

The Merry Wives of Windsor: Falstaff and the Laundry Basket
Act III, scene 3 (excerpt)

Mistresses Ford and Page are at Ford's house making preparations to deceive Falstaff into getting into the buck-basket (laundry basket). They know he's a coward and use Master Ford's jealousy to lure him into the basket.

Enter MISTRESS FORD and MISTRESS PAGE. Mistress Ford calls for her two servants, John and Robert.

MISTRESS FORD

What, John! What, Robert!

MISTRESS PAGE

Quickly, quickly! Is the buck-basket –

MISTRESS FORD

I warrant. What, Robin, I say!

Enter Servants with a basket

MISTRESS PAGE

Come, come, come.

MISTRESS FORD

Here, set it down.

MISTRESS PAGE

Give your men the charge; we must be brief.

MISTRESS FORD

Marry, as I told you before, John and Robert, be ready here hard by in the brew-house: and when I suddenly call you, come forth 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 in Datchet Mead, and there empty it in the muddy ditch close by the Thames side. Be gone, and come when you are called.

Exeunt Servants, Enter ROBIN

...

ROBIN

My master, Sir John, is come in at your back door, Mistress Ford, and requests your company.

...

MISTRESS FORD

Do so. Go tell thy master I am alone.

Exit ROBIN

Mistress Page, remember you your cue.

MISTRESS PAGE

I warrant thee; if I do not act it, hiss me.

Exit

MISTRESS FORD

Go to, then: we'll use this unwholesome humidity, this gross watery pumpkin; we'll teach him to know turtles from jays.

Enter FALSTAFF

FALSTAFF

Have I caught thee, my heavenly jewel? Why, now let me die, for I have lived long enough: this is the period of my ambition. O this blessed hour!

MISTRESS FORD

O sweet Sir John!

FALSTAFF

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.

...

MISTRESS FORD

Do not betray me, sir. I fear you love Mistress Page.

FALSTAFF

Thou mightst as well say I love to walk by the counter-gate, which is as hateful to me as the reek of a lime-kiln.

...

Enter ROBIN

ROBIN

Mistress Ford, Mistress Ford! here's Mistress Page at the door, sweating and blowing and looking wildly, and would needs speak with you presently.

FALSTAFF

She shall not see me: I will ensconce me behind the arras.

MISTRESS FORD

Pray you, do so: she's a very tattling woman.

FALSTAFF hides himself

Re-enter MISTRESS PAGE and ROBIN

What's the matter? How now!

MISTRESS PAGE

O Mistress Ford, what have you done? You're shamed, you're overthrown, you're undone for ever!

MISTRESS FORD

What's the matter, good Mistress Page?

...

MISTRESS PAGE

Your husband's coming hither, woman, 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.

MISTRESS FORD

'Tis not so, I hope.

MISTRESS PAGE

Pray heaven it be not so, ... 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 for ever.

MISTRESS FORD

What shall I do? 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.

MISTRESS PAGE

Look, here is a basket: if he be of any reasonable stature, he may creep in here; and throw foul linen upon him, as if it were going to bucking; or – it is whiting-time – send him by your two men to Datchet Mead.

MISTRESS FORD

He's too big to go in there. What shall I do?

FALSTAFF

[Coming forward] Let me see't, let me see't, O, let me see't! I'll in, I'll in. Follow your friend's counsel. I'll in.

MISTRESS PAGE

What, Sir John Falstaff! Are these your letters, knight?

FALSTAFF

I love thee. Help me away. Let me creep in here. I'll never –

Gets into the basket; they cover him with foul linen

MISTRESS PAGE

Help to cover your master, boy. Call your men, Mistress Ford. You dissembling knight!

MISTRESS FORD

What, John! Robert! John!

Exit ROBIN

Re-enter Servants

Go take up these clothes here quickly. Where's the cowl-staff? Look, how you drumble! Carry them to the laundress in Datchet Mead; quickly, come.

Enter FORD, PAGE, DOCTOR CAIUS and SIR HUGH EVANS

FORD

Pray you, come near: if I suspect without cause, why then make sport at me; then let me be your jest; I deserve it. How now! Whither bear you this?

SERVANT

To the laundress, forsooth.

MISTRESS FORD

Why, what have you to do whither they bear it? You were best meddle with buck-washing.

FORD

Buck! I would I could wash myself of the buck! Buck, buck, buck! Ay, buck; I warrant you, buck; and of the season too, it shall appear.

Exeunt Servants with the basket

Gentlemen, I have dreamed to-night; I'll tell you my dream. Here, here, here be my keys: ascend my chambers; search, seek, find out. I'll warrant we'll unkennel the fox. Let me stop this way first.

Locking the door

So, now escape!

...

MISTRESS PAGE

Is there not a double excellency in this?

MISTRESS FORD

I know not which pleases me better, that my husband is deceived, or Sir John.

MISTRESS PAGE

What a taking was he in when your husband asked who was in the basket!

MISTRESS FORD

I am half afraid he will have need of washing; so throwing him into the water will do him a benefit....