

LE SONGE D'UNE NUIT D'ETE

Music by Ambroise Thomas

Libretto by Rosier & Leuven

First Performance: Opéra-Comique, Paris, April 20, 1850

Act I

The anteroom of the Siren Tavern, London, on the banks of the Thames

A stormy night, following a performance at the Globe.

Jeremy, Nelly and servants are preparing for a party to honor Shakespeare. Falstaff, who is the host, arrives to supervise the preparations (*Allons que tout s'apprête*). There ensues a parade of meats, wines and other delicacies for Falstaff's approval.

The door opens, and two women (Elizabeth and Olivia) enter to escape a raging storm. They attended that evening's performance at the Globe - incognito - but in the confusion of the storm, they lost their two escorts. Elizabeth has a fascination with Shakespeare, but Olivia is fearful and questions the propriety of venturing out unprotected. Elizabeth reassures her with a song about the courage of Richard the Lion-hearted during the Crusades. Olivia is also panicked because she has missed an assignation with her fiance, Latimer. She clutches the bouquet he had given her that morning; she had promised to return a flower from the bouquet to "incense his night and enchant his dreams".

They prepare to leave, as Falstaff enters. The ladies veil themselves, so as to not be identified. The Queen recognizes Falstaff as her Officer of the Guards at the Royal Park at Richmond. Falstaff flirts with the women, trying to guess their identities. He brags of his position and reveals he keeps the best game for himself, giving the Queen only "second best". Thinking he is good for safe passage back to the castle, Elizabeth and Olivia agree to accompany him to his residence in Richmond, but before they can leave, Shakespeare and Latimer enter with a crowd of actors, actresses and admirers. Falstaff hides the ladies in a side room, for fear someone else will pick them up.

The chorus enters the banquet room, leaving Shakespeare and Latimer alone. The latter is beside himself with jealousy since Olivia failed to meet him, as planned (*Son image si chère*). Shakespeare insists he must stay at the party, but Latimer resists. Just then, Falstaff enters with the Queen and Olivia, still masked. When Olivia sees Latimer, she nearly faints, dropping her bouquet; Falstaff picks it up and hides it in his vest, thinking it was offered to him as a symbol of Olivia's affection. Latimer notes the resemblance of the veiled woman to his Olivia.

Now Shakespeare reiterates that no one can leave the party, and he makes his point by locking the front door and pocketing the key. Nelly takes Olivia back to the side room to recover her composure. Falstaff and Latimer rejoin the party in the banquet room, leaving Shakespeare and Elizabeth alone. He is as fascinated with her, as she with him. He tries to remove her veil, but she warns that such action would be a death sentence for him. He is ever more curious as she recounts the details of his life, but is less happy when she chides him for his debauched lifestyle. He begins to drink heavily (*Je trouve*

au fond du verre), and eventually falls into a stupor. Elizabeth decries the waste of his genius (Le voir ainsi! mon âme en est brisée).

The drunken party goes burst into the room, angry that Jeremy will not serve more wine. When they find the outside door locked, they break it down, throwing glasses, plates and furniture into the river. Jeremy begs Latimer to intervene, as the commotion will draw the attention of the constable. The tavern could be permanently closed for hosting a rowdy party after curfew. Falstaff opines that all will leave if they are given wine for the trip home. The servants begin passing out bottles, and Elizabeth attaches a note to the bottle destined for Falstaff. It is an order from the Sheriff, requiring Falstaff bring Shakespeare back with him, to Richmond. The rabble leave, followed by Falstaff, Elizabeth, Olivia, and four men carrying Shakespeare. Latimer trails behind, curious about the identity of Falstaff's ladies.

Act II

The Park at Richmond - the same night

There is Gothic pavilion at one side, and the Thames in the background.

After a Guard's chorus, Falstaff enters and sings about how frightening the Park can be at night.

When the Guards leave, Latimer approaches Falstaff. Still curious about the women, Falstaff assures him that they are his mistresses, and even shows Latimer the bouquet one of the women has given him. Latimer recognizes it as the same he gave Olivia, and challenges Falstaff to duel. Olivia enters from the pavilion, and assures Latimer she is faithful, but she will not explain all the events of the evening. She begs him to leave, to avoid further trouble. Latimer agrees, but hides to observe further.

Shakespeare awakens, and is unsure where he is or whether he is dreaming (Où suis-je? Est-ce un prestige?). He imagines he is Romeo, and when Elizabeth enters (still veiled), he believes she is Juliette. She, instead, tells him she is his "creative genius" who now comes to bring him to his senses. Shakespeare becomes more enamored as Elizabeth speaks, and pushes her to admit that she loves him as well (Ta voix me donne un nouvel être). Confused, Elizabeth escapes and Olivia rushes in to take her place, protecting the honor of the Queen.

At this moment, Latimer returns, finding Shakespeare on his knees before Olivia. Latimer demands satisfaction, and when Olivia tries to explain, Latimer pushes her to the ground. Elizabeth, now unveiled, rushes in to protect Olivia. Hearing Elizabeth's voice, Shakespeare realizes that his unknown love is the Queen. Elizabeth commands him to remain silent, but at this moment, Latimer returns with swords. Shakespeare defends himself, and appears to mortally wound Latimer. As guards approach from all directions, Shakespeare flees.

Act III

A reception hall in Whitehall Palace, London

The following day

A royal celebration has been planned to honor Shakespeare. Elizabeth regrets she cannot indulge her love for Shakespeare, because of her position as queen (*Malgré l'éclat qui m'environne*). Olivia rushes in, anxious to know whether Latimer is still alive. Falstaff is summoned to give account. In a clever trio, the Queen first asks him to write while she dictates the hanging order for an unknown officer of the Guards, who keeps the best game for himself, giving the queen the leftovers. Then, citing his legendary honesty, she asks what happened at Richmond the previous night. At first, he tries to maintain that nothing took place (*Les cerfs ont brame*), but when he realizes the ladies know about the duel, he reveals that Latimer slipped on the grass, and is unharmed. Believing Latimer dead, Shakespeare jumped the wall of the Park, fell into the Thames, and had to be rescued from the river by boatmen, who took him back to his quarters. In the end, the Queen tells him to go back to his previous story, i.e. nothing happened, or else he will be hanged at the same time as the disloyal officer. Falstaff comments to himself that only one rope will be necessary.

Olivia is overjoyed that Latimer is safe and well (*Le ciel exauce ma prière*). He then enters, denouncing Olivia for her "affair" with Shakespeare. Despite her entreaties, he demands her engagement ring be returned.

Elizabeth assures Olivia that things will improve, and warns that she must support the Queen's position that the previous night "did not happen" . As Olivia leaves, Shakespeare enters. He tries to get Elizabeth to own up to their previous encounter, but she insists he must be dreaming (*C'est un rêve*). She then calls Olivia, who supports Elizabeth's story under questions from Shakespeare. He begins to doubt his sanity (*Un songe! Eh quoi! c'était un songe?*), especially when Falstaff also has no knowledge of the night before. The final blow is when he sees Latimer cross the stage, in the background.

Shakespeare is thoroughly depressed, and tells Falstaff he has nothing to live for. When the Queen enters, Shakespeare tells her he must die because his "creative genius" is dead. She tries to reassure him, but eventually realizes she must reveal the truth. She tells him his "genius" is before his eyes - but warns him that it must always remain their secret. She will be his protectress and "amie", but she must also be his Queen.

Delighted with this revelation - and that he has not lost his mind - Shakespeare agrees. As the court gathers to honor Shakespeare, Latimer finds Olivia and begs her forgiveness, for he now knows the whole truth. The Queen presents Shakespeare to the assemblage, exhorting him to make the kings and warriors of his homeland live again in his writings. Falstaff asks Shakespeare to make him immortal by casting him as a comedic hero in his works. Overcome with happiness, Shakespeare agrees.