’s a wanton!” she says coyly.

“Well, heaven forgive you—and *all* of us, I pray!”

Falstaff grows impatient. “Mistress Ford; come, Mistress *Ford*—”

“Marry, this is the short and the long of it: *You* have brought her into such *canaries* as ’tis wonderful! The best courtier of them all when the court lay at Windsor could never have brought her to such a canary!”—feverish pitch, as in the lively Spanish dance.

Apparently fascinated by him, she continues liltily: “Yet there *has been* knights—and lords, and gentlemen, with their coaches, I warrant you, coach after coach, letter after letter, gift after gift; smelling so sweetly, all musk; and so rustling, I warrant you, in silk and gold; and in such *alligant* terms; and in such wine and sugar of the best and the fairest, that would have won *any* woman’s heart—

“And, I warrant you, *they could never get an eye-wink from her!*”

She thinks of Master Fenton’s bribe. “I had myself *twenty angels* given me this morning; but I *defy* all angels of any such sort but, as they say, in the way of *honesty*. And, I warrant you, they could never get *her* to so much as sip on a cup with the proudest of them all! And yet there has been earls—nay, which is more, *pensioners*...! But, I warrant you, all is one with her.”

Falstaff taps his fingers on the wet spot between his mug and a flagon. “But what says she to

me? Be brief, my good she-Mercury.”

Mistress Quickly’s voice drops by a register. “Marry, she hath received your *letter*—for the which she *thanks* you a thousand times!—and she gives notice to you that her *husband* will be in *absence* from his house between ten and eleven.”

“Ten and eleven?”

“Aye, forsooth—and then you may come and *see the picture*, she says, that you wot of. Master Ford, her husband, will be from home. *Alas!* the sweet woman leads an *ill* life with him: he’s a *very jealousy man!* She leads a *very frampold* life with *him*, good heart!”

“Ten and eleven,” says Falstaff. “Woman, commend me to her; I will not fail her.”

“Why, you say well.

“But I am *another* messenger to Your Worship: Mistress *Page* hath her hearty commendations to you, too!” She leans closer, imperiling her bosoms’ modesty. “And let me tell you in your ear, she’s as fartuous”—her pronunciation of *virtuous*—“a civil, modest wife as any in *Windsor*, whoe’er be the other!—one, I tell you, who will not miss your *morning* nor *evening* prayer!”

She touches his hand. “And she bade me tell Your Worship that her husband is seldom from home; but she *hopes* there will come a time!” She regards the knight admiringly. “I never knew a woman to dote so upon a man! “Surely *I* think you have *charms!*” she gushes, squeezing his hand. “*La, yes*, in truth!”

“Not I, I assure thee!” says Falstaff. “Setting the attractions of my good *parts* aside, I have no other charms!” he adds, affecting modesty.

“Blessing on your heart for’t!”

“But, I pray thee, tell me this: have Ford’s wife and Page’s wife acquainted *each other* how they love me?”

Mistress Quickly laughs at the idea, wagging her head. “Oh, *no* sir!—*that* were a jest *indeed!* *They* have not so little grace, I hope! That were a trick indeed!

“But Mistress Page would desire you to send her your little Robin, of all loves”—as a favor. “Her husband has a marvellous infection to the little page!”—*affection* for the lad.

“And truly *Master* Page is an honest man,” she says. “Ne’er a wife in *Windsor* leads a better life than she does!” she says, enviously. “Do what she will, say what she will; take all, pay all; go to bed when she list, rise when she list—all is as *she* will!

“And truly she deserves it; for if there be a *kind* woman in *Windsor*, *she* is one,” says Mistress Quickly. “You *must* send her your page; no remedy!”

Falstaff glances at Robin; the boy is frowning. “Why, I will....”

“Nay, but *do* so! Then, look you, he may come and *go between* you both! But in any case, have a *nay*-word,”—a secret term, “so that you may know one another’s mind, yet the boy never need to understand anything; for ’tis not good that children should know any wickedness!

“Old folks, you know, have *discretion*, as they say, and *know the world*....” Her eyelashes flutter.

“Fare thee well,” says Falstaff, rising. “Commend me to them both!” He opens a worn leather pouch and hands her a pair of coins. “There’s my purse; I am yet thy debtor!

“Boy,” he tells Robin, “go along with this woman.”

Mistress Quickly rises and curtsseys. She leads the young page down the stairs and out of the Garter.

Falstaff muses. “This news distracts me....”

Pistol is impressed with the messenger. “This punk”—courtesan—“is one of *Cupid’s* carriers! Clap on *more sails*,” the warrior cries to himself, rising. “*Pursue!*—up with your *flags!* Give *fire!*

“*She* is my prize!—or ocean whelm them all!” He troops off after the woman.

Falstaff watches, amused. *Sayest thou so, old Jack? Go thy ways!*

But the knight is resolved to continue with his scheme to become solvent. *I’ll make more of my old body than I have done.* Surveying his considerable circumference, he thinks of the wealthy

women. *Will they yet look after thee?* he wonders. *Wilt thou, after the expense of so much money, be now a gainer?*

*Good body, I thank thee!* he decides. *Let them say 'tis grossly done; so it be fairly done, no matter!*

Bardolph, now wearing the ale-stained apron of his trade, enters the room. "Sir John, there's one Master Brook below would fain speak with you and be acquainted with you—and he hath sent Your Worship a *morning's draught of sack!*" He slides a pewter flagon of the wine onto the dark, rough table.

"*Brook is his name?*"

"Aye, sir."

"Call him in!" says Falstaff, happily.

Bardolph—hardly surprised—goes to bring the visitor.

Think Falstaff, *Such brooks—that o'erflow with liquor!—are welcome to me!*

He chuckles in warm self-satisfaction as he pours. *Ah, Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, have I encompassed you? Go to! Via!*

Bardolph returns to the door and ushers in a gentleman.

"*Bless you, sir!*" says Ford, disguised in outdated clothes from a back bedroom, and sporting a large false moustache.

"And *you*, sir! Would you speak with me?"

"I make bold to press upon you with so little preparation," says Ford apologetically.

"You are welcome. What's your will?" He waves Bardolph away. "Give us leave, drawer." The tapster goes back down to the bar.

"Sir," says Ford, "I am a gentleman that have spent *much!*—my *name* is brook!" he says, in apparent frustration.

The introduction—wine, wealth and profligacy—charms Falstaff. "Good Master Brook, I desire more acquaintance of you!"

"Good Sir John, I *sue* for yours! But not to *charge* you; for I must let you understand I think myself in a *plight*, better to be lender than you are—which hath somewhat emboldened me to this unseasoned intrusion. For they say that if *money* go before, all ways do lie open...."

"*Money is a good soldier, sir, and will on,*" the knight confirms.

"*Troth!*—and I have a bag of money here that... *troubles* me," says Ford, with tactical tact, pulling a pouch from his coat. "If you will help me to *bear it*, Sir John, take half, or *all*, for easing me of the carriage!"

"Sir, I know not how I may deserve to be your porter."

"I will tell you, sir, if you will give me the hearing."

"Speak, good Master Brook! I shall be glad to be your servant."

"Sir, I hear you are a scholar...." He rubs his mustache thoughtfully. "I will be brief with you, as you have been a man long known to *me*, though I never had a reason so good as *desire* to make myself acquainted with you.

"I shall uncover a thing to you wherein I must very much lay open *mine own imperfection!* But, good Sir John, as you have one eye upon my follies, as you hear them unfolded, turn another into the register of your *own*, that I may pass with a reproof the easier, sith you yourself know how easy it is to be such an offender."

The accomplished offender nods. "Very well, sir. Proceed."

"There is a gentlewoman in this town; her husband's name is *Ford.*"

"Well, sir."

"I have *long loved* her, and, I protest to you, bestowed *much* on her!—followed her with a dotting observance; engrossed opportunities to meet her; fee'd every slight occasion that could but niggardly give me *sight* of her; not only bought many presents to give her, but have given largely to many just to know what she would *have* given her!

"Briefly: I have pursued *her* as Love hath pursued *me*—which hath been *on the wing of all*

*occasions!*

“But of whatsoever I have *merited*, meed for either my mind or my means, I am sure I have received *none!*—unless *experience* be a jewel that I have purchased at an infinite rate, and that hath taught me to say this: ‘Love like a *shadow* flies, and substance it subdues, *pursuing* that which flies, fleeing what *pursues!*’”

“Have you received no promise of satisfaction at her hands?” asks Falstaff.

“Never.”

“Have you *importuned* her to such a purpose?”

“Never.”

“Of what quality *was* your love, then?”

Ford shrugs. “Like a fair house built on another man’s ground!—so that I have lost my edifice by mistaking the place where I erected it!”

Falstaff stifles a smile for the gentleman’s failed erection. “To what purpose have you unfolded this to me?”

Frank leans forward. “When I have told you *that*, I’ll have told you *all!*”

“Some say that, though she appear honest to *me*, yet in *other places* she enlargeth her mirth so far that there is *harsh construction* made of her!”

“Now, Sir John, here is the heart of my purpose! You are a gentleman of excellent breeding, admirable discourse—of great admittance, authentic in your place and person, generally allowed for your many war-like, court-like, and learned preparations!”

Falstaff feigns modesty. “Oh, sir . . .”

“*Believe* it, for you know it!”

Ford lays the heavy leather pouch on the table; coins clinking within it. “There is *money!*—*spend* it, *spend* it; spend *more*; spend *all I have!*—only give me so much of your time in exchange for it as to lay an amiable siege to the honesty of this Ford’s wife! *Use* your art of *wooing*—win her to *consent* to you!

“If any man may,” he says, “*you* may as soon as any!”

Falstaff accepts that dubious compliment, but he is puzzled. “Would it supply well the vehemency of your affection that *I* should win what *you* would enjoy? Methinks you prescribe to yourself very preposterously!”

Ford can explain. “Oh, understand my *drift!* She dwells so securely on the excellency of her *honour* that the folly of my soul dares not present itself!—she is too *bright* to be *looked* against!

“Now . . . could I could come to her with any *detection* in my hand, *my* desires had instance and argument to commend themselves! I could *drive* her then from the ward of her purity, her reputation, her marriage-vow, and a thousand other of her defences, which now are too, too strongly embattled against me!

“What say you to’t, Sir John?”

Falstaff takes the pouch. “Master Brook, I will first make bold with your *money*; next, give me your *hand!*” They shake hands warmly. “And last, as I am a gentleman, you *shall*, if you *will*, enjoy Ford’s wife!”

“Oh, good *sir!*” cries Frank Ford.

Falstaff encourages his lustful patron. “I say you shall!”

“Want no *money*, Sir John!—you shall want none!”

Falstaff bows. “Want no *Mistress Ford*, Master Brook!—you shall want none!

“I shall be with her, I may tell you, by *her own appointment!*” he boasts. “Even as you came in to me, her assistant, or go-between, parted *from* me! I say I shall be with her between ten and eleven!—for at that time the jealous, rascally knave her husband will be forth.

“Come you to me at night; you shall know how I speed!”

Frank, now pale behind his false whiskers, mutters, “I am blest in your acquaintance.” He wonders what’s been said about him. “Do you know Ford, sir?”

“*Hang* him, poor cuckoldly *knave!* I know him not. Yet I *wrong* him to call him poor: they

say the jealous, wittolly knave hath masses of *money*—for the which his wife seems to *me* well-favorèd; I will use her as the key to the cuckoldly rogue’s coffer—and there’s *my* harvesting home!”

“I would you *knew* Ford, sir,” says Frank, defensively. He quickly adds, “So that you might avoid him if you saw him.”

Falstaff scoffs. “*Hang* him, mechanical salt-butter *rogue!* I will *stare* him out of his wits; I will *awe* him with my cudgel!—it shall hang like a *meteor* o’er the cuckold’s *horns!*”

“Master Brook, thou shalt know I will *predominate* over the peasant!—and *thou* shalt lie with his wife!

“Come to me soon at night. Ford’s a *knave*, and I will *aggravate* his style: thou, Master Brook, shalt know him for knave *and* *cuckold!* Come to me soon at night!”

Master Ford nods. He bows and takes his leave.

Downstairs, as he stalks out past the long bar of the Garter Inn, Frank Ford’s anger and dismay grow. *What a damnèd, Epicurean rascal is this!*

The assignation Falstaff revealed stunned him. *My heart is ready to crack with impatience! Who says this is improvident jealousy?—my wife hath sent to him!—the hour is fixèd!—the match is made!*

*Would any man have thought this?*

*See the hell of having a false woman: my bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawn at!—and I shall not only receive this villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms!—and from him that does me this wrong!*

*Terms—names! Lucifer sounds well; Amaimon, well; Barbason, well!—yet they are devils’ additions, the names of fiends! But cuckold, wittol! —a man who accepts his wife’s infidelity.*

*Cuckold! The Devil himself hath not such a name!*

*Page is an ass, a secure ass! He will trust his wife!—he will not be jealous!*

*I will rather trust an Irishman with my bottle of spirits, a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself! Then she plots, then she ruminates, then she devises!*

*And what they think in their hearts, they may effect; they will break their hearts but they will effect!*

*God be praisèd for my jealousy!*

*Eleven o’clock’s the hour. I will prevent this!—detect my wife, be revenged on Falstaff, and laugh at Page!*

*I will about it! Better three hours too soon than a minute too late!*

*Fie, fie, fie! Cuckold! Cuckold! Cuckold!*

## Chapter Four Ready to Duel

**A**t a grassy field on the southern outskirts of Windsor, Doctor Caius waits impatiently this bright morning, eager for an imminent combat of honor. “Jack Rugby!” he cries, calling his second, who, tired of waiting, has wandered away.

“Sir?”

“Vat is ze clock, Jack?”

“’Tis past the hour, sir, that Sir Hugh promised to meet.”

“By Gar, he has *save his soul*, zat he is no come!—he has pray his Pible *well*, zat he is no come! *By Gar*, Jack Rugby, he is *dead* already, if he be come!”

As usual, Rugby concurs. “He is wise, sir; he knew Your Worship would kill him if he came.”

“By *Gar*, ze *herring* is not so dead as I vill kill *him!*” He craves action. “Take your rapier,

Jack; I will tell you how I will kill him.” He draws his own blade, and slashes it through the air.

“Alas, sir, I cannot fence!”

“*Villainy*, take your rapier!” insists Caius.

“Forbear!—here’s *company!*” Jack points with relief to the arriving spectators.

Page approaches, with the Garter Inn’s host, Justice Shallow, and a young man whom Caius doesn’t know—Master Slender, the very rival Sir Hugh has endorsed for matrimony with Anne.

The innkeeper hails the sword-wielder wryly: “Bless thee, bully *doctor!*”

“Save you, Master Doctor Caius,” says old Shallow.

Page bows. “Now, good doctor.”

Lovesick Slender looks up and notices that the others are watching him. “Give you good morrow, sir.”

Caius frowns. “Vat be all you, one, two, tree, four, come for?”

“To see thee *fight*, to see thee *foin!*” cries the host, vigorously mimicking fencing moves, “to see thee *traverse!*—to see thee *here*, to see thee *there*—to see thee pass thy *punto*, thy stock, thy reverse, thy distance, thy *montant!*”

“Is he *dead*, my Ethiopian?” he demands of a fantasy second, waving his imagined sword aloft in triumph. “Is he *dead*, my Francisco? *Eh, bully?*”

He turns to the healer. “What says my Aesculapius?”—god of medicine, “my Galen!”—renowned second-century Greek physician, “my *heart of elder!*”—exemplar of the hidebound. “*Eh? Is he dead, bully stale? Is he dead?*”

Doctor Caius assumes he means Hugh—and he fumes. “*By Gar*, he is ze *coward* Jack priest of ze *vorld!*—he is not show his face!”

“Thou art a *castle-and-king*”—royal—“*urinal!*”—a glass cylinder for perusing patients’ piss, the innkeeper assures the French practitioner, “a *Hector* of grease, my boy!”—promoter of ointments; with a wry play on *Greece*, whose warriors were wounded by the Trojan.

Doctor Caius appeals to the others. “I pray you, bear witness that me have stay since six or seven—two, tree *hours* for him, and he is no come!”

“He is the *wiser* man, Master Doctor,” says Justice Shallow. “He is a curer of *souls*, and you a curer of *bodies*; if you should fight, you go against the hair of your professions. Is it not true, Master Page?”

George nods. “Master Shallow, you have *yourself* been a great fighter, though now a man of peace.”

“‘*Od’s bodykins*, Master Page,” says Shallow, “though I now be old and ‘of the peace,’ if I see a *sword* come out, my finger itches to take up one! Though we are justices and doctors and churchmen, Master Page, we have *some* salt of our youth in us!—we *are* the sons of women, Master Page!”

“‘Tis true, Master Shallow.”

“It will be found so, Master Page,” says the septuagenary. “Master Doctor Caius, I am come to fetch you *home*. I am sworn of the *peace!* You have showed yourself a wise physician, and Sir Hugh hath shown himself a wise and patient churchman. You must go with me, Master Doctor.”

“Pardon, guest-justice,” the host intervenes, with further mischief in mind. “A word, Mounseur Mockwater...”

Caius frowns. “*Mock-vater!* Vat is zat?”

“Mock-water, in our English tongue, is *valour*, bully,” the host tells him.

“*By Gar*, den, I have as *mush* mock-vater as ze *Englishman!* Scurvy jack-dog *priest!* By Gar, me vill cut his ears!”

“He will clapper-claw *thee* quickly, bully!”

“Clapper-de-claw... vat is zat?”

“That is, he will make thee *amends.*”

“By Gar, me do look he *shall* clapper-de-claw me; for, by Gar, me vill *have it!*”

“And I will *provoke* him to’t, or let him wag!” the host promises.

“Me tank you for zat,” says Doctor Caius.

“And, *moreover*, bully...” the host begins. He turns to the others. “But first, Master Guest,” he tells Shallow, “and Master Page, and eke *Cavaleiro* Slender, go you through the town to Frogmore.” The edge of that suburb lies just east of them.

- George whispers, “Sir Hugh is *there*, is he?”

- “He is there,” the host confirms. “See what humour he is in, and I will bring the doctor about by the fields. Will it do well?”

- “We will do it!” grins Shallow. Beside him, Abraham Slender is lost in a reverie centering on Anne Page.

“Adieu, good master doctor,” says George, with a wave, as he, Shallow and Slender head toward Frogmore.

Doctor Caius’s annoyance continues, unabated. “By Gar, me vill kill ze priest; for he speak for a *jackin’-ape* to Anne Page!”

Says the innkeeper, “*Let him die! Sheathe thy impatience; throw cold water on thy choler!* Go about the fields with me through Frogmore. I will bring thee where Mistress *Anne Page* is—at a farm-house a-feasting—and thou shalt *woo* her!

“Cried I *aim*?”—on the mark, he demands. “Said I *well*?”

“By Gar, me *tank* you for zat!” says the doctor. “By Gar, I love you; and I shall procure-a you ze good guests: ze *earl*, ze *knight*, ze *lord*, ze *gentlemen*, my *patients*!”

The Garter Inn’s host bows. “For the which I will be thy adversary toward Anne Page! Said I well?”

“By Gar, ’tis *good! Vell* said!”

“Let us *wag*, then!”

Doctor Caius motions to his man. “Come at my heels, Jack Rugby.”

On the green turf of an open field near Frogmore, the Welshman waits, highly distressed. Hugh Evans has a Bible in one hand, a sword in the other. With him, holding his clerical robe, is his young second for the expected duel.

“I pray you now, good Master Slender’s serving-man, and friend Simple by your name,” says Hugh, “which way have you looked for Master Caius, that calls himself *doctor* of physic?”

Peter replies, pointing around, “Marry, sir, to the pittie-ward, the park-ward, and *every* way old *Windsor* way! Every way but the town way.”

“I most feheemently desire you you will also look *that* way.”

“I will, sir.” The boy trots toward Frogmore.

*Pless my soul, how full of chollors I am, and trempling of mind!* thinks the clergyman. *I shall be glad if he have deceived me. How melancholies I am!*

But his indignation rises. *I will knog his urinals*—glass specimen-receptacles— *about his knave’s costard*—apple-head— *when I have good opportunities for the ’ork, bless my soul!*

To calm and reassure himself, he sings a solemn song:

“By shallow rivers, to whose falls

Melodious birds sings madrigals,

There will we make our peds of roses,

And a thousand fragrant posies.

To shallow—” He stops, his voice choked with emotion.

*Mercy on me! I have a great dispositions to cry!* He sings again, tremulously: “Melodious birds sing madrigals— When as I sat in Pabylon— And a thousand vagram posies— By shallow....”

“Yonder he is, *coming this way*, Sir Hugh!”

Evans is resigned to facing the French man. “He’s welcome.” He sings: “By shallow rivers, to whose falls—”

“Heaven prosper the right,” says Hugh softly. “What weapons is he?”



The boy sees none in hand. “No weapons, sir. There comes my master, Master Shallow, and another gentleman—from Frogmore, over the stile, this way.”

“Pray you, give me my gown,” Sir Hugh tells Peter. “Or else keep it in your arms,” he amends, with neither hand free, as Page, Shallow and Slender reach him.

“How now, Master *Parson!*” says Justice Shallow, savoring the sunshine. “Good *morrow*, good Sir Hugh! Keeps a gamester from the dice, and a good student from his book, but it *is* wonderful!”

Smitten Slender continues in the thrall of his affection. *Ah, sweet Anne Page!* he muses.

“’*Save* you, good Sir Hugh,” says George.

Pastor Evans is relieved, for now. “’Pless you from his mercy’s sake, all of you!”

Old Shallow, noting the heavy book and steel blade, demands, “What?—the sword and the Word? Do you study them *both*, Master Parson?”

Evans, motioning Peter forward, trades the sword for his cloak.

“And *youthful* still,” says Page, eying the minister. “In your *doublet and hose* this raw, rheumatic day!”

“There is reasons and causes for it,” Hugh says glumly.

“We are come to you to do a good office, Master Parson,” Page tells him.

“Fery well. What is it?”

“Yonder is a most reverent gentleman,” says George, “who, believing he received a *wrong* by some person, is more *at odds with his own gravity* and *patience* than ever you saw!”

Shallow concurs. “I have lived fourscore years and upward; I never heard a man of his place, gravity and learning so wide of his own respect!”—so out of countenance.

“Who is he?” asks Hugh.

“I think you know him: Master Doctor Caius, the renowned French physician.”

“Got’s will, and his passion of my heart!” cries Sir Hugh, angrily, “I had as lief you would tell me of a *supper of porridge!*”

“Why?” asks George.

“He has no more *knowledge* than Hibocrates and Galen!” Evans scorns medicine’s authorities, classical and current; they purport only to heal the body. “And he is a *knave* besides!—as *cowardly* a knave as you would desires to be acquainted withal!”

George motions toward the schoolmaster. “I warrant you, *here’s* the man *should* fight with him....”

But Slender, oblivious, is sighing. *Oh, sweet Anne Page!*

“It appears not so, by *his* weapons,” says Shallow. “Keep them asunder,” he warns. “Here comes Doctor Caius!”

The Garter’s host leads the French gentleman and Rugby toward the others.

“Nay, good Master Parson,” warns George, “keep in your weapon!”

“So do *you*, good Master Doctor!” commands Shallow.

“*Disarm* them,” says the innkeeper, “and let them *question!*”—debate. As he grabs Caius’s scabbard from Rugby, George firmly takes Hugh’s rapier from Peter. “Let them keep their *limbs* whole, and hack our *English!*”

Caius confronts Hugh. “I pray you, let-a me speak a word with your ear. Wherefore vill you not *meet-a* me?”

“Pray you, use your *patience*,” Evans tells the doctor, intending no play on *patients*. “In good time....”

“By Gar, you are ze *coward*, ze Jack *dog*, John *ape!*” cries Caius.

“Pray you, let us not be *laughing-stocks* to other men’s humours!” urges the pastor. “I desire you in *friendship*, and I will one way or other make you *amends*....” But he sees the continuing glare. “I will knog your urinals about your *knave’s cockscomb*, for missing your meetings and appointments!”

“*Diable!*” shouts Doctor Caius. He appeals to the witnesses: “Jack Rugby—mine host ze

Jarteer—have I not *stay* for him to kill him? Have I *not*, at ze place I did appoint?”

“As I am a *Christian’s* soul, *no!*” cries Sir Hugh Evans. “Look you, *this* is the place appointed! I’ll be judgement by mine host of the Garter!”

“*Peace*, I say,” calls the innkeeper, “Gallia and Gaul—French and Welsh—*soul-curer* and *body-curer*—”

“Aye,” nods Doctor Caius, approving the terms, “*zat* is very good; *excellent*.”

“—*peace*, I say!—hear ‘mine host of the Garter,’” says the innkeeper. “Am I a *politician*? Am I *subtle*? Am I a *Machiavel*?”

“Shall I *lose* my doctor? *No!*—he gives me the potions and the motions.

“Shall I *lose* my parson, my priest, my Sir Hugh? *No!*—he gives me the proverbs and the *no* verbs.

“Give me thy hand, terrestrial,” he says to the physician. “*So*.

“Give me *thy* hand, celestial,” he says to the cleric. “*So*.

“Boys of art, I have *deceived you both!*—I have directed you to wrong places! Your hearts are mighty, your skins are whole! Then let burnt *sack*”—mulled wine—“be the outcome!

“Come, lay their swords to pawn!”—let them be held aside, he tells his companions. He sweeps a grand wave of invitation toward Windsor. “*Follow me*, lads of *peace!*—follow, follow, *follow!*”

“Trust me, a *mad* host!” laughs Justice Shallow. “Follow, gentlemen, *follow!*”

Thinks young Slender, *Oh, sweet Anne Page!* He drifts, dreamingly, after the innkeeper, Page and Shallow, all three still chuckling as they head into town.

The would-be duelists now hold the sunny field.

“*Huh!* Do I *perceive zat?*” asks Caius. He mutters, watching the jolly innkeeper depart, “Have you make-a ze *sot* of us?”

Hugh, too, feels sheepish—and irked. “This is *well!*” he says peevishly. “He has made us his *vlouting-stog!*”—flouting stock. “I desire you that we may be friends,” he tells Caius, “and let us knog our prains together to be *revenge* on this same scall, scurvy, cogging *companion*, the host of the Garter!”

“*By Gar*, with all my *heart!*” says Caius, grasping his hand. “He promise to bring me where is Anne Page; by *Gar*, he *deceive* me too!”

“Well, I will smite his noddles!” vows Hugh Evans. “Pray you, follow.”

They, too, head toward the renowned Garter Inn and its revered tap room.

And so are combined the auras of two vast realms, both bent on punishing a prankster.

Mistress Page chides a new page—Robin—for walking beside her on the street in Windsor this morning. “Nay, keep your way, little gallant; you were wont to be a follower, but now you are a *leader*. Which had you rather,” she asks, “lead *mine* eyes, or eye your master’s *heels?*”

“I had rather, forsooth, go *before* you like a *man*, than follow *him* like a dwarf!”

“Oh, you *are* a flattering boy,” says Margaret dryly. “Now I see you’ll be a courtier!”

She encounters Frank Ford just outside his stately brick mansion.

“Well met, Mistress Page,” says he. “Whither go you?”

“Truly, sir, to see your wife. Is she at home?”

“Aye—and as *idly* as she may hang together, for want of *company*; I think if your husbands were dead, *you* two would marry!”

“Be sure of *that*—to other *husbands!*”

Ford’s smile is strained. “Where had you *this* pretty weather-cock?” He has not seen Robin with her before.

Meg feigns annoyance. “I cannot tell *what* the dickens his name is my husband had him from.” She asks Robin: “What do you call your knight’s name, sirrah?”

“Sir John Falstaff.”

Ford's eyes widen. "*Sir John Falstaff!*"

"He, he; I can never hit on's *name*, though there is such a *league* between my good man and he," claims Meg. "Is your wife at home, indeed?"

His face darkens. "In *deed* she is."

She passes by him and heads toward the door. "By your leave, sir; I am sick till I see her!" After being prompted again, Robin darts forward to precede her into the house.

Frank is aghast. *Has Page any brains? Hath he any thinking? Hath he any eyes? Surely they sleep!—he hath no use of them!*

*Why, this boy will carry a letter twenty miles as easily as a cannon will shoot twelve score point-blank!* He has no doubt that Robin will quickly tell Falstaff all he can find out.

Frank is appalled by George's carelessness. *He pieces out his wife's inclination!* — contributes to her transgression. *He gives her folly motion and advantage! And now she's going to my wife—and Falstaff's boy with her! A man may hear this shower sing in the wind!*

*And Falstaff's boy with her!*

*Good plots, they are laid!* he thinks—intending no play on the word. *And our revolted wives share damnation together!*

He is comforted by his own scheme to confront the knight during the attempt. *Well, I will take him!—then torture my wife, pluck the borrowed veil of modesty from the so-seeming Mistress Page, divulge Page to himself as a secure and wilful Actaeon! And to these violent proceedings all my neighbours shall cry 'aim!' —well shot!*

He hears bells in a town tower chime nine. *The clock gives me my cue, and my assurance bids me search!—there I shall find Falstaff! I shall be praised for this, rather than mocked—for it is as positive as the earth is firm that Falstaff is there! I will go!*

He turns resolutely toward home, but encounters the men returning from Frogmore.

"Well met, Master Ford!"

"Trust me, a *good* joining!" says Frank, managing to smile at the others. "I have *good cheer*"—food and drink—"at home, and I pray you all go with me!"

"I must excuse myself, Master Ford," says Shallow.

"And so must I, sir!" says Abraham. "We have appointed to dine with *Mistress Anne*, and I would not break with her for more money than I'll speak of!"

Shallow explains their stay in town: "We have lingered, about a match between Anne Page and my cousin Slender, and this day we shall have our answer."

Slender looks at George. "I hope I have your good will, father Page...."

"You *have*, Master Slender; I stand wholly for you!"

"But my *wife*, Master Doctor, is for *you* altogether," he tells Caius.

"*Aye*, by Gar; and ze *maid* is love-a *me!*" says the French gentleman. "My nursh-a Quickly tell me so mush!"

The athletic innkeeper savors all sporting competitions. "What say you to young *Master Fenton*?" he asks George. "He capers, he dances, he has eyes of youth; he writes verses, he speaks *holiday*, he smells April and May! *He* will carry't, *he* will carry't! 'Tis in his *buttons!*"—harbored beneath his doublet, in the heart. "*He* will carry't!"

"Not by *my* consent, I promise you," sniffs Page. "The gentleman is of no having"—without wealth, and therefore unacceptable. "He kept company with the wild prince"—during the intemperate youth of King Henry V—"and Poins; he is of too high a region—he knows too much!"

"No, he shall not knit a knot in *his* fortunes with the fingers of *my* substance!" says George haughtily. "If he *take* her, let him take her *simply!*" Despite the host's grin, he means *marry her without dowry*. "The wealth I have waits on my consent, and my consent goes not that way."

Frank is eager to have witnesses observe Falstaff's ignominy. "I beseech you heartily, *some* of you go home with me to dinner! Besides your cheer, you shall have *sport!*" he promises. "I will show you a *monster!*"

“Master doctor, you shall go; so shall you, Master Page; and you, Sir Hugh...”

“Well, fare you well,” says Robert Shallow. “We shall have the freer wooing at Master Page’s!” He and Abraham go down the street to speak with Anne.

Doctor Caius dismisses his man. “Go home, John Rugby; I come anon.” Rugby goes—as usual, by way of the Garter tavern.

The hostel’s host bows. “Farewell, my hearts! I will go to my honest knight, Falstaff, and drink canary with him!”

*Canary’s* meanings prompt Master Ford. *I think I shall drink in pipe-wine with him first! I’ll make him dance!*

“Will you go, gentles?” he asks, motioning for the others to follow him.

The pastor is curious, as he and the doctor walk along together. “Have with you, to see this ‘monster!’” says Evans amiably to Caius—unaware that a green-eyed one leads the way.

## Chapter Five Lovers Visit

**W**ithin the Fords’ mansion, the mistress of the house summons servants. “What, John! What, Robert!” cries Alice.

“Quickly, *quickly!*” urges Margaret, peering out a tall rear window. “Is the buck-basket—” “I’ll warrant,” Alice assures her. “*What?—Robert, I say!*” she calls.

Two burley men come in from outside. Swinging between them, slung from a strong staff between their right shoulders, is a very large brown hamper for the household’s *buck*, clothes to go down to the river for washing.

“Come, come, *come!*” cries Meg.

“Here, set it down,” Alice tells the men, pointing to a space along the back-room wall near a window. The servants lower the woven wicker to the floor near a heap of soiled laundry, and Robert settles the wide lid back into place.

Meg frets about the hour—it is almost ten. “Give your men their charge; we must be brief!”

“Marry, as I told you before, John and Robert, be *ready* here, hard by in the brew-house,” says Mistress Ford, pointing toward the side door, “and when I call you, come forth suddenly, and without any pause—or *staggering*—take this basket on your shoulders.

“That done, trudge with it in all haste, and carry it among the whitsters”—women who wash white linen clothes, then spread them out for the sun to bleach and dry—“in Datchet Mead, and there empty it in the muddy ditch close by the Thames’ side!”

“You will do it?” demands Mistress Page. They nod, caps in hand.

“I ha’ told them over and *over!*—they lack no *direction!*” insists Mistress Ford. She tells the two, “Be gone, and come when you are called!” They bow and head outside to wait in the pungent air near the wooden building where the family’s supply of beer is brewed.

“Here comes little Robin,” observes Meg, as the boy enters, by a rear door near the pantry.

“How now, my eyas-musket!”—toy gun. “What news with you?” asks Alice.

The lad grins. “My master, Sir John, is coming to your back door, Mistress Ford, and requests your company!”

Meg Page eyes him. “You little Jack-a-Lent, have you been true to us?”

“*Aye, I’ll be sworn!*” says Robin. “My master knows not of *your* being here, and hath threatened to put me into everlasting *liberty* if I tell you of it—for he swears he’ll *turn me away!*”—dismiss him.

“Thou’rt a good boy! This secrecy of thine shall be a *tailor* to thee, and shall make thee a *new* doublet and hose!”—fresh livery; she’ll assure his employment. Meg turns to Alice. “I’ll go hide me!”

“Do so!” Mistress Ford motions Robin along: “Go tell thy master I am *alone!*” He nods, and

runs back to the rear entrance. “Mistress Page, remember you your cue!”

“I warrant thee!—if I do not act it, *hiss* me!” She conceals herself in a far corner, behind a tall stack of dusty crates, boxes and stored holiday decorations by the door.

“Go to, then! We’ll *use* this *unwholesome humidity!*—this gross, watery *pumpion!*”—pumpkin. “We’ll teach him to know doves from jays!”—soft from harsh, true from faithless.

From the back, the clumping of heavy boots heralds the arrival of Sir John Falstaff.

At the door, the knight beams at Alice, arms spread wide. “Have I *caught* thee, my heavenly jewel? Why, now let me *die*, for I have lived long *enough!*—this is the *period* to my ambition! Oh, this blessed hour!”

“Oh, sweet Sir *John!*” she gushes.

“Mistress Ford, I cannot cog, I cannot prate, Mistress Ford! Now shall I *sin* in my wish: I would thy husband were dead! I’ll speak it before the best lord: I would make thee my *lady!*”

“I, your *lady*, Sir John!—alas, I should be a *pitiful* lady!” He hears humility—but she can guess at the Crown pensioner’s comparatively paltry income.

“Let the court of *France* show me such another!” says the knight grandly. “I see how thine eye would emulate the *diamond!* Thou hast the right-archèd beauty of the brows that becomes the *ship*-’tire, the *’tire-valiant*, or *any* ’tire ”—fashionably styled false hair—“of *Venetian* admittance!”

“A plain kerchief, Sir John!” murmurs Alice. “*My* brows become nothing else—nor *that* well, neither!”

“By the Lord, thou art a *traitor* to say so! Thou wouldst make an absolute *courtier!*—and the firm fixture of thy feet would give an excellent motion to thy gait in a semi-circled farthingale!”—hoops, swaying under a gown. “I *see* what thou wert, even if Fortune were thy foe: *Nature* is thy *friend!* Come, thou canst not *hide* it!”

She must hide annoyance, though. “Believe me, there is no such thing in me!” says Alice—instantly regretting the phrase: *thing* can be a term for the male member.

Counters Falstaff loftily, “What made *me* love thee? Let *that* persuade thee there’s something extraordinary in thee!” She has a good idea of what the threadbare degenerate sees in her.

He moves closer. “Come, I cannot cog, and say thou art this and that, like a-many of these lipping hawthorn-buds,”—young suitors, “that come like *women* in men’s *apparel*, and smell like Bucklersbury at simple time!”—London’s fragrance district when a season’s new aromatics arrive. “I cannot! But I *love* thee!—none *but* thee!—and thou *deservest* it!”

Despite such high acclaim, Alice expresses a concern: “Do not *betray* me, sir!—I fear you love *Mistress Page!*”

Falstaff snorts scornfully. “Thou mightst as well say I love to walk by the *Counter* gate,”—at a debtor’s prison, “which is as hateful to me as the reek of a lime-kill!”—rotten smell of a dead bird too long in a trap.

“Well, Heaven knows how *I* love *you*,” she says dryly, “and you shall one day find out!”

“Keep in that mind!” says Falstaff smugly. “I’ll *deserve* it!”

She nods. “*Aye*, I must tell you, so you *do*, or else I would not be *of* that mind.”

Suddenly Robin rushes in at the back. “*Mistress Ford, Mistress Ford!* Here’s *Mistress Page* at the door, sweating and blowing and looking wildly, and would needs speak with you *immediately!*”

Falstaff is highly alarmed. “She shall not see me!” He glances around. “I will ensconce me behind the arras!”

“Pray you, *do so!*” pleads Alice. “She’s a very *tattling* woman!”

He soon eases his bulk behind the drapery—creating a distinctive bellying in the heavy fabric.

“What’s the matter? How now!” demands Alice, as Margaret emerges to join her and Robin.

“Oh, *Mistress Ford*, what have you *done?*” cries Meg. “You’re *shamed*, you’re *overthrown*, you’re *undone forever!*”

“What’s the *matter*, good Mistress Page?”

“*Oh, well-a-day*, Mistress Ford!—having as honest a man as *your husband*—and giving him such cause of suspicion!”

“*What* cause of suspicion?”

“What cause of *suspicion! Out upon you!* How I am *mistook* in you!”

“Why, *alas*, what’s the *matter?*”

“Your husband’s *coming hither*, woman!” announces Meg, “with all the *officers* in *Windsor*, to search for a gentleman that he says is *here now* in the house, *by your consent*, to take an ill advantage of his absence! You are *undone!*”

Alice sounds dismayed: “’Tis not *so*, I hope!”

“Pray heaven it be not so that you *have* such a man here! But ’tis most certain your husband’s *coming*—with half of *Windsor* at his heels—to *search* for such a one! I come before to tell you: if you know yourself clear, why, I am *glad* of it!—but if you have a ‘friend’ here, *convey, convey him out!*”

“Be not amazed!—*call all your senses to you!*—defend your *reputation*, or bid farewell to your *good life* forever!”

“What shall I *do?*” cries Alice. “There *is* a gentleman—my dear *friend!*—and I fear not mine own *shame* so much as *his peril!* I had rather than a thousand pound he were *out of the house!*”

“For *shame!*” says Meg. “Your ‘had rather’ will never stand!—your husband’s *here at hand!* Bethink you of some *conveyance!* In the house you cannot *hide* him!”

“Oh, how you have *deceived me!*” moans Margaret. But then she points. “*Look!*—here is a *basket!* If he be of any reasonable stature, he may creep in *here!* Then throw foul linen upon him, as if it were going to *bucking*”—laundering. “And, as it *is* whiting-time, send him by your two men to *Datchet Mead...*”

“He’s too *big* to go in there,” groans Alice. “What shall I *do?*”

Falstaff pushes the drape aside and hurries forward. “Let me see’t, let me *see’t*, oh, let me *see’t!* I’ll *in!*—*I’ll in!* Follow your friend’s *counsel!*” he tells Mistress Ford. “*I’ll in!*”

Mistress Page is stunned. “What, *Sir John Falstaff?*” From her purse she snatches papers. “Are these your *letters*, knight?”

“I *love* thee!” says Falstaff, lifting the hamper lid. “Help me *away!* Let me creep in here,” he mumbles, leaning heavily onto the creaking, snapping wicker, then struggling to cram himself down into the big, wiggling basket. “I’ll never—”

His vow is muffled as they quickly pile dirty linen over his quivering mass.

“Help to cover your master, boy!” cries Meg. “Call your men, Mistress Ford!” She smacks the side of the basket. “You *dissembling* knight!”

Robin runs to open the side door, and Alice summons the servants: “What, John! *Robert! John!*”

“*Go*, take up these clothes here quickly!” she cries, as they rush in. “Where’s the cowl-staff?”—the shoulder bar for carrying the filled basket. “Look how you *drumble!*” she chides, urging the men on. “Carry them to the laundress in *Datchet Mead—quickly, come!*”

But just then Master Ford bursts into the room from the front of the house—followed by Master Page, Doctor Caius and Sir Hugh Evans.

“Pray you, come near!” cries Frank to the men. “If I suspect *without cause*, why then make *sport* of me! Then let me be your *jest*; I’ll *deserve* it!”

The big brown basket, hanging heavily between Robert and John, catches his eye. “How now! Whither bear you this?”

“To the laundress, forsooth,” says Robert.

“Why, what have *you* to do with whither they bear it?” demands Alice. “You were best not meddle with *buck-washing!*”

“*Buck!* I would I could wash *myself* of the ‘buck!’” cries Frank, again reminded of a horned beast. He sees her frown. “Buck, buck, *buck!* Aye, *buck!* I *warrant* you, *buck!*—and it shall

appear just *in season*, too!”—in time for lawful hunting.

The two servants, straining under the weight of their bulging basket, trudge out past the side door, followed by Robin.

Ford begins his dramatic exposure: “Gentlemen, I have *dreamed* last night; I’ll *tell* you my dream!

“Here, here, here be my *keys!* Ascend to my chambers!—*search, seek, find out!* I’ll warrant we’ll unkennel a *fox!*”

“Let me stop this way, first,” he says, locking both doors, “so *no escape!*”

George says soothingly, “Good Master Ford, be *contented*. You wrong yourself too much!”

“*True*, Master Page,” says Frank gravely—of previously misplaced trust. “*Up*, gentlemen! You shall see *sport* anon! Follow me, gentlemen!” He heads back toward the front of the house, and the stairs to its second-floor bedrooms.

Sir Hugh Evans is quite put out. “This is fery fantastical humours and jealousies!”

Doctor Caius concurs. “By Gar, ’tis no the fashion of *France*; it is not *jealous* in France!”

“Nay, follow him, gentlemen,” says George. “See the issue of this search.”

The three men attend Frank Ford in the frantic ransacking of his own house.

Left with her friend, Meg can’t help but laugh. “Is there not a *double* excellency in this?”

“I know not which pleases me better,” laughs Alice, “that Sir John is deceived, or my *husband!*”

“*What a quaking* was he in when your husband asked what was in the basket!” says Meg.

Alice grins. “I am half afraid he will have *need* of washing!—so throwing him into the water will do him a benefit!”

“*Hang* him, dishonest *rascal!* I would all of the *same* stain were in the same *distress!*”

Mistress Ford frowns at an inference: “I think my husband hath some *special* suspicion of Falstaff’s being here, for I never saw him so gross in his jealousy till now....”

Mistress Page regards her neighbor. “I will lay a plot to *try* that—and we will yet have more tricks with Falstaff! His dissolute disease will scarcely obey only *this* medicine!”

Alice, too, is thinking. “Shall we send that foolish carrion *Mistress Quickly* to him—and ignore his throwing into the water?—then give him *another hope*, to betray him to another *punishment!*”

“We will *do it!* Let him be sent for tomorrow, eight o’clock, to ‘*make amends.*’”

Ford returns, followed by Page, Caius, and Evans.

“I cannot find him,” Frank admits. “Maybe the knave bragged of that which he could not compass!”

- Meg frowns. “Heard you *that?*” she whispers to Alice; now they know that Frank has talked with Falstaff.

Says Alice indignantly. “You abuse me *well*, Master Ford, do you not?”

“Aye, I do so,” Frank mumbles, crestfallen.

“Heaven make you better than your *thoughts!*”

“Amen,” says Frank, his head hanging.

Margaret glares. “You do yourself a mighty wrong, Master Ford!”

“Aye, aye; I must bear it.”

Hugh Evans confirms the futility of their search. “If there be any pody in the house, and in the chambers, and in the coffers, and in the presses, Heaven forgive my sins at the Day of Judgment!”

“By Gar, nor I too!” says Doctor Caius. “There is no bodies.”

George scolds his friend. “Fie, *fie*, Master Ford!—are you not *ashamed?* What *spirit*, what *devil* suggests this imagination? I would not ha’ your distemper of this kind for the wealth of Windsor Castle!”

Ford is fully humbled. “’Tis my *fault*, Master Page; I *suffer* for it.”

“You suffer for a pad conscience!” declares Pastor Evans. “Your wife is as honest a ’oman as

I will desires among five thousand, and five *hundred*, too!”

The doctor concurs: “By Gar, I see ’tis an *honest* woman!”

“Well,” says Ford, “I promised you a dinner....” It is due to be served in about an hour, at noon. “Come, come, walk in the Park. I pray you, pardon me; I will hereafter make known to you why I have done this.

“Come, wife; come, Mistress Page. I pray you *pardon* me!—pray *heartily*, *pardon* me!”

“Let’s go in, gentlemen,” says George, motioning toward the parlor at the front. “But, trust me, we’ll *mock* him!”

“I do invite you tomorrow morning to my house for *breakfast*,” Page tells the men. “After, we’ll go a-birding together! I have a fine hawk for the bush!”—a falcon trained for sport. “Shall it be so?”

Frank, well chastened, is quietly compliant. “Anything.”

“If there is one, I shall make *two* in thy company,” says Hugh happily.

“If dere be one or two, I shall make-a the *turd!*” adds Caius.

“Pray you, go, Master Page,” says Frank, amiably, as they follow the ladies out for their walk.

Hugh Evans looks at the doctor. “I pray you now, remembrance *tomorrow* for the lousy knave, mine host!”

Caius nods. “Dat is good!—by Gar, with all my heart!”

“A lousy knave, to have his gibes and his mockeries!”

They have found three clever traveling men, and have induced them to sample the hospitality and amenities of Windsor’s Garter Inn.

A tall nobleman-suitor has come to the Pages’ house to call on their daughter. He stands outside with her, near the front door. “I see I cannot get thy father’s love,” says Fenton, frowning in frustration. “Therefore no more turn me to him, sweet Nan.”

“Alas, *how* then?” she protests.

“Why, thou thyself must *see*: he doth object that I am too great of birth—and that, my estate being gallèd with my *expenses*, I seek only to *heal* it by *his wealth!*”

“Besides, other bars he lays before me—my riots past, my wild societies—and tells me ’tis a thing impossible I should love thee but as a *property*.”

Her eyes search his face. “May be he tells you true.”

“*No!*—so heaven speed me in my time to come!” he says, taking her hand. “Albeit I will confess thy father’s wealth *was* the first reason I wooed thee, Anne, yet wooing thee I found *thee* of more value than stamps in gold or sums in sealèd bags!—and ’tis the very riches of *thy self* that now I aim at!”

“Gentle Master Fenton, *yet* seek my father’s love!—*still* seek it, sir! If opportunity and humblest suit cannot attain it, why, then—” She looks around. “Hark you hither....” She leads him to the side of the porch, by the window; there they talk earnestly, in hushed voices.

And now Justice Shallow comes calling, with his nephew Abraham Slender—both abetted by Mistress Quickly.

Shallow spots Anne with Fenton. “*Break their talk*, Mistress Quickly! My kinsman shall speak for *himself!*”

She nods, and ambles toward the couple.

“I’ll make a shaft or a bolt on’t!”—*take a shot*, says Slender tremulously, wringing his hands. “*Slid!*—’tis but *venturing*....”

“Be not dismayed,” Shallow tells him calmly.

“No, she shall not *dismay* me,” says Abraham. “I care not about *that*, except that I am *afeard!*”

Mistress Quickly tells Anne Page, “*Hark ye*, Master *Slender* would speak a word with you....”



The beautiful girl nods. "I'll come to him." *This is my father's choice*, she thinks, looking at the bashful young teacher, come to court her in his Sunday clothes. Her father has told her what her coming-of-age inheritance will be, and she is genuinely modest. *Oh, what a world of vile, ill-favored faults looks attractive in three hundred pounds a-year!*

Mistress Quickly cheerfully seizes the taller suitor's arm and pulls him away. "And how does good *Master Fenton*? Pray you, a word with you...."

"She's *coming*," whispers Justice Shallow. "*To her, coz!* O boy, thou hadst *a father!*" he says encouragingly.

Abraham smiles bravely. "I had a *father*, Mistress Anne. My uncle can tell you good *jest*s of him," he stammers. "Pray you, Uncle, tell Mistress Anne the *jest*—how my father stole two geese out of a pen, good uncle...."

Says the old man, stepping forward, "Mistress Anne, my nephew *loves you!*"

"Aye, that I do—as well as I love any woman in Gloucestershire."

"He will maintain you like a *gentlewoman!*" promises Shallow.

"Aye, that I will—come cut- and long-tail,"—in any event, "under the degree of a *squire*." The bumpkin clearly considers that an inducement for a town-dweller.

"He will make you a hundred and fifty pounds' jointure!"—wedding settlement, Shallow declares.

Anne smiles, kindly, touching the old man's sleeve. "Good Master Shallow, let him woo for himself."

"Marry, I *thank* you for it!" says he. "I thank you for that good comfort! She calls *you*, coz! I'll leave you." He goes to join Mistress Quickly and Fenton.

Anne begins. "Now, Master Slender—"

"Now, good Mistress Anne—" says he at the same time.

"What is your will?" she asks politely.

"My *will!* 'Od's heartlings, that's a pretty *jest* indeed! I ne'er *made* my will yet, I thank heaven!—I am not such a sickly creature, I give heaven praise!"

"I mean, Master Slender, what would you with *me*?"

"Truly, for mine *own* part, I would little or nothing with you," says Abraham meekly. "Your father and my uncle have made motions.... If it be my luck, so; if not, happy man be *his* dole!"—the one she does marry. "*They* can tell you how things go better than I can," he notes. "You may ask your father—here he comes."

Page and his wife have returned home. "Now, *Master Slender!*" says George warmly, coming to him. "*Love* him, daughter Anne!" he urges.

George spots the other suitor. "Why, how now? What does Master *Fenton* here?" he asks angrily. "You *wrong* me, sir, thus still to haunt my house!—I *told* you, sir, my daughter is *disposed of!*"

Fenton tries to appease. "Nay, Master Page, be not impatient...."

Margaret is abrupt: "Good Master Fenton, come not to my child!"

"She is no match for *you*," says George.

"Sir, will you *hear* me?" pleads the young man.

"*No!* good Master Fenton," says Page. "Come, Master Shallow; *come in*, son Slender," he says, starting past the door. He looks back, frowning. "Knowing my *mind*, you *wrong* me, Master Fenton!"

Shallow and Slender follow George into the house.

Mistress Quickly now encourages Fenton: "Speak to *Mistress Page!*"

He nods, and goes to Meg. "Good Mistress Page," he says, hat in hand, "for that I *love* your daughter, in such a *righteous* fashion as I *do*, perforce against all checks, rebukes and manners I must advance the colours of my love, and not retire! Let me have your good will!" he beseeches.

Anne glances toward Slender as he enters the house. "Good mother, do not marry me to yond *fool!*"

“I mean it not,” Meg assures her. “I seek you a *better* husband!”

“That’s my master—master *doctor*.” says Mistress Quickly.

“*Alas!*—I had rather be *set alive i’ the earth*,” Anne tells them all, “and *bowled* to death with *turnips!*”

Meg waves away her concern. “Come, trouble yourself not!

“Good Master Fenton, I will not be your friend nor enemy; my daughter will I question how she loves you, and as I find *her*, so am *I* affected. Till then, farewell, sir! She must needs go in; her father will be angry.”

Fenton bows. “Farewell, gentle mistress. Farewell, Nan.”

Margaret and her daughter proceed into the tall house.

Mistress Quickly clasps Fenton’s arm and claims credit for the gentlewoman’s apparent neutrality. “This is *my* doing, now! ‘*Nay,*’ said I, ‘will you *cast away* your child on a fool, or a physician? Look on *Master Fenton!*’ This is *my* doing!”

“I thank thee,” he says, “and I pray thee, sometime tonight give my sweet Nan this *ring!*” He hands her two more gold coins as well. “There’s for thy pains.”

Mistress Quickly curtsies. “Now heaven send thee good fortune!” she says, as Fenton bows and goes on his way.

*A kind heart he hath! A woman would run through fire and water for such a kind heart!*

*But yet I would my master had Mistress Anne. Or I would Master Slender had her! Or, in sooth, I would Master Fenton had her....*

*I will do what I can for them, all three; for so I have promised, and I’ll be as good as my word!* She looking fondly at the gold. *But speciously for Master Fenton!* She slips the money into her pocket.

*Well, I must go on another errand to Sir John Falstaff from my two mistresses, she sighs. What a beast am I to slack it!*

But postpone she does; she goes into the house to say goodbye to Anne—and to give her Fenton’s ring.

## Chapter Six Trying Again

Falstaff, his clothes still damp, boots caked with remnant mud, broods crossly this morning in a booth at the Garter Inn. “Bardolph, I say!”

“Here, sir.”

“Go fetch me a quart of sack.” He realizes it’s time for breakfast, and that he needs sustenance. “Put a toast in’t.”

The tapster nods and goes.

*Have I lived to be carried in a basket, and to be thrown, like a barrow of butcher’s offal, into the Thames? Well, if I be served another such trick, I’ll have my brains ta’en out and buttered, and give them to a dog for a New Year’s gift!*

*The rogues slided me into the river with as little remorse as they would have drowned a blind bitch’s puppies, fifteen i’ the litter!*

*And one may know by my size that I have a kind of alacrity for sinking!—if the bottom were as deep as Hell, I should down!*

*But that the shore was shelvy and shallow, I had been drownèd—a death that I abhor, for the water swells a man—and what a thing should I have been when I had been swelled! I should have been a mountain of mummy!*

Bardolph returns with the wine. “Here’s Mistress Quickly, sir, to speak with you.”

Falstaff grabs for the restorative. “Let me pour some *sack* into the Thames-water!—for my belly’s as cold as if I had swallowed *snowballs* as pills to cool the rage!

“Call her in,” he says, after finishing a second long draught.

“Come in, woman,” says Bardolph at the door.

“By your leave, I cry you mercy,” says Mistress Quickly courteously, as she moves toward Falstaff. “Give Your Worship good morrow!”

“Take away these chalices,” Falstaff tells Bardolph, who picks up the empty mugs. “Go brew me a pottle of sack, finely”—heated, with spice.

“With eggs, sir?”

“Simple of itself—I’ll no pullet-sperm in my brewage!”

Bardolph goes back downstairs.

The knight regards Mistress Quickly. “How now?”

“Marry, sir, I come to Your Worship from Mistress Ford—”

“*Mistress Ford!* I have had *ford* enough!” he cries. “I was *thrown into* the ford!—I have my belly *full* of ford!”

“*Alas the day!*” says Mistress Quickly sympathetically. “Good heart, that was not *her* fault! She does so *take on* with her *men!*”—rebuke Robert and John. “They mistook their erections!”—directions.

“So did I *mine*,” growls Falstaff, “to build upon a foolish *woman’s* promise!”

“Well, she *laments*, sir, for it, such that it would yearn your heart to see it!” She examines her gloves carefully. “Her *husband* goes a-birding this morning....”

The knight pictures the handsome, wealthy woman, left by herself in that big house.

Mistress Quickly comes to the point: “She desires you once more to come to her, between eight and nine! I must carry word to her”—return his answer—“quickly.

“She’ll *make you amends*, I warrant you!” promises Mistress Quickly, raising a heavily drawn eyebrow.

“Well, I will visit her,” says Falstaff gruffly. “Tell her so. And bid her think what a *man* is! Let her consider his frailty—and then judge of *my merit!*” he adds with ponderous dignity.

“I will tell her.”

“Do so. Between nine and ten, sayest thou?” He wants to finish his breakfast, such as it is.

“Eight and nine, sir.”

“Well, be gone; I will not miss her,” he grumbles.

“Peace be with you, sir,” says Mistress Quickly, taking her leave.

Falstaff again drinks deeply. *I marvel I hear not from Master Brook; he sent me word to stay within. I like his money well!* Over the pewter rim of his raised mug he spots movement. *Oh, here he comes!*

“Bless you, sir,” says Brook, bowing curtly at the door.

Falstaff waves him in. “Now, Master Brook, you come to know what hath passed between me and Ford’s wife?”

Frank mutters, “That, indeed, Sir John, is my business.”

“Master Brook, I will not lie to you: I was at her house the hour she appointed me.”

“And sped you, sir?”

“Very *ill-favoredly*, Master Brook.”

“How so, sir? Did she change her determination?”

“*No*, Master Brook!—but the peaking *cornuto* her *husband*, Master Brook, dwelling in a continual alarum of *jealousy*, comes upon me in the instant of our encounter, after we had embraced, kissed, protested, and, as it were, spoken the *prologue* of our comedy!

“And at his heels, a rabble of his *companions*, thither provoked and instigated by his distemper, began, forsooth, to *search his house* for his wife’s lover!”

Ford is stunned. “*What?*—while you were *there?*”

“While I was there.”

“Then, did he search for you, but could not *find* you?”

“You shall hear,” says the knight. He takes another swig. “As good luck would have it, comes

in one Mistress Page, gives intelligence of Ford's approach, and, in her invention and Ford's wife's distraction, they conveyed me into a buck-basket."

"*A buck-basket!*"

"By the Lord, a *buck-basket!* Rammed me in with foul shirts and smocks, socks, foul stockings, greasy napkins—so that, Master Brook, there was the rankest compound of *villainous smells* that ever *offended nostril!*"

"And how long lay you there?"

"Nay, you shall *hear*, Master Brook," says Falstaff, after quaffing again, "what I have *suffered* to bring this woman to evil for your good!" He belches copiously. "Being thus crammed in the basket, a couple of Ford's *knaves*, his *hinds*, were called forth by their mistress to carry *me*, under the name of foul clothes, to Datchet-lane! They took me on their shoulders, met the jealous knave their master in the door—who asked them once or twice what they had in their basket!

"I quaked for fear, lest the lunatic knave would have *searched* it; but Fate, ordaining he *should* be a cuckold, held back his hand!

"Well! On went *he* for a *search*—and away went I for *foul clothes!*"

"But mark the sequel, Master Brook! I suffered the pangs of *three several deaths*: first, an intolerable *fright*, to be detected by a jealous, rotten bell-wether; next, to be *compassed* like a good *bilbo*"—sheathed like a dagger—"in the circumference of a *peck*, hilt to point, *heel* to *head*; and then, to be *stoppered in*, like a strong distillation, with *stinking* clothes that *fretted in their own grease!*"

"*Think of that!*—a man of *my* kidney!—*think of it!*—who am as subject to heat as *butter*, a man of continual dissolution and thaw! It was a *miracle* to 'scape suffocation! And in the height of this bath—when I was more than half stewed in grease like a *Dutch* dish—to be *thrown into the Thames*, and *cooled* in that surge, *glowing hot* like a *horse-shoe!* *Think of that!*—*hissing hot!*—*think of that*, Master Brook!"

The thoughts and images in fact delight Ford; but Master Brook looks concerned. "In good sadness," he says mournfully, "I am sorry that for my sake you have suffered all this!

"My suit then is desperate," he groans. "You'll undertake her no more?"

"Master Brook, I will be thrown into *Etna*"—the volcano—"as I have been into *Thames*, ere I will leave her *thus!* Her husband has this morning gone *a-birding*," he says, contemptuously. "I have received from her another embassy of meeting! 'Twixt eight and nine is the hour, Master Brook."

Croaks Ford, again stricken, "'Tis past eight already, sir,"

"Is it? I will then address me to my appointment."

"Come to me at your convenient leisure, and you shall know how I've sped; and the *conclusion* shall be crownèd with *your* enjoying her!

"Adieu! You shall *have* her, Master Brook! Master Brook, *you* shall cuckold *Ford!*" He drains his mug, and marches, a bit unsteadily, to the stairs.

*Hmh!* thinks Frank. *Is this a vision? Is this a dream? Do I sleep? Master Ford, awake! Awake, Master Ford!*—*there's a hole made in your best coat, Master Ford!*

*This 'tis to be married! This 'tis to have linen and buck-baskets!*

*Well, I will proclaim myself what I am: I will now take the lecher!*

*He is at my house—he cannot 'scape me; 'tis impossible he should! He cannot creep into a halfpenny purse, nor into a pepper-box! But, lest the devil that guides him should aid him, I will search impossible places!*

*Though what I am I cannot avoid, yet being what I would not shall not make me tame!*

*If I have horns to make one mad, let the proverb go with me!—I'll be horn-mad!*

**O**n the street near the Pages' home, Mistress Quickly spots Margaret and her young son, William, walking toward the grammar school; she hurries to meet them. Asks Meg, "Is he at Ford's already, think'st thou?"

Mistress Quickly has already visited Alice. “Surely he *is* by this—or will be presently!” she advises. “But, truly, he is very courageous *mad* about his throwing into the water! Mistress Ford desires you to come *suddenly!*”

“I’ll be with her by and by,” says Meg calmly. “I’ll but bring my young man here to school. Look, where his master comes,” she says, as Sir Hugh Evans emerges from the rectory next door. “’Tis a playing-day, I see. How now, Sir Hugh! No school today?”

“No; Master Slender is let the boys have leave to play.”

“Blessing on his heart!” says Mistress Quickly, who has often done the same.

Margaret has a concern. “Sir Hugh, my husband says my son profits nothing in the world at his books. I pray you, ask him some questions about his *accidence*”—Latin inflections.

Sir Hugh Evans nods. “Come hither, William; hold up your head; come.”

William, eight, wants to play with the other boys.

“Come on, sirrah; hold up your head,” his mother commands. “Answer your master; be not afraid.”

Hugh asks, “William, how many numbers is in *nouns*?”

“Two,” says William.

“Truly I thought there had been one number *more*,” says Mistress Quickly, “because they say, ‘*Od’s ’ounds!*’” *Odds* would imply *three or more*.

“Peace your tattlings!” frowns Sir Hugh, offended at hearing the oath, a version of *God’s wounds*, spoken before the child. “What is ‘fair,’ William?”

The lad thinks. “*Pulcher*,” he mumbles.

Mistress Quickly is surprised; she’s heard something else. “*Polecats*? There are fairer things than *polecats*, surely!” The term is also used for women of ill repute.

Hugh Evans is annoyed. “You are a very simplicity ’oman! I pray you *peace!*”

“What is ‘*lapis*,’ William?”

“A stone.”

“And what is ‘*a stone*,’ William?”

Mistress Quickly stares; the word can mean *testicle*.

“A pebble.”

“No, it is ‘*lapis*,’” chides Sir Hugh. “I pray you, remember in your *prain!*”

William nods; his schooling is, after all, mainly repetition. “*Lapis*.”

“That is a good William. What is it, William, that does lend *articles*?”

“Articles are borrowed from the *pronoun*,” William answers dutifully, “and be thus declined: *singulariter, nominativo, hic, haec, hoc*.”

“*Nominativo, hig, hag, hog*,” says the Welshman. “Pray you, mark: *genitivo, huius*.”

“Well, what is your *accusative* case?”

William frowns, trying to recall. “*Accusative... hinc...*”

“I pray you, have your remembrance, child: *accusative—hung, hang, hog*.”

“‘Hang-hog’ is Latin for *bacon*, I warrant you,” says Mistress Quickly.

“Leave your *prabbles*, ’oman,” demands Sir Hugh. “What is the *focative* case, William?”

“*Uh...vocativo... um...*”

Hugh shakes his head; Latin grammar has no vocative case. “Remember, William: *focative* is *caret!*”—lacking.

“And that’s a good root!” says Mistress Quickly, who likes carrots.

“’Oman, *forbear!*” insists Sir Hugh.

“Peace,” Margaret tells both, laughing in spite of herself.

“What is your *genitive* case, plural, William?”

“*Genitive* case...?”

“Aye.”

William thinks. “*Genitive—horum, harum, horum!*”

Mistress Quickly thinks she’s heard *Jenny, ’tis whoring*. “’*Vengeance* on Jenny’s case; *fie* on

her!—never *name* her, child, if she be a *whore!*”

“For *shame*, ’oman!” cries Sir Hugh.

But Mistress Quickly is scandalized too. “You *do ill* to teach the child such words!” She appeals to Meg. “He teaches him to *hic*, and to *hack*—which they’ll do fast enough by themselves—and to call *whoredom!*” She frowns at the clergyman. “*Fie* upon you!”

“’Oman, art thou *lunatics?* Hast thou no understandings for thy cases and the numbers of the genders? Thou art as foolish a Christian creatures as I could desire!”

Margaret smiles. “Prithee, *hold thy peace!*” Each adult thinks she addresses the other.

Hugh turns to the boy. “Show me now, William, some declensions of your pronouns.”

“Forsooth, I have forgot,” William Page admits.

“It is *qui, quae, quod!*” Hugh’s eyebrows rise in admonition: “If you forget your *quies*, your *quaes*, and your *quods*, you must be *preeches!*”—*britches*, slid down for a whipping. “Go your ways, and play; go!” he says kindly. The boy trots off happily to join his mates.

Meg tells Mistress Quickly—dryly, “He is a better scholar than I *thought* he was.”

Hugh Evans bows. “He is a good, sprag memory! Farewell, Mistress Page.”

She nods politely. “Adieu, good Sir Hugh.” She summons William. “Get you *home*, boy!

“Come, we stay too long!” she tells Mistress Quickly.

The women hurry away, going up the street to support Alice Ford.

Falstaff is forgiving: “Mistress Ford, your *sorrow* hath eaten up my sufferance,” he tells her, once again at the back of her home. “I see you are obsequious in your love; and I profess *requital* at a *hair*’s breadth: not only, Mistress Ford, in the simple *office* of love, but in all the accoutrement, complement and *ceremony* of it!

“But are you sure of your husband now?”

“He’s a-birding, sweet Sir John.”

Mistress Page calls from the front entrance. “*What ho*, gossip Ford! *What ho!*”

Alarmed, Alice points to the pantry. “*Step into the chamber*, Sir John!” He does so, and she quickly closes the door, concealing the knight—and blocking his view.

“How now, sweet heart,” says Margaret, coming in. “Who’s at home, besides yourself?”

Alice gives her a meaningful nod: “Why, none but mine own people.”

“Indeed?”

“No, certainly.” She moves close to her friend, and whispers, nodding toward the pantry door. “Speak louder.”

“Truly, I am so glad you have nobody here!” says Meg.

“Why?”

“Why, woman, your husband is in his *old* lines again! He so *takes on* yonder with *my* husband—so *rails* against all married mankind, so *curses* all Eve’s daughters of what complexion soever, and so *buffets himself* on the forehead, crying, ‘Peer out, peer out!’—that any madness I ever *yet* beheld seemed but *tameness*, *civility* and *patience*, to this distemper *he* is in now!

“I am glad the fat knight is not here!”

“Why?—does he talk of *him?*”

“Of none *but* him!—and swears he was carried out, the last time he searched for him, in a basket—protests to my husband *he is now here!*—and hath *drawn* him and the rest of their company from their sport to make *another* experiment of his suspicion! But I am glad the knight is not here! Now he shall *see* his own *foolery!*”

“How near is he, Mistress Page?”

“Hard by, at street end; he will be here anon.”

“I am *undone!*” cries Alice. “The knight *is* here!”

“Why then you are utterly *shamed*—and *he’s* but a *dead* man!” moans Meg. “What a woman are *you!* Away with him, *away with him!*—better *shame* than *murder!*”

Alice sounds frantic: “Which way should be *go?* How should I *bestow* him?—shall I put him

into the basket again?"

Falstaff bursts from the pantry. "No!" he exclaims. "I'll come no more i' the *basket!* May I not go out ere he come?"

"Alas," cries Margaret, "three of Master Ford's brothers watch the door with *pistols*, so that none shall issue out!—otherwise you might slip away ere he came." She frowns at her erstwhile suitor. "But what make you *here?*"

"What shall I do?" wonders Falstaff, looking around. He goes to the large stone hearth, unused this late in the spring. "I'll creep up into the chimney!"

Alice shakes her head. "*There* they always use to discharge their birding-pieces!"—fire off the weapons, to unload them of powder and shot, and to dislodge soot. "Creep into the kiln-hole!"

"Where is it?" demands Falstaff, desperate; the kitchen's oven is big, but hardly large enough for Falstaff.

Mistress Ford shakes her head, distraught. "He will *seek* there, on my word! Neither press, coffer, chest, trunk, well, vault, but he hath an abstract for the remembrance of such places, and goes to them by his note! There is no hiding you in the house!"

Falstaff turns toward the door. "I'll go out then!"

"If you go out in your own semblance, you *die*, Sir John!" warns Mistress Page. "Unless you go out *disguised*—"

"How might we disguise him?" asks Alice.

"Alas the day, I know not! There is no *woman's gown* big enough for him; otherwise he might put on a hat, a scarf and a kerchief, and so *escape!*"

"Good hearts, *devise* something!" pleads Falstaff. "*Any* extremity rather than a mischief!"

Alice grasps her friend's arm. "My maid's *aunt*, the fat woman of Brentford, has left a gown above!"

"On my word, it *will* serve him!" cries Meg. "She's as big as *he* is!—and there's her thrummed hat, and her scarf, too! *Run up*, Sir John!"

"Go, go, sweet Sir John! Mistress Page and I will look for some linen for your head!"

"*Quick, quick!*" cries Mistress Page. "We'll come dress you straight! Put on the gown the while...."

Falstaff does not wish to be shot—at the door, nor in the chimney or oven; he hurries through the corridor to the front, and clambers heavily up the stairs.

"I would my husband *would* meet him in that shape!" laughs Alice. "He cannot *abide* the old woman of Brentford! He swears she's a *witch!*—forbade her my house, and hath threatened to beat her!"

"Heaven *guide* him to thy husband's *cudgel*," says Meg, "and *the Devil* guide his cudgel afterwards!"

Mistress Ford is surprised. "But *is* my husband coming?"

"Aye, in all seriousness, he *is!*—and talks of the *basket*, too, howsoever he hath had that intelligence."

Alice grins mischievously. "We'll *try* that!"—attempt to find out. "For I'll appoint my men to carry the basket *again*—to meet him at the door with it as they did last time!"

Meg agrees. "Aye—but he'll be here *presently!* Let's go dress him like the *witch of Brentford!*"

"I'll first direct my men what they shall do with the basket," says Alice. "Go up; I'll bring linen for him straight!" She goes to find Robert and John.

Margaret can hear Falstaff's rummaging upstairs. *Hang him, dishonest varlet! We cannot misuse him enough!*

She is irked by Frank Ford's jealousy—his foolish eagerness, springing from fear, not love, to embrace suspicions of her friend, a decent and lively wife. *We leave approval, by that which we will do; but wives may be merry, and yet honest, too!*

*We do not act, who often jest and laugh! 'Tis old, but true: 'Still swine eat all the draff!'*—as

ever, pigs will devour brewery refuse.

Meg finds pieces of women's wear among the articles of laundry, and hurries toward the stairs and up to the wives' swinish suitor.

At the back of the house, Alice directs the servants. "Go, sirs, take the basket again on your shoulders! Your master is hard at door; if he bid you set it down, obey him *quickly! Dispatch!*"

"Come, come, take it up," says Robert, shouldering one end of the basket pole.

John grins, grasping the other. "Pray heaven it be not full of *knight* again!"

Robert laughs. "I *hope* not!—I had as lief bear so much *lead!*"

Just then Ford bursts in at the back, with Shallow, Caius, and Evans close on his heels.

Says Frank testily, "Aye, but if it prove *true*, Master Page, have you any way then to *unfool me* again?" He points to the hamper. "*Set down the basket, villains!* Somebody call my wife!

"*You in the basket!*" he cries angrily. He shouts, glaring at the servants, "*Out, you pandering rascals!* There's a knot, an engine, a pack, a *conspiracy* against me! *Now* shall the devil be *shamed!*"

"*What?—wife, I say!*" roars Ford, as John and Robert flee. "Come, *come forth!* Behold what honest *clothes* you send forth to bleaching!"

Page is appalled. "Why, this *surpasses! Master Ford!*—you are not to *go loose* any longer; you must be *pinioned!*"

Sir Hugh Evans concurs. "Why, this is *lunatics!* This is mad as a *mad dog!*"

"Indeed, Master Ford, this is not well in *deed,*" says old Justice Shallow.

"*So say I too, sir!*" counters Ford, as his wife comes into the kitchen. Frank motions to her. "Come hither, Mistress Ford—Mistress Ford the *honest* woman, the *modest* wife, the *virtuous* creature that hath a *jealous fool* as her husband! I suspect *without cause*, do I, mistress?"

Alice is calm. "Heaven be my witness you *do*, if you suspect *me* in any dishonesty."

"Well said, *brazen-face!*" says Frank. "*Hold it out!*"—maintain the manner.

He throws the lid from the basket and begins furiously pulling out soiled garments, tossing linens into the air. "*Come forth, sirrah!*" he commands.

George stares. "This *'passes!*"

Mistress Ford watches in disgust. "Are you not *ashamed?* Let the clothes alone!"

"I shall *find you anon!*" cries Frank, now leaning deep into the hamper.

"'Tis un-*reasonable,*" says Sir Hugh. He asks, gently. "Will you pick up your wife's clothes? Come, away...."

"*Empty the basket, I say!*" demands Frank, standing red-faced beside it.

"Why, man, why?" asks Alice.

Frank is exasperated. "Master Page, as I am a *man* there was one conveyed out of my house yesterday *in this basket!* Why may not he be there *again?* In my *house* I am sure he *is!* My intelligence is *true*; my jealousy is *reasonable,*" he says, trying to appear calm. But then: "Pluck out all the linen!" he cries, heaving the hamper onto its side.

"If you find a man *there,*" says Alice dryly, "he shall die a *flea's* death!"

George glances into the big, empty shell of brown wicker. "Here's no *man,*" he says—looking hard at Ford.

"By my fidelity, this is not well, Master Ford," says Shallow sadly. "This wrongs you."

"Master Ford, you must *pray,*" Pastor Evans advises, "and not follow the *imagination*s of your own heart! This is *jealousies.*"

"Well, he's not *here* I seek for," mutters Frank, standing amid the tumble of clothing.

"No—nor nowhere else but in your brain!" says George.

"Help to search my house *this one time!*" Frank beseeches. "If I find not what I seek, allow no cover for my extremity!—let me for ever be your *table-sport!*—let them say of me, '*As jealous as Ford*—that searched a *hollow walnut* for his wife's leman!"

"Satisfy me once more," he begs. "Once more *search* with me!"

Alice rolls her eyes, clearly wanting to end the disturbance. She goes to the corridor. "*What*



ho, Mistress Page! Come you and the old woman down; my husband will be coming into the chamber.”

“Old woman?” says Frank. “What old woman’s that?”

“Nay, it is my *maid’s* aunt, of Brentford.”

“A *witch*, a quean, an old cozening *quean!*”—a bawd, cries Ford, livid. “Have I not *forbid* her my house? She comes on *errands*, does she? We are simple *men*,” he says, with heavy sarcasm, “we do not *know* what’s brought to pass under profession of *fortune-telling!* She works by *charms*, by *spells*, by the *symbol*—and such daubery as that is beyond *our* element; *we* know *nothing!*” he tells the stunned men. “Come *down*, you witch, you *hag*, you!—come *down*, I say!”

“Nay, good, sweet husband!” says Mistress Ford, trying to calm him. “Good gentlemen, let him not strike the old woman!” she pleads.

Leading the aunt, Mistress Page is backing toward them through the corridor. “Come, Mother Prat; come, give me your hand...”

“I’ll *prat* her!” cries Frank, swatting at the ungainly visitor with his wide hat. “*Out of my door*, you *witch*, you *hag*, you *baggage*, you *polecat*, you *runyon!* *Out, out!* I’ll *conjure* you, I’ll *fortune-tell* you!”

In a huge blur of pink taffeta and white lace beneath a wide purple bonnet—one with a long veil—Sir John Falstaff moves with surprising speed past the side door and away through the yard.

“Are you not *ashamed?*” Mistress Page asks Frank. “I think you have killed the poor woman!”

“Nay, he *will* do it!” says Mistress Ford. “’Tis a *goodly* credit to you!” she tells her husband angrily.

“*Hang her, the witch!*” says Frank, still fuming.

Standing by the door, Sir Hugh Evans got a glimpse of the old woman’s face as she sailed past, veil flying. “By the yea and no, I think the ’oman *is* a witch indeed!—I like it not when a ’oman has a great *peard!* I spied a great *peard* under this scarf!”

For a moment the men just stare, blinking.

“Will you follow, gentlemen?” cries Frank. “I beseech you, *follow!*—see but the issue of my jealousy! If I cry out thus upon *no trail*,”—howl like a hound tracking a false scent, “never trust me when I opine again!”

George nods. “Let’s obey his humour a little further. *Come*, gentlemen!”

The men all rush out in pursuit of Mother Prat, who is now in full flight—in the direction of the inn.

Meg laughs, happily recalling Ford’s attack upon his wife’s would-be lover: “Trust me, he beat him most pitifully!”

“Nay, by the mass, that he did *not!*” says Alice, “he beat him most *unpitifully*, methought! I’ll have the hat *hallowed* and hung o’er the *altar!*” she laughs, pointing to a spot over the hearth. “It hath done meritorious service!”

Alice ponders. “What think you? May we, with the warrant of womanhood and the witness of good conscience, pursue him with any *further* revenge?”

“The spirit of *wantonness* is, surely, scared out of him! If the Devil have him not in fee-simple with fine and recovery,”—at law, *completely*, “he will *never*, I think, in the way of waste attempt *us* again!”

Alice regards her artful accomplice. “Shall we tell our *husbands* how we have served him?”

“Yes, by all means!—if it be but to scrape the figures”—jealous notions—“out of your husband’s brains!”

“If *they* can find in their hearts that the poor, fat, unvirtuous knight shall be any further afflicted, we two will still be the *ministers!*” Meg promises.

“I’ll warrant they’ll have him shamed *publicly*,” says Alice, “and methinks there would be no *period*”—proper conclusion—“to the jest, should he *not* be publicly shamed!”

“Come!—to the *forge* with it then,” laughs merry Mistress Page. “*Shape* it! I would not have

things cool!”

Together, with indignation still glowing red, the imps hammer out their resolved revenge.

**B**ardolph has good news for the host of the inn, concerning several foreign guests. “Sir, the Germans desire to have three of your horses! The duke himself will be tomorrow at court, and they are going to meet him.”

“What duke should *that* be, comes so secretly?” the innkeeper wonders. “I hear not of him in the court”—the Garter’s courtyard, not the king’s court. “Let me speak with the gentlemen. They speak English?”

“Aye, sir; I’ll call them to you.”

“They shall have my horses, but I’ll make them *pay!*—*I’ll* sauce them!” He is somewhat concerned about the prosperous Germans’ bespoken stay. “They have had my house a *week* at command!—I have turned away my other guests!

“They must come off; I’ll *souse* them!”—soak them thoroughly. He ponders the business for a moment, then motions for the tapster to follow. “Come.”

## Chapter Seven Plots for the Park

**S**ir Hugh Evans, after learning of Falstaff’s escape in disguise, has joined the conspiracy, plotting at the Fords’ home with them and the Pages. “’Tis one of the best discretions of a ’oman as ever I did look upon!” he declares, of the newest deception proposed by Margaret.

George holds some papers. “And did he send you *both* these letters at an instant?”

Meg nods. “Within a quarter of an hour!”

Frank is amazed by what the women have revealed. “*Pardon* me, wife,” he says, bowing deeply. “Henceforth do what thou wilt; I will rather suspect the *sun* of *cold* than thee of wantonness! Now doth thine honour stand, in him that was of late an heretic, as *firm* as *faith!*”

“’Tis well, ’tis well—no *more!*” chuckles Page. “Be not as extreme in *submission* as in offence!

“But let our plot go forward! Let our wives yet once again, to make for us a *public* sport, appoint a meeting with this old, fat fellow where we may catch him and disgrace him for it!”

“There is no better way than that they spoke of,” says Frank.

But George has reservations. “How?—to send him word they’ll meet him in the park *at midnight? Fie, fie!*—he’ll never come!”

Hugh concurs. “You say he has been thrown in the rivers and has been grievously peaten as an old ’oman! Methinks there should be terrors in him that he should not come; methinks his flesh is *punishèd*. He shall have no *desires*.”

“So think I too,” says George.

But Alice is confident; Frank has confessed his actions in the guise of Master Brook, and she is certain that the allure of money will continue to arouse the knight. “Devise but how you’ll *use* him when he comes,” she tells the men, “and let *us two* devise to bring him thither!”

Meg steps forward. “There is an old tale which goes that ‘Herne the Hunter,’ a sometime keeper there in Windsor Forest, doth in all but winter-time, at still midnight, walk round about an oak, with great, raggèd *horns*—and there he shivers the tree, scares the cattle, and makes milch-kine”—milk-cows—“yield *blood!*—and shakes a *chain* in a most hideous and dreadful manner!

“You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know that our superstitious, idle-headed *elders* received, and did deliver to this age, the tale of Herne the Hunter as a *truth*.”

George nods. “Why, *yet* there want not many but do fear to walk by Herne’s Oak in deep of night!” The queen’s men sometimes fell trees and saw timber in the woods south of the castle—in daylight. “But what of that?”

Says Meg, eyes twinkling, “Marry, this is our device: that Falstaff at *that oak* shall meet with us—disguised as *Herne*—with *horns* on his head!”

George laughs, now willing to listen. “Well, let it not be doubted he’ll come, and in this shape! But when you have brought him thither, what shall be *done* with him? What is your plot?”

“That, likewise, have we thought upon,” says his wife, “and thus: Nan Page my daughter, and my little son, and three or four more of their growth, we’ll dress like *fairies* and *their* children, urchins in green and white—with crowns of waxen *tapers* on their heads, and *rattles* in their hands!

“Upon a sudden, as Falstaff, she and I are newly met, let them *rush forth at once* from the sawing pit, with some diffusèd song! Upon their sight, *we* two in great amazèdness will *fly*!

“Then let them all *encircle* him about and, fairy-like, *pinch* the unclean knight, and ask him *why*—that hour of fairy revel, in their so-sacred paths—he dares to tread in shape profane!”

“And till he tell the *truth*,” laughs Alice, “let the supposed *fairies pinch him soundly* and burn him with their *tapers’ wax*!”

Meg concludes: “The *truth* being known, we’ll all *present ourselves, dis-horn* the spirit, and *mock him home to Windsor*!”

Ford considers. “The children must be practised well to this, or they’ll ne’er do’t.”

“I will teach the children their behaviors,” Sir Hugh offers, “and *I* will be like a *jack-an-apes* also, to burn the knight with my *taber*!”

“That will be *excellent*!” Frank tells the others. “I’ll go and buy them *vizards*!”—masks.

Margaret beams. “My Nan shall be the *queen* of all the *fairies*, finely attired in a robe of white!”

The idea pleases George. “That silk will I go buy!” He thinks, *And in that attire shall Master Slender steal my Nan away, and marry her at Eton!* The town is to the north, just outside Windsor. “Go, send to Falstaff straight!”

“Nay,” says Frank, “*I’ll* to him again in name of Brook; he’ll tell me all his purposes. For sure, he’ll come!”

“Fear you not for that!” says Meg. “Go, get us *properties* and *tricking*”—accessories—“for our *fairies*!”

Hugh Evans rubs his hands together happily. “Let us *about* it! It is admirable pleasures and fery honest knaveries!”

The three gentlemen set off to fulfill their assigned tasks.

“Go, Mistress Ford,” says Meg, “send quickly to Sir John, to know his mind!”

As her friend speaks with Robin, Mistress Page ponders a further scheme of her own: *I’ll to the doctor! He hath my good will—and none but he—to marry with Nan Page!*

*That Slender, though well-landed, is an idiot—and he my husband best of all affects! The doctor is well-moneyèd, and has friends potent at court!*

*He, none but he, shall have her, though twenty thousand worthier come to crave her!*

**W**hat wouldst thou have, boor?—*what*, thicks’ kin?” the innkeeper asks the wiry lad.

“Speak, breathe, *discuss*—brief, short, *quick, snap*!”

“Marry, sir,” says pert Peter Simple, “I come from Master Slender to speak with Sir John Falstaff.”

The host goes to a flight of well-worn wooden stairs; above is a gallery of guests’ rooms. He points up to the knight’s door. “There’s his chamber, his house, his castle, his standing-bed and truckle-bed! ’Tis painted about with the story of the Prodigal, fresh and new!” he adds with proprietary pride. “Go, *knock* and *call*; he’ll speak unto *thee* like an Anthropophaginian!”—a cannibal. “*Knock*, I say!”

The boy is not eager to be seen as a snack. “There’s an old woman, a *fat* woman, gone up into his chamber; I’ll be so bold as stay, sir, till she come down. I come to speak with *her*, indeed.”

“*Hmm*... A fat woman?”—or a capacious disguise for a thief, thinks the innkeeper. “The

knight may be *robbed!*” he cries, alarmed. He goes to the stairs. “I’ll call! *Bully knight! Bully Sir John!* Speak from thy lungs military!—art thou *there?* It is thine *host*, thine *Ephesian*, calls!”

The door opens a crack, and Falstaff’s voice replies: “How now, mine host.”

“Here’s a Bohemian-Tartar carries the coming down of thy *fat woman!*” says the host. “Let her descend, bully, let her *descend!*” He realizes that others can hear. “My chambers are *honourable! Fie! Privacy?*”—for clandestine encounters. “*Fie!*”

Falstaff comes out onto the narrow balcony. “There *was*, mine host, an *old* fat woman even now with me; but she’s gone.”

Peter calls up, “Pray you, sir, was’t not the wise woman of Brentford?”

“Aye, marry, *was* it, mussel-shell; what would you with *her?*”

“My master, sir, Master *Slender*, seeing her go through the streets, sent to her to know, sir, whether one *Nym*, sir, that *beguiled him of a chain*,”—a gold one, for a man’s neck, “*has* the chain or no.” The teacher hopes the famous fortune-teller can advise him.

“I spake with the old woman about it,” says Falstaff.

“And what says she, I pray, sir?”

“Marry, she says that the very same man who ‘beguiled’ Master Slender of his chain *cozened* him of it!”

Says Simple, “I would I could have spoken with the woman herself; I had *other* things to have spoken with her, too, from him...”

Falstaff is curious. “What are they? Let us know.”

“Aye, *come on—quick!*” demands the host.

“I may not conceal them, sir,” says Simple—meaning *reveal*.

Now the host *must* know. “*Conceal them*, or thou diest!”

“Why, sir, they were nothing but about *Mistress Anne Page*,” says Peter. “To know if it were my master’s fortune to *have* her or no.”

Falstaff nods. “’Tis, ’tis his fortune.”

“What, sir?”

“To have her or no,” says the knight sourly. “Go; say the woman told me so.”

Peter, who misses the wry jest, is surprised; he hadn’t thought Slender’s faltering suit could succeed. “May I be so bold as to say so, sir?”

“Aye, sir—like anyone *more* bold!”

“I thank Your Worship,” says Simple. “I shall make my master *glad* with *these* tidings!” He goes out through the courtyard.

Falstaff treads heavily down the stairs.

The innkeeper grins knowingly. “Thou art clerkly, thou art *clerkly*,”—cautiously discreet, “Sir John!” He winks. “Was there a *wise* woman with thee?”

“Aye, that there was, mine host,” says Falstaff ruefully, “one that hath taught me more wit than ever I learned before in my life!—and I paid nothing *for* it, neither, but was *paid*”—beaten—“for my learning!”

The innkeeper has questions, of course, but before he can ask, his new tapster, returning from an errand with several of the inn’s guests, runs up to him. “*Out, alas*, sir! *Cozenage!*—mere *cozenage!*” cries Bardolph, wringing his muddy cap.

“Where be my *horses?*” cries the host, instantly concerned. “Speak *well* of them, *varletto!*”

“*Run away* with the *cozeners!*” moans Bardolph. “For so soon as I came beyond Eton, they *threw me off* from behind one of them—into a slough of *mire!*—then set spurs, and *away* like three German *devils!*—three *Doctor Faustuses!*”

But the host merely laughs. “They are gone but to meet the *duke*, villain!” he scoffs. “Do not say they be *fled!*—Germans are *honest* men!”

Before old Bardolph can argue, Hugh Evans enters the courtyard, demanding insistently, “Where is mine *host?*”

“What is the matter, sir?” asks he.

“Have a care of your entertainments!” warns Hugh. “There is a friend of mine come to town tells me there is three *German* cousins that has *cozened* all the hosts at Readins, at Maidenhead, at Colebrook, of *horses* and *money*!

“I tell you for *good will*, look you,” he says, with an odd smile. “You are *wise*, and full of gibes and vlouting-stocks, and ’tis not convenient *you* should be cozened! Fare you well!”

He chuckles, smiling even more broadly, and goes on his way—leaving the innkeeper to worry.

But the host’s dire thoughts are soon interrupted: Doctor Caius strides into the yard, “Vere is mine host ze Jarteer?”

“*Here*, Master Doctor—in *perplexity* and doubtful *dilemma*!”

“I cannot tell vat is dat,” say Caius, “but it is told a-me zat you make grand preparation for a Duke de Zhermany.” He has just returned, it would seem, from a visit to the palace. “By my trot, dere *is no duke* zat the court is know to come!

“I tell you for *good vill*,” he says, with a thin smile. “Adieu.” He, too, leaves the Garter and its fretful host.

The innkeeper has had two warnings—both too late. “*Hue and cry*, villain!” he suddenly shouts at Bardolph. “*Go!*” Bardolph runs to find a constable. “*Assist* me, knight!” the host cries to Falstaff. “I am *undone*!”

“*Fly, run!*—*hue and cry*, villain!” he yells, dashing after Bardolph. “I am *undone*!”

Thinks Falstaff, watching them go, *I would all the world might be cozened, for I have been cozened—and beaten too!*

*If it should come to the ear of the royal court how I have been transformèd—and how in my transformation have been washed and pounded!—they would melt my fat out of me, drop by drop, and lacquer fishermen’s boots with it! I warrant they would whip me with their fine wits till I were as crest-fallen as a dried pear!*

*I’ve never prospered since I forswore myself at primero!* He falsely denied cheating at cards during a game. He sighs. *Well, if my wind were but long enough to say my prayers, I would repent!*

At the front of the inn, Mistress Quickly walks into the courtyard and approaches the knight.

“Now whence come *you*?” he demands.

“From thy two parties, forsooth!”

“The *Devil* take one party, and his *dam* the other!—and so shall they both be *bestowèd*!”—sent to hell, cries Falstaff. He sputters, “I have suffered *more* for *their* sakes... more than the villainous inconstancy of *Man*’s disposition is *able to bear*!”

“And have not *they* suffered?” counters Mistress Quickly. “*Yes*, I warrant!—speciously *one* of them: Mistress Ford, good heart, is beaten so black and blue,” she claims, “that you cannot see a white spot about her!”

“What tellest thou *me* of black and blue?” cries Falstaff. “I myself was beaten into all the colours of the *rainbow*!—and I was nearly *apprehended*—as *the witch of Brentford*! But that my admirable dexterity of *wit*, my counterfeiting the action of an old woman, *delivered* me, the knave constable had *set me i’ the stocks*!—*i’ the common stocks*!—as a *witch*!”

Mistress Quickly tries to calm him. “Sir, let me speak with you *in your chamber*! You shall hear how things go—and, I warrant, to your *content*! Here is a letter will say, somewhat,” she says, giving him the new missive from Meg.

“Good hearts, what *ado* it is to bring you *together*!” says Mistress Quickly. “Surely *one* of you does not serve heaven well, that you are so *crossèd*!”

“Come up into my chamber,” says that one. She may simper and pander, but she still holds the key to unlocking the several treasures of Masters Ford, Page and Brook.

**I**n the host’s own rooms at the Garter Inn, he paces, miserable. “Master Fenton, talk not to *me*; my mind is heavy!” he groans. “I will give over all!” The theft of his fine horses has

overwhelmed his habitual enthusiasm.

“Yet hear me speak,” says the tall youth soothingly. “Assist me in my purpose, and, as I am a gentleman, I’ll give thee a hundred pound in *gold* more than your *loss!*”

The innkeeper is immediately attentive. “I will *hear* you, Master Fenton—and I will at the least *keep* your counsel”—not reveal it to others.

“From time to time,” says Fenton, “I have acquainted you with the dear love I bear to fair Anne Page—who mutually hath *answerèd* my affection, so far forth as *herself* might be her chooser, even to my *wish!*”

“I have a letter from her of such contents as you will *wonder* at!—the *mirth* whereof so larded with *my* matter that neither can be manifested singly without the *show* of *both!*”

“But hark, good mine host: I’ll show you here, at large, the *image of the jest!*”

“Fat Falstaff hath a great *scene* tonight at Herne’s Oak! Just ’twixt twelve and one must my sweet Nan present”—play the part of—“*the Fairy Queen!* The purpose why is here,” he says, tapping the letter. “In which disguise, while other somewhat rank jests are afoot, her *father* hath commanded her to slip away with *Slender*—and with him at Eton *immediately to marry!*”

“She hath *consented,*” he says—and grins at the host’s surprise. “Now, sir, her *mother*, ever strong against *that* match, and firmly for *Doctor Caius*, hath appointed that *he* shall likewise shuffle her away, while the sports are tasking others’ minds—and at the deanery, where a priest attends, straight *marry* her! In this, her mother’s plot, she, seemingly obedient, likewise hath made promise *to the doctor!*”

“Now, thus it rests: her *father* means that she shall be *all in white*, and when *Slender* sees his time to take her by the hand and bid her go, she shall go with him in that habit.

“Her *mother* hath intended, the better to denote her to the doctor, for they must all be masked and vizarded,”—disguised as fairies, “that in quaint *green* shall she be loose enrobèd, with pendent ribands flaring ’bout her head. And when the doctor spies his ’vantage ripe to pinch her by the hand, then on that token the maid hath given consent to go with *him.*”

Asks the innkeeper, “Which means she to *deceive*, father or mother?”

Fenton laughs. “*Both*, my good host!—and to go along with *me!*”

“Here it rests: that you’ll procure the *vicar* to stay for me at *church* ’twixt twelve and one, and, in the lawful name of *marrying*, to give our hearts united ceremony!”

The mischievous host is delighted—by the match, the pranks, and the gold. “Well, *husband your device!*—I’ll to the *vicar!*” he says, pumping Fenton’s hand warmly. “Bring you the *maid*, you shall not lack a *priest!*”

“So shall I evermore be bound to thee!” says Fenton gratefully. “Besides,” he quickly confirms, knowing the man, “I’ll make immediate *recompense!*”

The host smiles; but despite the money, he will miss his prize horses.

Falstaff is annoyed and impatient. “Prithee, no more *prattling!*—*go!*” he tells the persuasive Mistress Quickly, in his chambers. “I’ll hold.” But, he points out, “This is the *third time*. I hope *good luck* lies in odd numbers!

“Away! I’ll go. They say there is divinity in odd numbers—in nativity, chance, or death. Away!”

Mistress Quickly has been preparing for his imminent nocturnal appearance as Windsor Forest’s haunting spirit, Herne the Hunter. “I’ll provide you a *chain*; and I’ll do what I can to get you a pair of *horns*”—a service which she has performed for others.

Falstaff straightens his vast old doublet. “*Away*, I say; *time wears!* Hold up your end—and *mine!*”—his intention.

Mistress Quickly curtseys and leaves.

While he is readying himself for supper, Falstaff hears another visitor knock at his door. He opens it. “How now, Master *Brook!*” cries the knight to his wealthy patron. “Master Brook, the matter will be known *tonight* or *never!* Be you in the park about midnight at Herne’s Oak, and

you shall see *wonders!*”

Frank frowns, and his false whiskers twitch. “Went you not to her *yesterday*, sir, as you told me you had appointed?”

“I went to her, Master Brook, as you *see* me, like a poor old man—but I came *from* her, Master Brook, like a poor old *woman!* That same knave *Ford*, her husband, hath the *finest mad devil* of *jealousy* in him, Master Brook, that ever governed *frenzy!*”

“I will tell you that he *beat me grievously*—in the shape of a woman, for in the shape of *man*, Master Brook, I fear not *Goliath* with a *weaver’s beam!*”—one such heavy roller served as the shaft of the giant’s great spear. “Because I know *life* is also a shuttle!”—the part of a loom that continually pulls yarn against the waiting warp.

“I am in haste,” says the knight, ushering out his guest and closing the door behind them. “Go along with me! I’ll tell you *all*, Master Brook!

“Since I pluckèd geese, played truant, and whippèd top,”—was a boy, “I knew not what ’twas to be *beaten*—till *lately!*”

“Follow me; I’ll tell you strange things of this knave Ford—on whom tonight I will be *revengèd!*—and I will deliver his wife *into your hands!*”

“Follow,” he says, leading the way down the stairs. “Strange things in hand, Master Brook! Follow!”

Across the dark field just south of the royal residence and its Windsor Park, George Page, carrying a lantern, leads Justice Shallow and his nephew up toward the woods. “Come, come!” he tells them, at the edge, “we’ll crouch i’ the castle ditch till we see the light of our fairies! Remember, son Slender, my daughter!”

“Aye, forsooth,” says the teacher. “I have spoke with her, and we have a nay-word how to know one another: I come to her who’s *in white* and cry ‘*budget*’; she cries ‘*mum*,’ and by that we know one another.”

Says Shallow, “That’s good to do, but what needs either your *budget* or her *mum*? The white will decipher her well enough.” They hear chimes. “It hath struck ten o’clock.”

George peers into the ancient forest, from which land for the castle was cleared some five centuries ago. “The night is dark; lights and spirits will become it well!

“Heaven prosper our sport! No man means evil but to the devil—and we shall know *him* by his *horns!*”

“Let’s away! Follow me!”

They make their way among the tall trees, and soon they lie waiting, hidden in a quiet gully.

Walking with Alice Ford on a street leading to the park, Margaret Page advises the middle-aged bridegroom. “Master Doctor, my daughter is in *green*: when you see your time, take her by the hand!—away with her to the *deanery*, and dispatch it quickly!

“Go before me into the park,” she tells him. “We two must go together.”

Doctor Caius nods. “I know vat I have to do. Adieu!” He strides on ahead.

“Fare you well, sir!” calls Mistress Page to her French son-in-law-to-be. She admits to Alice, “My husband will not *rejoice* so much at the abuse of Falstaff as he will *chafe* at the doctor’s marrying my daughter!

“But ’tis no matter; better a little *chiding* than a great deal of *heartbreak!*”

Mistress Ford concurs; Abraham Slender has not impressed her. “Where is Nan now, and her troop of fairies—and the Welsh ‘devil’ Hugh?”

“They are all couched in a pit hard by Herne’s Oak,” Meg tells her, “with obscurèd lights”—shuttered lanterns—“which, at the very instant of Falstaff’s and our meeting, they will at once display to the night!”

“That cannot choose but *amaze* him!”

“If he be not amazèd, he will be *mocked*; if he *be* amazed, he will in *every way* be mocked!”

Mistress Ford laughs. "We'll betray him finely!"  
"Against such lewdsters and their lechery, those that betray them do no treachery!"  
"The hour draws on. To the oak, *to the oak!*" cries valiant Alice Ford.

Sir Hugh Evans, disguised as a red fiend, shepherds his company of young people to the rim of a dell in the park. "*Trib, trib*, fairies!"—trip along quickly. They are all dressed as woodland sprites. "Come!—and remember your parts! Be pold, I pray you!

"Follow me into the pit!" cries the devil, "and when I give the watch-'ords, do as I pid you!"  
"Come, come! *Trib, trib!*"

## Chapter Eight At Herne's Oak

In the near-darkness, substantial Sir John Falstaff approaches a massive old tree. He wears, in accordance with the gentlewomen's whimsy, a long coat of brown leather and a quiver of arrows, and he drags a heavy chain, all in the guise of a grim local legend, Herne the Hunter.

*The Windsor bell hath struck twelve*, he thinks. *The minute draws on! May the hot-blooded gods now assist me!*

Loath to don the headpiece with antlers, provided by Mistress Quickly, he muses: *Remember, Jove, when thou wast a bull for thy Europa? Love set on thy horns!—oh, powerful love!—that in some respects makes a beast of a man, in some other, a man a beast! You were also, Jupiter, a swan for the love of Leda! Oh, omnipotent love!—how near the god drew to the complexion of a goose! A fault done first in the form of a beast, O Jove—a beastly fault! And then another fault, in the semblance of a fowl! Think on't, Jove—a foul fault!*

*When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?* He sighs, and puts on the horns. *As for me, here I am, a Windsor stag—and the fattest, I think, i' the forest! Send me a cool rutting-time, Jove, or who can blame me for pissing my tallow?*

He hears footsteps in the dark. *Who comes here?* He perceives a woman walking toward him. "My doe?"

"Sir John!" calls Mistress Ford softly, "art thou there, my dear?—my male *deer?*"

"My doe with the black scut!"—tail, cries Falstaff eagerly. "Let the sky *thunder* to the love-tune of 'Greensleeves,' *rain* sweet *yams!* Let it *hail* kissing comfits, and *snow* eringoes!" Both sweets are thought to arouse passion. "Let there come a *tempest* of provocation!—I will shelter me *here!*"

Alice informs him. "Mistress Page is come with me, sweet heart."

Falstaff is surprised—but greedily delighted: *Divide me like a bribèd buck: to each a haunch!* he thinks, as if he were an ill-gotten hart whose its rump is to be shared. *I will keep my sides to myself, my shoulders for the fellow of this walk*—the game warden. *And my horns I bequeath your husbands!*

He asks boldly, "Am I a *woodman?* Speak I like Herne the *Hunter?*" He has no bow, he realizes; he rattles the arrows before the double display of pulchritude. "Why, now is Cupid a child of *conscience*: he makes restitution!" Falstaff smiles. "As I am a *true* spirit, welcome!"

But then a clamor arises nearby—and dim figures glide ominously toward them from the surrounding woods.

"*Alas, what noise?*" cries Meg.

"Heaven forgive our *sins!*" cries Alice.

"What should *this* be?" mutters Sir John.

The gentlewomen run. "*Away, away!*"

Falstaff backs toward the oak and peers around—and sees the approach of many tiny flames bobbing toward him. *I think the Devil will not have me damned, lest the oil that's in me should set*



*Hell on fire! Else he would never cross me* thus! —with mere warnings, he hopes.

In the flickering light, he can now discern full-sized forms: a red devil, a hobgoblin, and two fairies. Gathering in a circle around them are five smaller fairies, all crowned with candles, and carrying lighted tapers.

The larger nymph—considerably larger—addresses the others: “*Fairies*, black, grey, green, and white,” cries masked Mistress Quickly, “you moonshine revellers and shades of night, you orphan heirs of fixed destiny, attend your *office* and your *quality!*” She frowns; some are still giggling.

“Crier *Hobgoblin*, make the fairy *oyez!*”—call the roll and issue orders, she tells the thin and sinister figure.

“Elves, listen for your names!” growls Pistol. “*Silence*, you airy toys!

“*Cricket*, to Windsor chimneys shalt *thou* leap! Where fires thou find’st unranked, and hearths unswept, there pinch the maids as *blue* as *bilberry!* Our radiant queen hates sluts and sluttery!” The young Fairy Queen smiles, with a delicately proper nod.

- The old knight moans, trembling; conversing with such spirits is believed to be lethal. *They are fairies!—he that speaks to them shall die!* He decides to feign death instead. *I’ll blink and cough! No man their works must eye!* He lies down, rolls onto one side, and covers his face with his hands.

“Where’s *Bede?*” demands Hobgoblin. A fairy steps forward. “Go you—and where you find a maid that *sleeps* ere she has thrice her *prayers* said, sleep she as sound as careless infancy, raise up the organs of her *fantasy!*”

“And those as sleep, and think not on their *sins*,” he scowls, “*pinch* them, arms, legs, backs, shoulders, sides and shins!”

Behind him, Falstaff shivers.

The plump fairy now issues kindlier commands:

“About, *about!* Search Windsor Castle, elves, within and out!

Strew *good luck*, young ones, in every sacred room,

That it may stand till the perpetual doom

In state as *wholesome* as in state ’tis *fit*,

Worthy the owner!—and the owner it!” Queen Elizabeth is the owner.

The fairy adds a special charge, regarding the highest chivalric honor for knights of the realm, the Order of the Garter—and its famous motto, *Evil unto him who evil thinks*:

“The several chairs of one Order look you scour

With juice of balm and every precious flower!

Each fair instalment coat, and the several crests

With loyal blazon evermore be blest!

And nightly, meadow-fairies, look you sing,

Like the garter’s compass, in a *ring!*

The expressure that it bears, *green* let it be,

More fertile fresh than all the field to see!

And ‘*Honi soit qui mal y pense*’ write

In emerald tufts, flowers purple, blue and white!

Let sapphire, pearl, and rich embroidery,

Buckle below fair knighthood’s bending knee—

Fairies, use *flowers* for *their* charactery!

“Away! Disperse!

“*But*,” she cries, halting them, “till ’tis one o’clock, our dance of custom, round about the oak of Herne the Hunter, let us not forget!”

“Pray you, lock hand in hand,” says the red devil, “yourselves in order set; and many *glow-worms* shall our lanterns be, to guide our measure round about the tree!”

The fairies clasp hands.

“But, stay!” cries Hugh—apparently alarmed. “I smell a *man* of middle-earth!”

Falstaff groans. *Heavens defend me from that Welsh fairy, lest he transform me to a piece of cheese!*

Pistol nudges the cowering knight with a foot. “*Vile worm, thou wast nearly o’erlookèd even in thy birth!*”

The largest fairy suggests a test: “With trial-fire touch his finger end!” she says. “If he be *chaste*, the flame will back descend, and turn him to no pain—but if he *start*, it is the flesh of a *corrupted heart!*”

Pistol motions the light-bearers forward. “*A trial, come!*” He approaches the knight and kneels beside him.

“Come, will this wood take *fire?*” wonders the demon, as the flame of Pistol’s candle nears Falstaff’s hand.

“*Ow, ow, ow!*” cries the knight, sitting up suddenly, eyes squeezed shut, and blowing on the black-smudged tips of his fingers.

“*Corrupt, corrupt, and tainted in desire!*” cries Mistress Quickly. “*About him, fairies! Sing a scornful rhyme!—and, as you trip, still pinch him to your time!*”

The sprites, large and small, dance around Sir John, who lies, eyes still tightly closed, sprawled on the oak’s dead leaves. They sing tauntingly, as little hands dart forward, tiny fingers pinching.

*“Fie on sinful fantasy!  
Fie on lust and luxury!  
Lust is but a bloody fire,  
Kindled with unchaste desire,  
Fed in heart, whose flames aspire,  
As thoughts do blow them higher and higher!”*

As the fairies prance, holding aloft their tallow tapers, three are drawn by the hand from the shadowy circle: Doctor Caius steals away, pulling one in green; Master Slender tugs one in white; and Master Fenton makes off with another.

*“Pinch him, fairies, mutually!—  
Pinch him for his villainy!  
Pinch him, and burn him, and turn him about,  
Till candles and starlight and moonshine be out!”*

And then all are startled by the nearby blare of a hunter’s brass horn. At the sound, harsh in the night, the fairies flutter from the dell up into the woods beyond. As the children run away, Falstaff sits up and looks around. He rises as Margaret and Alice walk down the slope toward him.

Their husbands have come, too—with lanterns now open and bright.

“Nay, do not *fly!*” cries George, as Falstaff gapes around him. “I think we have *watchèd* you now!”—stationed a watch. Smiling people of the town are emerging in a throng from the forest above, where they have witnessed the sight. All begin to chat—and laugh.

Page frowns at the knight. “Will none but *hernia hunter* serve your turn?”

“I pray you, come, *hold up* the jest no *higher!*” laughs Margaret, as Falstaff lifts the headpiece, to take off the leather strap with buck’s horns attached. “Good Sir John, how like you *Windsor wives now?*” She points to the antlers. “See you these, husband? Do not these fair yokes”—dual symbols of lust—“become the *forest* better than the town?”

“Now, sir—who’s a cuckold *now?*” demands Frank. Addressing the false mustache held up in his left hand, he mocks the knight’s words: “*Master Brook, Falstaff’s a knave, a cuckoldly knave!* Here are his *horns*, Master Brook!

“And, Master Brook, he hath enjoyed nothing of *Ford’s* but his *buck-basket*, his *bonnet*, and

twenty pounds of *money!*—which must be *repaid* to Master Brook,” notes Ford. “His *horses* are arrested for it, Master Brook,” he adds, having taken steps to recover his gold.

Alice sighs with theatrical sorrow. “Sir *John*, we have had *ill luck!*—we could never *meet!* I will never take you for my *love* again—but I will always count you my *deer!*”

Falstaff watches as the folks from Windsor come closer, their fairy-like children beside them, laughing and pointing. “I do begin to perceive that I am made an ass,” he says dryly.

Ford laughs. “Aye—and an *ox* too! The proofs of *both* are extant!”

Slowly, Sir John smiles. “And these are not *fairies?* I was three or four times in the *thought* they were not fairies—and yet the guiltiness of my mind, the sudden surprise of my powers, drove the grossness of the foppery into a *received belief*—in despite of the teeth of all rhyme and *reason*—that they *were* fairies!” he confesses. “See now how wit may be made a Jack-a-Lent, when ’tis upon ill employment!” he says, a bit sheepishly.

Evans has removed his devilish mask and pointed tail. “Sir John Falstaff, serve *Got*, and leave your desires; then *fairies* will not *pinse* you!”

“Well said, fairy Hugh!” says Ford.

The good pastor turns to Ford. “And leave your *jealousies*, too, I pray you.”

Frank promises, “I will never mistrust my wife again—till *thou* art able to woo her *in good English!*”

Falstaff, now having reached full, if unwelcome, sobriety, is distraught. “Have I laid my brain in the sun and *dried* it, that it wants matter to prevent so gross o’erreaching as *this?* Am I *ridden like a Welsh goat*, too?—shall I have a coxcomb of *fleece?* ’Tis time I were *choked*—with a piece of toasted *cheese!*”

Hugh shakes his head, regarding the delicacy: “Seese is not good to give to *putter*—your *nelly* is all putter!”

“‘Seese’ and ‘putter!’” moans Falstaff. “Have I lived to stand under the taunt of one that makes *fritters* of English?” He wags his head sadly. “This is enough to be the decay of lust and late-walking”—carousing—“through the realm!”

Margaret is highly indignant. “Why, Sir John, do you think that, even if we had pulled *Virtue* out of our hearts by the head and shoulders, and had given ourselves, without scruple, to *Hell*, that even the *Devil* could have made *you* our delight?”

“What?” laughs Frank, “a *hodge-pudding?* A *bag of flax?*”

“A *puffed* man!” says Meg.

“Old, cold, and of withered, intolerable *entrails!*” says her husband.

“And one that is as *slanderous* as *Satan!*” adds Ford.

“And as *poor* as *Job!*” says Page.

“And as *wicked* as *Lot’s wife!*” adds Meg—no one could be more *salty*.

Even Hugh joins in: “And given to *fornications*, and to *taverns*, and sack, and wine, and metheglins, and to drinkings and *swearings* and *starrings*, *pribbles* and *prabbles!*”

Falstaff regards them glumly. “Well, you have the start on me; I am your *theme*. I am dejected at not being able to answer this Welsh *flannel*—but *ignorance itself* is a-plummet o’er me.” He spreads his arms in surrender. “Use me as you will!”

“Marry, sir, we’ll bring you to Windsor, to one *Master Brook*,” says Frank, “whom you have cozened out of money, for whom you would have been a pander! Over and above what you have suffered, I think repaying that money will be a biting affliction!”

“Yet be *cheerful*, knight!” says George. “Thou shalt *eat a posset*”—a sweet dessert made with wine—“tonight at *my house*—where I will desire thee to laugh at my *wife*, who now laughs at *thee!*” He looks at her, triumphant. “Tell her that *Master Slender* hath *married her daughter!*”

Thinks Mistress Page, *Doctors doubt* that! *If Anne Page be my daughter, by this time she is Doctor Caius’s wife!*

“*Who-ah, ho!*” cries Abraham Slender, pushing his way through the circle around the lanterns. “*Ho! Father Page!*”

Page smiles. "Son, how now! How now, son?—have you dispatched?"

"*Dispatchèd!* I'll make the best in *Glou'ster* know of't!—would I were *hanged* else!"

George frowns. "Know of *what*, son?"

"I came yonder at Eton to marry Mistress Anne Page—and she's a *great lubberly boy!*

"If I had not been i' the church, I would have *swinged* him, or he should have *swinged me!* If I did not think it had been Anne Page, would I might never stir!—but 'twas the postmaster's *boy!*"

Cries George, "Upon my *life*, then *you took the wrong one!*"

"What need you tell me *that?* I think *so!*—when I took a boy for a *girl!*

"If I had been *married* to him, for all he was in woman's *apparel* I would not have *had* him!"

George is furious. "Why, this is *your own* folly! Did not I tell you how you should know my daughter by her garments?"

"I went to *her in white!*—and cried '*Budge it,*' and she cried '*Mum,*' as Anne and I had appointed, and yet it was *not* Anne, but *the postmaster's boy!*"

Margaret, laughing, tells her husband, "Good George, be not angry! I *knew* of your purpose!—turned my daughter into *green!* And, indeed, she is now with the *doctor* at the deanery—and there *married!*"

The physician himself arrives at that moment, and he heads toward the lights at the center of the crowd.

"*Vere is Mistress Page?*" he demands angrily. "By *Gar*, I am *cozened!*—I ha' married *un garçon*, a *boy*; *un paysan*, by *Gar*—a *boy!* It is *not* Anne Page! By *Gar*, I am *cozened!*"

Meg is appalled. "Why, did you take her in *green?*"

"*Aye*, by *Gar!*—and 'tis a *boy!*" cries Caius. "By *Gar*, I'll *raise all Windsor!*"

Frank Ford peers around the ring of conspirators. "This is strange! Who hath got the *right* Anne?"

"My heart misgives me," moans George, looking over the observers' heads. "Here comes Master Fenton!"

And indeed, that nobleman strides to the front—with Anne on his arm.

"How now, Master Fenton?" demands Page.

"*Pardon*, good father!" says the blushing Anne, curtsying. "Good my mother, *pardon!*"

George frowns. "Now, mistress, how chance you went not with Master *Slender?*"

Margaret glares. "Why went you not with Master *Doctor*, maid?"

But Fenton raises a palm politely. "You do distress her! Hear the truth of it!

"*You* would have married her most *shamefully*, where there was no proportion held in *love!*

"The truth is, she and I, long since contracted, are now so sure"—securely united—"that nothing can dissolve us!

"The offence is *holy* that she hath committed," the proud young husband insists, "and this deceit loses the name of craft, of disobedience, or 'unduteous' title, since therein she doth vitiate and shun the thousand *irreligious*, *cursèd* hours which forcèd marriage would have brought upon her!"

The bride and groom display their wedding rings.

"Stand not amazèd; there is no remedy," Frank tells the others. "In *love*, the *heavens* themselves do guide the state: money buys lands—but *wives* are sold by *Fate!*"

Falstaff looks up and cries out, to Cupid: "Though you have ta'en a special stand to *strike* at me, I am glad that your arrow hath *glancèd off!*"

George Page can only shrug. "Well, what remedy? Fenton, *heaven give thee joy!* What cannot be eschewed must be *embraced!*" He shakes the hand of his son-in-law, then kisses his daughter's cheek.

And now Falstaff can laugh. "When *night-dogs* run, all *sorts* of deer are chased!"

Mistress Page comes to the new couple. "Well, I will muse no further! Master Fenton, heaven give you many, many merry days!

“Good husband, let us every one go home, and laugh this sport o’er by a *country* fire!—*Sir John and all!*”

“Let it be so!” cries Ford, finally happy.

And as they all walk up the banks and head for the Pages’ house, Frank forgives the debt of gold; he has seen the fat knight’s poor nags.

He claps Falstaff jovially on the back. “Sir John, to Master Brook you yet shall *hold your word,*” he says mischievously, “for he tonight *shall* lie with Mistress Ford!”