

I PURITANI

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The English civil war in the 1640s divided the land between the supporters of Parliament under Oliver Cromwell (the Roundheads) and the Royalists faithful to the Stuart monarchy (the Cavaliers). The divisions were also religious with the Puritans on the Parliamentary side against the monarchists who were Episcopalian or even, in the case of the French queen, Roman Catholic.

Charles has been beheaded and the Queen, Henrietta, has escaped in disguise.

Act I, Scene 1: Plymouth, a Puritan stronghold, is threatened by siege from the Royalist troops. Offstage voices herald the wedding day of Elvira, daughter of Lord Walton, the fortress's commander. Now Sir Richard Forth comes in lamenting that his promised bride, Elvira, loves another man - a Stuart partisan ("Ah, per sempre, io ti perdei"). Her father has no desire to force her to marry against her will, it seems, and Richard's friend Sir Bruno urges him to devote his life to leading the Parliamentary forces.

Act I, Scene 2: Elvira tells her uncle Sir George that she would rather die than marry Sir Richard ("Sai come arde"). Her uncle reassures her, saying he has persuaded her father to allow the marriage with her lover, Lord Arthur Talbot. Although he is an enemy sworn to the Monarchist cause, he is heralded as he enters the castle keep ("A quel suono").

ACT I, Scene 2: Everyone gathers for the wedding celebration and Lord Arthur greets his bride ("A te, o cara"). He learns that Henrietta, the widow of King Charles I, is now a prisoner in the castle and soon to be taken to London for trial. Alone with her, Arthur offers to save her even if this means his death. Elvira returns with her bridal veil ("Son vergin vezzosa"); capriciously she places the veil over Henrietta's head.

When they are alone again, Arthur tells Henrietta that the veil will provide the perfect disguise to escape from the fortress. As they are about to leave, however, Sir Richard bars the way, determined to kill his rival. Henrietta separates them and reveals her identity. Richard lets them flee, knowing this will ruin Arthur. When the others return for the wedding, Sir Richard reveals Arthur's escape with Henrietta. As soldiers rush off in pursuit, Elvira believes herself betrayed and is beset by madness.

Act II: The townsfolk mourn the sadness of Elvira's mental breakdown. Her uncle, Sir George, relates that she continues to pine for Arthur. Sir Richard arrives to announce that Arthur has been condemned to death by Parliament. The Puritans depart.

Now Elvira wanders in still reliving her happy past ("Qui la voce"). In her madness she mistakes Richard for Arthur and dreams of her wedding ("Vien, diletto"). When she goes, Sir George tries to get Richard to save Arthur. At first indignant, Richard is finally moved to help Elvira, and the two men unite in patriotism: if Arthur returns as a friend, he shall live - if as an enemy in arms, he shall die ("Suoni la tromba").

Act III: In Elvira's garden, Arthur reveals that love for her has brought him back to Plymouth. He overhears her sing his old love song ("A una fonte afflitto") and is torn between his love and his loyalty to the Stuarts. Elvira herself appears and Arthur assures her that she is his only love ("Vieni fra queste braccia"). But the soldiers rush in to arrest Arthur.

At the crucial moment a diplomat arrives with the news that the Parliamentary faction has triumphed and the Royalists, including Sir Arthur, are all pardoned. The shock of this restores Elvira to her senses, and she embraces Arthur. Their happiness is assured.