

The Merchant of Venice

by William Shakespeare

Presented by Paul W. Collins

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Chapter One World Weary

Venice, a powerful Mediterranean sovereignty and long a major center of east-west shipping, has a stable, reliable government, and it supports a thriving community of traders and merchants—including many foreigners—involved in international commerce. Now, as the 16th century comes to an end, its sophisticated nobility enjoys great affluence and luxury.

The island city's artistic achievement is ascending, and the wide Rialto—a splendid new marble bridge arching over the city's central Grand Canal, its crowded walk flanked by shops and other businesses—is renowned as a primary location for the lively exchange of intelligence—and of rumor.

But Venice, “Queen of the Seas” for one hundred years, is no longer in its prime. In the slow waning of heady success, some of its magnates are troubled: their many enterprises, still highly profitable, have become more diverse and less hazardous—and less exciting.

“In sooth, I know not *why* I am so solemn,” sighs Antonio, a wealthy but somewhat stiff nobleman engaged in shipping ventures, as he strolls this bright morning with two lively young fops, both aspiring in his lucrative vocation. “It wearies me; you say it wearies you. But how I caught it, found it, or came by it, what stuff ’tis made of, whereof it is born, I am to learn—and such a want-wit graveness makes of me that I have much ado to know myself!”

“Your mind is tossing on the *ocean*,” Salerio suggests, as they walk in the sunshine, “where your argosies sail like signiors and rich burghers upon the flood—a portly pageant, as it were, of the sea, overpeering the petty traffickers that curtsy to them, doing them reverence as they fly by them with their woven wings!”

Solanio concurs. “Believe me, sir, had *I* such ventures forth, the better part of my affections would be with my hopes abroad! I should ever be plucking blades of grass to learn where sits the wind!—peering in maps for ports and piers and roads!—and every object that might make me fear misfortune to my ventures, out of doubt would make me sad!”

As usual, Salerio has more to say. “*My* wind, cooling my broth, would blow me to an ague when I thought what harm a wind too *great* might do at sea! I should not see the sandy hour-glass run but that I should think of shallows and of flats—and see my wealthy *Andrew* docked in *sand*, vailing her high-top lower than her ribs, listing into *burial*!

“Could I go to church and see the holy edifice of stone and not bethink me straight of *dangerous rocks*?—which but *touching* my gentle vessel's side would scatter all her spices on the stream, enrobe the roaring waters with my silks! In a word, but even now worth *this*”—he spreads his hands wide, “and now—” he snaps his fingers—“worth *nothing*!”

“Shall I have thought to think on this, yet *lack* the thought that such a thing bechanced would make me *worry*? Tell not *me*!—*I know*!” he asserts to Solanio. “Antonio is sad to think upon his merchandise!”

But Antonio shakes his head. “Believe me, no,” he assures them. “I thank my fortune for it, my ventures are not in one ship's bottom trusted, nor to one place; nor is my whole estate upon the fortune of this present *year*. Therefore my merchandise makes me not sad.”

Solanio grins. “Why then you are in *love*!”

“*Fie, fie!*” laughs Antonio, a staid bachelor well past fifty.

“Not in love neither?” says Solanio. The wag considers. “Then let us say you are sad because you are *not merry*!—and ’twere as easy for you to laugh and leap and say you *are* merry, because you are *not sad*!”

Seeing Antonio smile slightly, the young man goes on. “Now, by two-headed Janus, Nature hath framed strange fellows in her time: some that will evermore peep through their eyes and *laugh like parrots* at a *bag-piper*; and others of such *vinegar* aspect that they'll not show their teeth in way of smile though *Nestor* swear the jest be laughable!”

And now, as the young men have expected, they see Antonio's chief associate striding toward them, with two more gentlemen of their circle.

"Here come Bassanio, our most noble kinsman, and Gratiano and Lorenzo. Fare ye well! We leave you now with better company!"

"I would have stayed till I had *made* you merry," says Salerio courteously, "if worthier friends had not prevented me!"

"*Your* worth is very dear in my regard," says Antonio kindly. "I take it your own business calls you on, and you embrace the occasion to depart."

"Good morrow, my good lords!" Salerio tells the older men as they approach.

"Good signiors both, *when shall we laugh?*" chides Bassanio—as if he hadn't spoken with them just yesterday. "Say *when!* You grow exceeding distant! Must it be so?" Turning away from Antonio's view, he winks.

"We'll make our leisures to attend on yours," says Salerio, playing along. He and Solanio bow as they leave.

Says handsome Lorenzo, a poetic young soul, and a lover of music, "My Lord Bassanio, since you have found Antonio, we two will leave you. But at dinner-time, I pray you, have in mind where we must meet."

"I will not fail you," says Bassanio, tall and distinguished-looking at thirty. The prosperous gentlemen all intend to surprise Antonio, their generous patron, with some lighthearted revelries at a supper this very evening.

Gratiano—impulsive and frank at twenty-seven—notes their friend's persisting dejection. "You look not well, Signior Antonio; you have too much reflected upon the world! They *lose* it that do buy it with too much *care!*" he cautions the older man, clearly concerned. "Believe me, you are marvellously *changed.*"

Antonio sighs. "I hold the world as but a *stage*, Gratiano, a world where every man must play a part—and mine a sad one."

"Let *me* play the *fool!*" says Gratiano. "From *mirth and laughter* let old wrinkles come, and let my *liver* rather heat with wine than my *heart* cool with mortifying groans! Why should a man whose blood is *warm* within—who is ripe for courting—"sit like his *grandsire* cut in alabaster?—*sleep* when he wakes, and creep into a jaundice by being *peevish!*"

"I tell thee what, Antonio—I love thee, and 'tis my love that speaks—there is a sort of men whose visages do green in mantle like a standing pond, and do a wilful stillness entertain, with purpose to be dressed in an opinion of *wisdom*, gravity, profound thinking—as if to say, 'I am Sir *Oracle*, and when *I* ope my lips, let no dog bark!'"

"Oh, my Antonio, I do know of some therefore *reputed* wise only for saying *nothing!*—who, I am very sure, if they should *speak*, would almost *dam up* those ears which their hearing brothers would call *fools!*"

Gratiano spots Lorenzo's brief, surreptitious frown; Bassanio has urgent matters to discuss with his older friend.

"I'll tell thee more of this another time," says the garrulous Gratiano. "But fish not with this melancholy bait for the foolish minnow *opinion!* Come, good Lorenzo.

"Fare ye well a while," he tells Antonio. "I'll end my exhortation after supper," he adds.

Lorenzo grins. "Well, we will leave you then till supper-time," he tells Antonio. "I *must* be one of these same silent wisemen, for Gratiano never lets me speak!"

Gratiano laughs. "Well, keep *me* company but two years and thou shalt not know the sound of thine own tongue!"

Even Antonio smiles at that. "Farewell. *I'll* grow into a talker for this gear!"—after your effort.

Gratiano bows, "Thanks, i' faith!—for *silence* is commendable only in a neat's-tongue dried, and a maid not vendible!" He and Lorenzo stride away.

Antonio chuckles, but shakes his head in mild disapproval. *The only tongues that should be still are cured beef and a chaste woman's*. "Is *that* anything, now?"

Bassanio laughs. "Gratiano speaks more than any other man in all Venice!—an *infinite* deal of *nothing*! His *reasons* are like two grains of wheat hid in two bushels of chaff: you shall seek all day ere you find them—and when you have them, they are not worth the search!"

Antonio knows something is weighing on his companion's mind. "Well, tell me now, what *lady* is the same to whom you swore a *secret pilgrimage*? You promised to tell me of that today...."

Bassanio nods and paces, hands clasped behind him. "'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio, how much I have disabled mine estate by showing, sometimes, a more swelling part than my faint means would grant *continuance*"—spending more than he could afford. "Nor do I now make moan to be abridged from such a noble rate.

"But my *chief* care is to come fairly off from the great *debts* wherein my something-too-prodigious times hath left me engagèd."

He regards his friend. "To *you*, Antonio, I owe the *most*, in money and in love; and from your love I have a warranty to unburden all my plots and purposes how to get clear of all the debts I owe."

The older man is, as always, reassuring. "I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it; and if it stand, as you yourself still do, within the eye of honour, be assured that my purse, my person, my extremest means, lie all unlocked to your occasions!"

Bassanio continues. "In my school-days, when I had lost one shaft, I shot its fellow of the self-same flight, the self-same way, but with more-advised *watch*, to find the other forth—and by *adventuring* both, I often *found* both.

"I urge this *childhood* proof because what follows is in pure candor." He knows that honest Antonio will value a forthright request more than an artful argument. "I owe you *much*, and, like a *wilful youth*, that which I owe is *lost*. But if you please to shoot another arrow that same way which you did shoot the first, I do not doubt—as I will *watch the aim!*—either to find *both*, or to bring your latter hazard *back* again, and rest a thankful debtor for the first."

Antonio smiles warmly. "You know me well, and herein spend but *time*, entwining my love with *circumstances*; but beyond doubt you do me more wrong, now, in making *question* of my uttermost than if you had made waste of all I have!

"Then do but say to me what I should do, that to your knowledge may by me *be* done, and I am prest unto it! Therefore speak."

Bassanio describes his hope: "In Belmont is a lady richly left"—with a large inheritance. "And she is *fair!*—*ah*, fairer than that *word*—and of *wondrous virtues!*" He remembers well his first visit, more than a year ago, to her father's estate seven leagues away on the Italian mainland. "Sometimes from her *eyes* I did receive fair, speechless *messages!*

"Her name is *Portia*—nothing undervalued compared to *Cato's* daughter, *Brutus's* Portia! Nor is the wide *world* ignorant of her worth, for the four winds blow in from every coast renownèd *suitors*, and her sunny locks hang at her temples like a *golden fleece!*—which makes her home at Belmont like the Black Sea's shore, and many *Jasons* come in quest of her!

"Oh, my Antonio, had I but the means to hold a rival's place as *one* of them, I have a mind presages me such drift that I should questionless be fortunate!"

The older man nods, thinking. "Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea; neither have I money nor commodity to raise a present sum. Therefore go forth to try what my *credit* can in Venice do; that shall be racked, even to the uttermost, to furnish thee to Belmont—to fair *Portia!*"

"Go, immediately inquire, and so will I, where *money* is!

"And I no question make to *have* it, on my trust, or for my sake!"—secured, or for friendship, he says confidently.

While Venice's busy lagoon of islets off the Adriatic bristles with bright sails, and seamen scramble to dock or depart, to stow costly freight or bring it ashore, well inland lies the town of Belmont, tranquil and serene amid fertile farms with grazing cattle and sheep, and sunny, fragrant fields and orchards. Lately, though, its residents have been set astir by glimpses of strangely clad noblemen and their trains from far-off lands. The visitors are suitors, attracted by the wealthy young heiress in the hilltop mansion.

At her estate this evening, Lady Portia complains to her waiting-gentlewoman. "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a-weary of this great world!"

"You *would* be, sweet madam—if your miseries were in the same abundance as your *good* fortunes are!" says Nerissa. "And for aught *I* see, they are not as sick who *surfeit* with too much as they that *starve* with *nothing*!"

"It is no *middling* happiness therefore, to be seated in the middle: superfluity sooner comes by white hairs, but continence *lives* longer."

"Good sentences!—and well *pronounced*," says Portia dryly, of the homilies.

"They would be better if well *followed*," laughs Nerissa.

Portia sighs. "If to *do* were as easy as to *know* what were good to do, chapels had been churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces. It is a good divine that follows his own instructions! I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than *be* one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching!"

Despite her considerable wealth, the lady would live as modestly as she had before her father died but for the demands imposed by uninvited guests. "The *brain* may devise laws for the blood, but a hot temperament *leaps o'er* a cold decree; such a hare is the madness of *youth*, skipping o'er the meshes of Good Counsel, the *cripple*!"

She paces. "But then, *reasoning* is not the fashion for choosing a *husband*. Oh, me, that word '*choose*!' *I* may neither choose whom I would, nor refuse whom I dislike! Thus is the will of a living daughter curbed by the *will* of a dead father!"

"Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose *one*, nor refuse *none*?"

"Your father was ever virtuous; and holy men at their death have good inspiration," says the gentlewoman. "Therefore the lottery that he hath devised in those three chests, of gold, silver and lead—whereof who chooses *his* meaning chooses *you*—will, no doubt, never be rightly chosen by any but one who shall rightly *love*!"

"But what warmth is there in your affection towards any of these princely suitors that are already come?"

"I pray thee, name them over," says Portia, ready for amusement, "and as thou namest them, I will describe them and, according to my description, level at my affection."

"First, there is the Neapolitan prince."

"Aye, that's a *colt* indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his *horse*; and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts that he can shoe it himself! I am much afeard my lady his mother played false with a smith!"

"Then there is the Count Palatine," from Heidelberg, capital of the palatinate on the Rhine.

Portia dismisses the nobleman with a wave. "He doth nothing but frown, as if to say, 'If you will not have me, simply confirm it.' He hears merry tales and smiles not! I fear he will prove the weeping philosopher when he grows old, being so full of unmannerly sadness in his youth!"

"I had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in its mouth than to either of these! God defend me from *those* two!"

"How say you of the French lord, Monsieur Le Bon?" asks Nerissa.

Portia shakes her head. "God made him, and therefore let him *pass* for a man," she says sourly. "In truth, I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but, *he!*—why, he hath a horse better than the Neapolitan's, a better bad habit of frowning than the Count Palatine! He is *every* man and *no* man: if a throstle sing, he falls straight a-*capering*; he will fence with his own *shadow*! If I should marry *him* I would marry *twenty* husbands!"

“If he should despise me I would forgive him; for even if he loves me to *madness*, I shall never requite him!”

“What say you, then, to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?”

“You know I say *nothing* to him—for he understands not me, nor I him: he hath neither Italian, French, nor Latin, and you will come into a court and swear that I have a poor pennyworth in ‘*the Een-GLISH*.’ He is a proper man’s *picture*, but, alas, who can converse with a dumb-show? And how oddly he is *clothed!*—I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behavior everywhere!”

Nerissa looks at the high ceiling, recalling. “What think you of the Scottish lord, his neighbour?”

Portia laughs. “That he hath a neighbourly *charity* in him—for he borrowed a box on the ear from the Englishman, and swore he would pay him again when he was able!” she says wryly. “I think the Frenchman became his *surety*, and sealed under for another!”—assured a second blow. Despite frequent pledges to help the Scots fight England, the French fail to do so.

Nerissa laughs at the gibes. “How like you the young German, the Duke of Saxony’s nephew?”

“Very *vilely* in the *morning*, when he is sober—and *most* vilely in the afternoon, when he is *drunk!* When he is best, he is a little worse than a *man*, and when he is worst, he is little better than a *beast*. If the worst fall that *ever* fell, I hope I shall make shift to go without *him!*”

Nerissa raises an eyebrow. “If he should offer to choose, and choose the right casket, you would refuse to perform your father’s will if you were to refuse to accept him!”

“Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee, set a *deep* glass of Rhenish wine on a contrary casket!”—a losing one. “For even if the *devil* be within and *that* temptation without, I know he will *choose it!* I will do anything, Nerissa, ere I’ll be married to a *sponge!*”

Her list completed, Nerissa grins. “You need not fear, lady, the having *any* of these lords. They have acquainted me with their determination, which is indeed to return to their homes, and to trouble you with no more suit—unless you may be won by some *other* sort than your father’s imposition depending on the caskets....”

Portia laughs; a requirement that staves off unsuitable suitors does have *some* merit. “If I live to be as old as Sibylla I will die as chaste as Diana, unless I be obtained by the manner of my father’s will! I am glad this parcel of wooers are so reasonable, for there is not *one* among them but that I dote on his very *absence*, and I pray God grant them a fair departure!”

Nerissa thinks of a happier prospect. “Do you not remember, lady, from your father’s time, a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier who came hither in company of the Marquis of Montferrat?”

“Yes, *yes*—it was *Bassanio*,” says Portia brightly. She blushes. “As I think, he was so called...” she adds.

Nerissa nods. “True, madam. He, of all the men that ever *my* foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving a fair lady!”

“I remember him well,” Portia confesses, “and I remember him worthy of thy praise.” She turns to a serving-man who has come into the room. “How now! What news?”

“The four *strangers* seek for you, madam, to take their leave,” he says, of the deterred suitors who will soon depart from the sprawling Belmont estate, “and there is a forerunner come from a fifth, the Prince of Morocco, who brings word the prince his master will be here tonight.”

“If I could bid the fifth *welcome* with so good a heart as I can bid the other four *farewell*, I should be glad of his approach,” says Portia, with some trepidation. “If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should *shrive* me than wive me!

“Come, Nerissa.” She will go to greet the prince.

“Sirrah, go before,” she tells the man.

“Whiles we shut the gates upon one wooer, another knocks at the door!”

Chapter Two Risks Undertaken

On the Piazzetta in Venice, between St. Mark's Cathedral and the sea, Bassanio and a man who lends money at interest discuss a loan.

"Three thousand ducats," Shylock writes in a notebook. "Well." The ducats issued by Venice are well regarded in all markets; its coins, minted in gold and silver, are known for their proper weight and the metal's purity.

"Aye, sir," says Bassanio, "for three months."

"For three months; well."

"For the which, as I told you, *Antonio* shall be bound."

"Antonio shall become bound; well." He pauses, thinking.

"May you stead me? Will you pleasure me?" asks Bassanio, eager to head for Belmont. "Shall I know your answer?"

Shylock ponders. "Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound."

"Your answer to that?"

"Antonio is a good man," says Shylock, considering.

"Have you heard any imputation to the contrary?" asks Bassanio sharply.

"Oh, no!—*no, no, no!*—my meaning in saying he is a good man is to have you understand me that *he* is sufficient.

"Yet his *means* are in supposition: he hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies; I understand, moreover, from upon the Rialto, that he hath a third at Mexico, a fourth for England—and other ventures he hath, squandered abroad.

"Yet ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land-rats and *water-rats*, land-thieves and *water-thieves*. . . . I mean, *pirates!* And then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks. . . .

"The man is, notwithstanding, sufficient. Three thousand ducats. I think I may take *his* bond. . . ."

"Be assured you may!"

"I *will* be assured I may; and, so that I may be assured, I will bethink me," says Shylock.

"May I speak with Antonio?"

"If it please you to dine with us," offers Bassanio.

Shylock is Jewish, and he observes the dietary of Judaism. He thinks, sourly, *Yes, to smell pork—to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the Devil into! I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following—but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you!*

As he looks up, another man approaches. The usurer, pocketing his notes, hails the newcomer with the common greeting here: "What news on the Rialto?" Quietly, Shylock asks Bassanio, "Who is he comes here?"—although he certainly knows.

"This is Signior Antonio."

Shylock, as well aware of that prominent gentleman's hostile opinions as he is of his business prospects, privately reciprocates—and with scorn. *How like a fawning tapster he looks!*

I hate him for that he is a Christian—but more for that in low simplicity he lends out money gratis, and brings down the rate of usance here with us in Venice! If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him! He hates our sacred nation, and he rails, even there where merchants most do congregate, on me, my bargains and my well-won thrift, which he calls 'interest.' Cursèd be my tribe if I forgive him!

Bassanio is impatient. "Shylock, do you hear?"

"I am debating of my present store—and, by the near guess of my memory, I cannot instantly raise up the gross of full three thousand ducats." He shrugs. "What of that? Tubal, a wealthy

Hebrew of my tribe, will furnish me. But soft... how many months do you desire?" He nods politely to Antonio. "Rest you fair, good signior; Your Worship was the last man in our mouths."

Antonio is stern-faced. "Shylock, although *I* lend and borrow neither by giving nor taking of *surplus*, yet, to supply the ripe wants of my friend, I'll break a custom.

"Is he yet possessed how much ye would?" he asks Bassanio.

"Aye, aye," says Shylock, "three thousand ducats."

"And for three months," notes Antonio.

Shylock nods. "I had forgot; three months; you told me so. Well, then—and your *bond*; let me see...." He pauses, considering, then looks up, apparently puzzled. "But hear you: methought you said you neither lend nor borrow upon advantage." Asserting disapproval of interest-bearing transactions is an odd prelude to asking for one.

"I do never use it."

Shylock would turn tutor. "When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban's sheep—this Jacob from our holy Abra'm was, as his wise mother wrought in his behalf, the third possessor; aye, he was the third—"

Antonio interrupts. "And what of him? Did he take interest?"

"No, he did not take '*interest*'—not, directly, what your would call interest. Mark what Jacob did when Laban and himself were agreed that all the eanlings which were streaked and pied"—newborn lambs that had brown patches—"should fall as Jacob's hire"—be his pay for tending the flock.

"The ewes, being rank, in the end of autumn turned to the rams," says Shylock. "And when the work of generation between these woolly breeders was in the act, the skilful shepherd... peeled *certain* wands"—stripping bark from saplings is a metaphor for fostering forwardness in chosen male sheep. "And, in the doing of the deed of kind, he stuck *them* up before the fulsome ewes—which then conceiving did in eaning-time bear parti-coloured lambs! And those were Jacob's!"

Shylock smiles, enjoying the cleverness of Abraham's grandson, the son of Isaac; Jacob's twelve sons were progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. "This was a way to *thrive*, and he was blest!" He raises his eyebrows. "And thrift"—gain—"is a *blessing*, if men *steal* it not."

Antonio shakes his head. "This was a venture, sir, that Jacob *served* for—a thing not in *his* power to bring to pass, but swayed and fashioned by the hand of Heaven!

"Was this tale inserted to make interest *good*? Or are your *gold* and *silver* ewes and rams?"

Shylock shrugs. "I cannot tell. I make it breed as fast. But note me, signior—"

Antonio cuts him off. "Mark you this, Bassanio: the *Devil* can cite Scripture for his purpose! An evil soul producing holy witness is like a villain with a *smiling cheek*—a goodly apple *rotten* at the *heart*! Oh, what a goodly outside *falsehood* hath!"

Shylock ignores the sanctimonious sally; he has pulled out his notebook. "Three thousand ducats; 'tis a good round sum," he murmurs. "Three months from twelve; then, let me see; the rate—"

"Well, Shylock, shall we be beholden to you?" demands Bassanio.

The Jew regards them dourly. "Signior Antonio, many a time—and oft in the Rialto—you have berated me about my moneys and my usances; ever have I borne it with a patient shrug, for sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.

"You call me *misbeliever*, *cut-throat dog*, and spit upon my Jewish gaberdin,"—the legally-required cloak, made of coarse fabric and extending almost to ground, that identifies men of the Jewish faith, "and all for use of that which is mine own!

"Well then, it now appears you need my help. Go *to*, then!

"You come to me, and you say, 'Shylock, we would have moneys!'—*you* say so!—*you*, that did void your *rheum*"—spit—"upon my beard, and *foot* me as you spurn a stranger cur over your threshold!

“*Moneys* is your suit. What should I say to you? Should I not say, ‘Hath a *dog* money? Is it possible a *cur* can lend *three thousand ducats*?’”

“Or shall I bend low, and in a bondman’s key, with ‘bated breath and whispering humbleness, say this: ‘Fair sir, you spat on me on Wednesday last; you spurned me such a day; another time you called me dog—and for these *courtesies* I’ll lend you thus much moneys!’”

Antonio, strongly opposed to usury, is blunt: “And I am as like to call thee so *again*, to *spit* on thee again, to *spurn* thee, too! If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not as to thy *friend*—for when did friendship take the offspring of barren metal from its friends? But lend it rather to thine *enemy*, from whom, if he break, thou mayst with better face exact the *penalty*!”

Shylock smiles. “Why, look you, how you *storm*!” he chides amiably. “I would be *friends* with you and have your love!—*forget* the shames that you have stained me with, supply your present wants, and take no doit of usance for my moneys—but you’ll not *hear* me!” He spreads his arms wide. “This is *kind* that I offer!”

Bassanio likes the idea of a cost-free loan: “This *were* kindness!”

“*This* kindness will I show,” says Shylock, now watching Antonio intently. “Go with me to a notary, seal me there your single bond.” He does not want Bassanio to be named. “And, in a merry *sport*, if you repay me not on such a day, in such a place, such sum or sums as are expressed in the conditions, let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair *flesh* to be cut off, and taken from what part of your body it pleaseth me.”

Antonio has returned the unwavering gaze. “*Content*, i’ faith!” he says, defying the shrewd affront. “I’ll seal to such a bond, and say there is much *kindness* in the Jew.” His dour implication is: *the man does just as would be expected of his kind*.

Bassanio is alarmed. “You shall *not* seal to such a bond for *me*! I’ll rather dwell in my necessity!”

“Why, fear not, man; I will not forfeit it,” Antonio assures him. “Within these two months—that’s a *month* before this bond expires—I do expect return of *thrice three times* the value of the bond!”

Shylock pretends to be wounded by Bassanio’s concern. “O father *Abra ’m*, see what these Christians are, whose own hard dealing teaches them to suspect the thoughts of others!

“Pray you, tell me this,” he asks Bassanio. “If he should break his day, what should I *gain* by the exaction of the forfeiture? A pound of flesh taken from a *man* is not so estimable—profitable neither!—as flesh of *muttons, beefs, or goats*!

“I say, to buy his *favour* I extend this *friendship*!” He believes that the stratagem itself demeans the supercilious shipper: the offer sounds generous, even though the terms should bar its acceptance. “If he will take it, so; if not, *adieu*—and for my *love*, I pray you wrong me not.”

Antonio is determined to help his friend. “Yes, Shylock, I *will* seal unto this bond!” He believes the harsh proposition exposes a callousness that will cost the usurer business.

Shylock is content. His money will not be at risk: Antonio’s credit is sound—stronger than his personal reputation will be, after the traders’ exchange learns of his humiliation. “Then meet me forthwith.

“At the notary’s, give him direction for this merry bond. I will go and purse the ducats straight, then see to my house—left in the fearful guard of an unthrifty knave—and presently I will be with you.”

Antonio bows curtly. “Hie thee, gentle Jew,” he says, as Shylock heads toward his home in the ghetto. “The Hebrew will turn Christian!—he grows *kind*.”

Bassanio is wary. “I like not fair *terms* in a *villain*’s mind!”

But Antonio is pleased with the transaction. “Come on,” he says, clasping an arm across Bassanio’s broad shoulders, “in this there can be no dismay; my ships come home a *month* before the day!”

A regal flourish of cornets is sounded as the visitor and his train of courtiers and attendants enter a large hall in the mansion at Belmont. Lady Portia receives him, with Nerissa and others attending.

The prince of Morocco, just across the water south of Spain, is well aware that Christians believe devils' faces to be black; he is attired, deliberately and proudly, in shades of white that set off—flatter—his face, black beard, and powerful hands.

“Mislike me not for my complexion, the shadowed livery of the burnished *sun*, to whom I am a neighbour and near bred! Bring me the fairest creature *northward* born, where Phoebus' fire scarce thaws the icicles,” he tells Portia, “and let us make *incision* for your love, to prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine!

“I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine hath frightened the *valiant!* By my love I swear, the best-regarded *virgins* of our clime have loved it, too! I would not change this hue except to steal *your* thoughts, my gentle queen!”

Tipping up his chin, he eyes her expectantly.

“In terms of choice, I am not solely led by the direction of a maiden's *eyes*,” Portia tells the potentate—pointedly; she is a virgin. “Besides, the lottery of my destiny bars me from the right of voluntary choosing.

“But if my father had not scanted me, and hedged me by his wit to yield myself his wife who wins me by that means I told you, *yourself*, renowned prince, then stood as fair as any comer I have looked on yet for my affection.” Nerissa, who knows just *how* the lady regarded has the others, suppresses a smile.

“Even for that, I thank you,” says proud Morocco, surveying the sumptuous surroundings, and rubbing his hands together eagerly. “Therefore, I pray you, lead me to the caskets to try my fortune!

“By this scimitar that slew the *Sophy* and a Persian *prince* who won three fields from Sultan *Solyman*,”—the shah and his general, “I would *outstare* the sternest eyes that look, *outbrave* the heart most daring on the earth!—pluck the young, suckling cubs from the *she-bear*—yea, mock the *lion* when he roars for prey—to win *thee*, lady!” he proclaims.

He frowns. “But, alas the while, if *Hercules* and Lichas play at dice as to which is the better man, the greater *throw* may turn fortune unto the weaker *hand!* So is *Alcides* beaten by his *page*; and so may *I*, blind Fortune leading me, miss that which one unworthier may attain—and die with grieving!”

Portia is polite but firm. “You must take your chance, and either not attempt to choose at all, or *swear* before you choose—therefore be advised—if you choose wrong, *never to speak to a lady afterward in way of marriage!*”

Morocco readily nods agreement; marriage *per se* has never been his goal; he is not a virgin. “Nor will not. Come, bring me unto my chance!”

But this is Portia's house, and here *she* commands. “First, forward to the temple; after dinner your hazard shall be made.”

Cries Morocco, “Good *fortune* then, to make me blest!—or among men the *cursèdest!*” His brazen horns again annoy the household.

A mbling down the bridge onto an island, the only area of Venice where Jews are permitted to reside, a wiry servant—he is sixteen—stops on the street not far from Shylock's house to debate with himself: *Certainly my conscience will stop my running from this Jew my master....*

But the fiend is at mine elbow!—and tempts me, saying to me, ‘Gobbo’—‘Launcelot Gobbo, good Launcelot,’ or ‘good Gobbo,’ or ‘good Launcelot Gobbo’—‘use your legs!’—take the start!—run away!’

My conscience says, ‘No! Take heed, honest Launcelot,’ ‘Take heed, honest Gobbo,’ or, as aforesaid, ‘honest Launcelot Gobbo,’—‘do not run!—scorn running with thy heels!’

Well, the most-courageous fiend bids me pack: 'Via!' says the fiend! 'Away!' says the fiend; 'For heaven's sake, rouse up a brave mind,' says the fiend, 'and run!'

Well, my conscience, hanging about the neck of my heart, says very wisely to me, 'My honest friend Launcelot'—I being an honest man's son—or rather an honest woman's son. The boy's eyes narrow with suspicion. For indeed my father did something smack of... something grow to... he had a kind of taste....

Well, my conscience says, 'Launcelot, budge not!'

'Budge!' says the fiend.

'Budge not!' says my conscience.

'Conscience,' say I, 'you counsel well.' 'Fiend,' say I, 'you counsel well.'

To be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master—who, God bless the mark, is a kind of devil! But to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the fiend, who is the Devil himself! He adds, politely, in case Satan is listening, Saving Your Reverence.

Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation—and by my conscience, my conscience is but a kind of hard conscience to offer to counsel me to stay with the Jew!

He ponders, rubbing his chin. The fiend gives the more friendly counsel! I will run, fiend!—my heels are at your commandment! I will run!

Just as he has set his mind to it, a gray-bearded man with a small basket hobbles up behind him. "Master, young man, you, I pray you, which is the way to Master Jew's?"

Oh, heavens! thinks Launcelot, turning, this is my true-begotten father!—who, being more than sand-blind—highly, gravel blind!—knows me not.

I will try confusions with him! thinks the rascal.

"Master young gentleman, I pray you, which is the way to Master Jew's?" asks the father, blinking as he peers down the long street into the ghetto.

"Turn up on your right hand at the next turning, but, at the next turning of all, on your left—marry, at the very next turning, turn on no hand, but turn down indirectly to the Jew's house."

"By God's sonties, 'twill be a hard way to hit!" moans the old man. "Can you tell me whether one Launcelot that dwells with him dwell with him or no?"

"Talk you of young Master Launcelot?" asks the lad—awarding himself a promotion. Mark me now, he tells himself, how will I raise the waters!—stir up tears. "Talk you of young Master Launcelot?"

"No master, sir, but a poor man's son: his father, though I say it, is an honest, exceedingly poor man, but, God be thanked, well enough to live."

"Well, let his father be what 'a will; we talk of young Master Launcelot," insists the imp.

Gobbo nods: "Your Worship's friend, and Launcelot, sir."

"But, I pray you, old man, ergo I beseech you—talk you of young Master Launcelot!"

Gobbo shakes his head. "Of Launcelot, an't please Your Mastership."

Mastership—"Ergo Master Launcelot!" But now he shakes his head sadly. "Talk not of Master Launcelot, father; for the young gentleman—according to Fates and Destinies and such odd sayings—the Sisters Three, and such branches of learning—is indeed deceased, or, as you would say in plain terms, gone to heaven!"

"Marry, God forbid!" cries the old man—with regard to demise, not destination. "The boy was the very staff of my age, my very prop!"

Launcelot is indignant. "Do I look like a cudgel or a hovel-post!—a staff, or a prop?" He leans closer. "Do you know me, Father?"

Gobbo wags his head. "Alack the day, I know you not, young gentleman. But, I pray you, tell me: is my boy, God rest his soul, alive or dead?"

"Do you not know me, Father?"

"Alack, sir, I am sand-blind; I know you not."

"Nay, indeed, if you had your eyes you might fail of the knowing me!" Launcelot mumbles the adage about consequences, "It is a wise father that knows his own child." But now he

kneels. "Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son. Give *me* your blessing! Truth will come to light; murder cannot be hid long—a man's *son* may, but at length the truth will out!"

"Pray you, sir, stand up," Gobbo tells him, annoyed. "I am sure *you* are not Launcelot, my boy."

"Pray *you*, let's have no more fooling about it, but give me your blessing! I *am* Launcelot, your boy that was, your son that *is*, your child that *shall be!*"

"I cannot think you are my son."

The boy grins. "I know not what I shall think of *that!*—but I *am* Launcelot, the Jew's man; and I am sure Margery, your *wife*, is my mother."

"Her name is Margery indeed! I'll be sworn, if thou be Launcelot, thou art mine own flesh and blood!" Reaching forward, he touches the boy's long hair. "Lord!—'Worship' *might* ye be!—what a *beard* hast thou got! Thou hast got more hair on thy chin than Dobbin, my cart-horse, has on his tail!"

"It would seem, then, that Dobbin's tail grows *inwards*, says the beardless boy, rising. "I am sure he had more hair on his tail than I on my face when *I* last saw him!"

"Lord, how art thou changed," says Gobbo. But he has come here out of concern—and for a purpose. "How dost thou and thy master agree? I have brought him a present. How 'gree you now?"

"Well," Launcelot admits, "well."

"But, for mine own part, as for my rest I am set upon *running away*, so I *will* not rest till I have run some ground! My master's a very *Jew!* Give him a *present?*—give him a *noose!* I am *famished* in his service: you may count every finger I have with my ribs!"

The boy has an inspiration. "Father, I am glad you are come! Give your present to one Master *Bassanio*, who, indeed, now gives rare liveries"—is adding to his staff. "If I serve not *him*, I will run as far as God has any ground!"

He looks up—and spots that very nobleman, with attendants, coming toward them on the street. "Oh, rare fortune! Here comes the man! *To* him, father—for I am a *Jew* if I serve the Jew any longer!"

Chapter Three Stealing Away

Bassanio is still making preparations for the party to entertain Antonio. "You may do so," he replies to his steward, "but let it be so hastened that supper be ready, at the farthest, by five o' the clock!"

He hands the man papers, each folded and sealed with wax. "See these letters delivered; put the liveries to making,"—tailors will make new, matching clothes for the servants he will take along to Belmont, "and desire Gratiano to come anon to my lodging." The major-domo hurries away to accomplish his assignments.

Launcelot nudges his companion. "*To* him, Father!"

"God bless Your Worship!" says old Gobbo, coming up to Bassanio and bowing.

"Gramercy. Wouldst thou aught with me?"

"Here's my son, sir, a poor boy—"

"Not a poor *boy*, sir," Launcelot interjects, stepping forward, "but the rich Jew's *man*—who would, sir, as my father shall specify—"

"He hath a great infection, sir, as one would say, to serve—"

"Indeed, the short and the long is, I serve the Jew, and have a *desire*, as my father shall specify—"

"His master and he, saving Your Worship's reverence, are scarcely caper-cousins—"

“To be *brief*, the very truth is that the Jew, having done me wrong, doth cause me, as my father, being, I hope, an old man, shall frutify unto you—”

“I have here a dish of doves that I would bestow upon Your Worship, and my suit is—”

“In *very* brief, the suit is impertinent to myself, as Your Worship shall know by this honest old man; and, though I say it, though old man, yet poor man, my father!”

Bassanio holds up a hand. “*One* speak for both! What would you?”

“*Serve* you, sir!” says Launcelot.

Gobbo nods: “That is the very defect of the matter, sir.”

Bassanio chuckles; he smiles at the boy. “I know thee well; thou hast *obtained* thy suit! Shylock thy master spoke with me this day, and hath... preferred thee”—he considers a disparaging by Shylock to be a kind of endorsement. But Bassanio’s servants, though well paid, are not pampered. “If it *be* a preferment to leave a rich Jew’s service to become the follower of so poor a gentleman.”

Says Launcelot, bowing, “The old proverb”—*The grace of God is gear enough*—“is very well divided between my master Shylock and you, sir. You have the grace of God, sir; and he hath *enough!*”

“Thou speak’st it well,” laughs Bassanio. “Go, father, with thy son.

“Take leave of thy old master,” he tells Launcelot, “and enquire my lodging out.” Pulling a list from his coat pocket, Bassanio tells a servant, “Give him a livery more elaborate than his fellows”—implying a higher rank. “See it done.”

But at that, Launcelot pulls his dad aside. “*Father, in!* I cannot get a service! *No!*—I have ne’er a tongue in my head!” Apprehensive, he resorts to the best of seers: he studies his own palm. He likes what he sees. “Well, if any man in Italy have no fairer a table which doth offer to swear upon a book, I shall have good fortune!

“Go *to*,” he says, tracing happily with a forefinger. “Here’s a simple line of life; here’s a small trifle of *wives*, alas! Fifteen wives—eleven widows—is nothing; and nine *maids* is a simple *coming-in* for one man.” He traces further. “And then to ’scape drowning thrice, and to be in peril of my life at the edge of a feather-bed!—here are simple ’scapes! Well, if Fortune be a woman, she’s a good wench for *this* gear!

“Father, come; I’ll take my leave of the Jew in the twinkling of an eye!” Master Gobbo leads his father away toward Shylock’s house.

Bassanio hands another paper to a trusted servant. “I pray thee, good Leonardo, think on this! These things being bought and orderly bestowed, return in haste, for I do feast tonight my best-esteemed acquaintance! Hie thee, *go!*”

Leonardo bows. “My best endeavours shall be done herein!” He hurries away, passing Gratiano on the street.

“Where is your master?” asks that gentleman urgently.

“Yonder, sir, he walks.”

“Signior Bassanio!”

“Gratiano!”

“I have a suit to you,” Gratiano begins.

“You have obtained it!”

But Gratiano has a serious request to make. “You must not deny me! I must go *with you* to *Belmont!*” He had accompanied Bassanio on the previous visit.

Bassanio’s smile is magnanimous. “Why, then you *must!*”

“But hear thee, Gratiano,” he warns, “thou art too wild, too rude and *bold of voice*—parts that *become* thee happily enough, and appear not faults in such eyes as *ours*. But where thou art not known, why, there they show as somewhat too liberal.”

He rests a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “Pray thee, take pain to allay with some cold drops of *modesty* thy skipping spirit, lest through thy wild behavior *I* be misconstered in the place I go to, and lose my hopes!”

Gratiano is delighted—and droll. “Signior Bassanio, hear me! If I do not put on a *sober habit*—talk with respect, and swear but *now and then*, wear prayer-books in my pocket, look demurely—nay *more!*—while grace is spoken, hood mine eyes thus with my hat, and sigh, and say ‘*Amen*,’ use all the observance of civility like one well studied in a such ostent as to please his *grandam*—never trust me *more!*”

Bassanio laughs. “Well, we shall *see* your bearing!”

“Aye—but I bar *tonight*,” Gratiano amends, thinking of their supper. “You shall not gauge me by what we do tonight!”

“No, that were a pity,” Bassanio agrees. “I would entreat you rather to put on your *boldest* suit of *mirth*, for we have friends who purpose merriment! But fare you well: I have some business....”

“And I must to Lorenzo and the rest,” says Gratiano. “But we will visit you at supper-time!”

At Shylock’s home, his beautiful daughter, Jessica, hears what Launcelot has decided, and learns of the boy’s joining Bassanio’s attendants.

“I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so! Our house is *hell*, but thou, a *merry* devil, didst rob it of some taste of tediousness! But fare thee well; there is a ducat for thee!

“And, Launcelot, soon at supper shalt thou see *Lorenzo*, who is thy new master’s guest. Give him this letter—do it *secretly!*”

“And so farewell! I would not have my father see me in talk with thee!”

“*Adieu!* Tears exhibit my tongue,” says the boy. “Most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew! If a *Christian* did not play the knave and beget thee, I am much deceived! But, *adieu!* These foolish drops do somewhat drown my manly spirit! *Adieu!*” He bows and, wiping his eyes, hurries out the door.

“Farewell, good Launcelot!”

She muses, watching him go. *Alack, what heinous sin is it in me to be ashamed to be my father’s child! But though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners!*

Oh, Lorenzo, if thou keep promise, I shall end this strife—become a Christian, and thy loving wife!

Near Antonio’s stately stone home in the most fashionable quarter of Venice, Lorenzo meets Gratiano, Salerio and Solanio to propose that they perform a masque—a lively production with acting and singing by colorfully dressed guests—after dining with Bassanio this evening.

“Aye, we will slink away in supper-time,” Lorenzo says gleefully, “disguise us at my lodging, and return, all in an hour!”

“We have not made good *preparation!*” protests Gratiano.

“We have not spoke us yet of *torchbearers*,” Salerio complains; he wants to be seen.

“’Tis vile, unless it may be *quaintly* ordered,” insists Solanio, who likes a touch of the unusual, “and better in my mind not undertook!” Selecting just the right clothes takes time.

Lorenzo is unperturbed by their customary carping. “’Tis now but four o’clock; we have *two hours* to furnish us.”

Bassanio’s newest servant arrives. “Friend Launcelot, what’s the news?” asks Lorenzo eagerly.

With a flourish, the boy hands him Jessica’s letter. “An it shall please you to break ope this, it shall seem to signify,” says Launcelot—in elegant accordance with his new responsibilities.

Lorenzo is pleased. “I know the hand! In faith, ’tis a *fair* hand!—and whiter than the paper it writ on is the fair hand that writ!”

“*Love*-news, in faith,” says Gratiano, as Lorenzo reads and nods, smiling.

Launcelot starts to go. “By your leave, sir.”

“Whither goest thou?” asks Lorenzo.

“Marry, sir, to bid my old master the Jew to sup tonight with my new master the Christian.”

“Hold here... Take this,” says Lorenzo, giving Launcelot coins. “Tell gentle Jessica I will not fail her!—speak it *privately!*” Launcelot pockets the money and heads for Shylock’s house.

“So, gentlemen, will you prepare you for this masque tonight? I *am* provided with a torch-bearer,” Lorenzo assures them happily.

“Aye, marry,” says Salerio, “I’ll be gone about it straight!”

“And so will I!” says Solanio.

“Meet me and Gratiano at Gratiano’s lodging some hour hence,” Lorenzo tells them.

“Tis good; we do so!” says Salerio; he and Solanio hurry away.

“Was not that letter from fair Jessica?” Gratiano asks his friend.

Lorenzo beams. “I must needs tell thee all!” he says, tapping her letter. “She hath directed how I shall take her from her father’s house—what *gold* and *jewels* she is furnished with, what *page’s* suit”—a disguise—“she hath in readiness!

“If e’er the Jew her father come to heaven, it will be for his gentle *daughter’s* sake! And never dare misfortune cross her foot, unless it do it under this excuse: that she is issue of a faithless Jew!

“Come, go with me; peruse this as thou goest,” he says, handing Gratiano the letter. “Fair *Jessica* shall be my torch-bearer!”

Shylock returns home, followed by Launcelot. “Well, thou shalt see!—thine eyes shall be thy judge of the difference between old Shylock and Bassanio!

“What, *Jessica!*” he calls, entering the frame house. “Thou shalt not gormandise as thou hast done with *me*,” he tells the slender lad. “What, *Jessica!*—and sleep and snore, and rend apparel out! Why, *Jessica* I say!”

“*Why Jessica!*” shouts Launcelot.

Shylock is startled and annoyed. “Who bids *thee* call? I do not bid thee call!”

“Your Worship *was* wont to tell me that I could do *nothing* without being bidden,” the jester counters. Shylock ignores the sarcasm.

Jessica comes down the stairs. “Call you?” she asks her father. “What is your will?”

“I am bid forth to supper, Jessica. There are my keys,” he says, laying a heavy ring of them on the parlor table. “But wherefore should I go? I am not bid for love; they only *flatter* me. But yet I’ll go in hate, to feed upon the prodigal Christian!

“Jessica, my girl, look to my house. I am right loath to go; there is some ill a-brewing towards my rest, for I did dream of *money-bags* last night!”

“I beseech you, sir, *go*,” says Launcelot. “My young master doth expect your reproach—”

“So do I *his*,” says Shylock sourly.

“—and they have conspired together! I will not *say* you shall see a masque,” says Launcelot prophetically, “but if you do, then it was not for nothing that my nose fell a-bleeding on Black-Monday last at six o’clock i’ the morning! Falling out that leap year on Ash Wednesday ’twas in the afternoon”—astrological gibberish to mock the old man’s portentous dreaming.

Shylock frowns. “What, are there *masques*? *Hear* you me, Jessica! *Lock up my doors*, and when you hear the drum and the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife, clamber not you up to the casements then, nor thrust your head into the public street to gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces, but stop my house’s ears!” Launcelot laughs. “I mean my *casements!* Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter my sober house!

“By Jacob’s staff, I swear I have no mind for feasting forth tonight! But I will go. Go you before me, sirrah; say I will come.” He turns to pick up a scarf hanging on a peg.

“I will go before, sir,” says Launcelot. He whispers to Jessica: “Mistress, look out at window, for all this; there will come a Christian by will be worth a Jewess’ eye!” He quickly leaves the house.

On the porch, Shylock adjusts the neck cloth. “What says that fool of Hagar’s offspring, *eh?*”

“His words were ‘Farewell, mistress,’ nothing else.”

“The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder,” grumbles Shylock. “Snail-slow in profit, and he sleeps by day more than the wildcat! *Drones* hive not with me; therefore I *part* with him—and part with him to one that I would have him *help to waste* his borrowed purse!

“Well, Jessica, go in; perhaps I will return immediately. Do as I’ve bid you; shut doors after you. ‘Fast bind, fast find!’—a proverb never stale in thrifty mind.” He goes down the wooden steps, heading off, glumly, to sup with genteel Antonio and his friends, all gentiles.

Jessica closes the door. “Farewell,” she murmurs, hurrying up the stairs. “And if my fortune be not crost, I have a father, you a daughter, *lost!*”

Not far from Shylock’s house an hour later, Salerio and Solanio have been waiting, disguised in costly silk and satin, and wearing colorful feathered masks set with sequins. As night falls, Gratiano, attired as a sort of masked, velvet monk, comes to meet them. “This is the shed under which Lorenzo desired us to make stand,” he confirms, looking askance at the dilapidated shelter of gray, unpainted wood.

“His hour is almost past,” notes Salerio, watching the dark ghetto street uneasily.

“And it is a *marvel* he out-dwells his hour,” says Gratiano, “for lovers ever run before the clock!”

“Oh, *ten* times faster Venus’s pigeons fly to seal *love’s* bonds *new-made* than they are wont to keep *obligèd* faith unforfeited!” complains Solanio.

Gratiano must elaborate, as usual. “That ever holds. Who riseth from a feast with that keen appetite that he sits down with? Where is the horse that doth untread again his tedious measures with the unabated fire that he did pace them first? All things that are are with more spirit *chasèd* than *enjoyed*.

“How like a younger son the scarfèd ship puts from his native bay, hugged and embracèd by the *wind!* How like a prodigal doth he *return*, with over-weathered ribs and ragged sails, lean, rent and beggared by that strumpet!”

“Here comes Lorenzo,” says Salerio, doubly relieved. “More of this hereafter....”

Lorenzo is late, and short of breath—but eager. “Sweet friends, your patience for thy long abide! Not I, but my affairs have made you wait! When *you* shall please to play the thieves for wives, I’ll watch as long for you then!” He is dressed as a sheriff’s silken officer.

“Approach,” he says, leading them to a house. “Here dwells my father-in-law Jew. *Ho!* Who’s within?”

Jessica—dressed in a boy’s clothes, her hair tucked into a cap—opens a window above them. “Who are you?” she calls. “Tell me, for more certainty—albeit I’ll swear that I do know your *tongue!*” Gratiano and Salerio exchange grins.

“*Lorenzo*, and thy love!” he cries, peering up.

“Lorenzo, certain—and my love *indeed*, for whom love I so much?” sighs lusty Jessica. She spots the other two. “And now who *knows* but you, Lorenzo, whether I am yours?”

“*Heaven* and thy *thoughts* are witness that thou art!”

She laughs. “Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains!” she says, and lets fall a small strongbox. “I am glad ’tis *night*—do you not *look* on me, for I am much ashamed of my change! But love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies they themselves commit; for if they could, Cupid himself would blush to see me thus transformèd to a *boy!*”

“Descend,” Lorenzo tells her, “for you must be my torchbearer.”

“*What?*—must I hold a *candle* to my shames? They in themselves, good-sooth, are too, too *light!* Why, ’tis an office of *discovery*, love—and I should be obscured!”

“So *are* you, sweet, in the lovely garnish of a *boy*,” says Lorenzo. “But come at once, for the close night doth play the runaway, and we are *stayed for* at Bassanio’s feast!”

“I will make fast the doors and gild myself with some more ducats, and be with you straight!” says Jessica. She disappears into the house, carefully closing the window.

“Now, by my hood, a *gentile* and no Jew!” says Father Gratiano.

“Beshrew me but *I love her heartily*,” Lorenzo tells his friends earnestly, “for she is *wise*, if *I* can judge of her, and *fair* she is, if that mine eyes be true, and *true* she is, as she hath *proved* herself! And therefore, like herself, wise, fair and true shall she be placèd in my constant soul!

“What, art thou come?” he asks, as Jessica emerges from the house, closes the door after herself for the last time, and locks it.

“On, gentlemen, *away!*” urges Lorenzo. “Our masquing-mates by this time for us stay!” He, Salerio and Solanio, led by the page-boy Jessica, head for Bassanio’s festive party for Antonio. As Gratiano starts to follow, a figure comes rushing down the street toward him.

“Who’s *there?*” calls the well-dressed gentleman.

Gratiano is surprised. “Signior Antonio!”

“Fie, *fie*, Gratiano! Where are all the *rest?*—’tis nine o’clock; our friends all stay for you!

“No masque tonight!” the shipper tells him, nearly out of breath from hurrying. “The *wind* has come about!—Bassanio presently will *go aboard!*”

“I have sent *twenty* out to *seek* for you!” he wheezes, wiping his brow with a handkerchief.

Gratiano follows Antonio toward the bridge. “I am glad of’t! I desire no more delight than to be under sail and *gone* tonight!”

Chapter Four Suspense, Torment

The elaborate supper at Belmont has concluded. Under a flourish of cornets, and to a military drum’s slow cadence, Lady Portia and the Prince of Morocco and their followers enter a grand, guarded hall—where drapery masks a space at the far end.

“Go draw aside the curtains,” Portia tells an attendant, “and reveal the several caskets to this noble prince.” On a long table of dark, carved wood are three locked chests. “Now make your choice,” she tells the prince.

He strides forward boldly to examine them. “The first, of gold, this inscription bears: ‘Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.’ The second, silver, this promise carries: ‘Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.’ This third, dull lead, with warning all as blunt, ‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.’”

“How shall I know if I do choose the right?”

“One of them contains my *picture*, prince,” Portia tells him. “If you choose that, then I am yours withal.”

Morocco looks from case to case. “Some god direct my judgment! Let me see; I will survey the inscriptions back again. What says this leaden casket? ‘Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.’”

“Must *give*—for what? For lead!—hazard for *lead*? This casket threatens. Men that hazard all do it in hope of fair advantage; a golden mind stoops not to shows of dross. I’ll then neither give nor hazard aught for lead!

“What says the silver, with its virgin hue? ‘Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.’”

He ponders. *As much as he deserves... Pause there, Morocco, and weigh thy value with an even hand. If thou be’st rated by thy estimation, thou dost deserve enough; and yet ‘enough’ may not extend so far as to the lady!*

And yet to be afeard of my deserving were but a weak disabling of myself. As much as I deserve... why, that’s the lady! I do in birth deserve her, and in fortunes, in graces and in qualities of breeding; but more than these, in love I do deserve! What if I strayed no further, but chose here?

“Let’s see once more this saying graved in gold. ‘Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.’ Why, that’s the *lady*—all the world desires her; from the four corners of the earth they come, to kiss this *shrine*, this mortal, breathing *saint*!

“The Hyrcanian deserts and the vasty wilds of wide Arabia are as *thoroughfares*, now, for princes to come view *fair Portia*!

“The *watery* kingdom, whose ambitious head spits in the face of heaven is no bar to stop the foreign spirits, but they come as o’er a *brook* to see fair Portia!”

He paces before the table. “One of these three contains her heavenly picture. Is’t likely that *lead* contains her? ’Twere damnation to think so base a thought!—it were too gross to rib her cerecloth in the obscure grave!

“Or shall I think in *silver* she’s immured, it being *ten times* undervalued to trièd *gold*? Oh, *sinful* thought! Never was so rich a gem set in worse than gold!”

He steps to the gleaming casket. “They have in England a coin that bears the figure of an *angel* stamped in gold; but that’s insculpèd *upon*; here an angel in a golden bed lies all *within*!

“Deliver me the key!” he demands. “Here do I choose!—and thrive I as I may!”

“There, take it, Prince,” says Portia, “and if my form lie there, then I am yours.”

He unlocks the box.

“Oh, *hell*! What have we *here*?” cries Morocco. “A carrion *Death*!—within whose empty eye there is a written scroll.” He pulls the paper from the lacquered skull. “I’ll read the writing.

“‘*All that glisters is not gold!*—

Often have you heard that told;

Many a man his life hath sold,

But my *outside* to behold!

Gilded tombs do *worms* enfold.

Had you been as wise as *bold*,

Young in limbs, in *judgment* old,

Your answer had not been *inscrolled*!

Fare you well. Your suit is cold.’

“Cold, indeed; and labour lost,” moans the prince. “Then, farewell, heat, and welcome, frost! Portia, adieu! I have too grievèd a heart to take a tedious leave; thus losers part.”

He and his procession of white-clad courtiers depart with one last, harsh flourish of cornets.

Portia smiles, relieved. “A gentle riddance.” She signals for attendants to reset the scroll and lock the golden casket, just as it was. “Draw the curtains, go.”

She looks at Nerissa. “Let all of *his* complexion choose me so!”

As they walk in Venice, masks in hand, under flickering torchlight beside the Grand Canal near the Rialto, Salerio tells Solanio, “Why, man, I *saw* Bassanio *under sail*! With him is Gratiano gone along; but on their ship I am sure *Lorenzo is not*!”

Solanio frowns. “The villain Jew with outcries raised the *duke*, who went with him to search Bassanio’s ship.”

“He came too late!—the ship was under sail!” Salerio reports. “But there the duke was given to understand that in a *gondola* were seen together Lorenzo and his amorous Jessica; besides, Antonio *certified* to the duke they were not with Bassanio in his ship.”

Solanio had enjoyed seeing Shylock’s dismay: “I never heard a passion so destructive, so strange, outrageous, and so variable as the dog Jew did utter in the streets! ‘My *daughter*! Oh, my *ducats*! Oh, my *daughter*!—fled with a *Christian*! Oh, my *Christian ducats*! *Justice*! *The law*! My *ducats* and my *daughter*! A *sealed bag*—two sealed bags of ducats!—*double* ducats stolen from me by my daughter! And *jewels*, two stones, two rich and precious *stones*, *stolen* by my daughter! *Justice*! Find the girl; she hath the *stones* upon her, and the *ducats*!’”

Salerio laughs; stones is a common term for testicles. “Why, all the boys in Venice follow him, crying, ‘*His stones*: his *daughter* and his *ducats*!’”

Solanio's amusement is fading. "Let good Antonio look he keep his day,"—return the borrowing timely, "or he shall pay for this!"

"Marry, well remembered," says Salerio. "I conversed with a Frenchman yesterday who told me that, in the narrow seas which part the French and English, there miscarried a vessel of *our* country, richly fraught. I thought upon Antonio when he told me—and hoped in silence that it were not *his*!"

"You were best to tell Antonio what you hear," Solanio advises. "Yet do not suddenly, for it may grieve him."

"A kinder gentleman treads not the earth! I saw Bassanio and Antonio part. Bassanio told him he would make some *speed* for his return; he answered, 'Do *not* so! Slubber not business for *my* sake, Bassanio, but await the very riping of the time! And as for the Jew's bond which he hath of me, let it not enter in your mind of love!

"Be *merry*, and employ your chiefest thoughts to *courtship*, and such fair ostents of love as shall usefully become you there!'

"And even then, his eye being big with tears, turning his face he put his hand before him, and with affection wondrously apparent, he wrung Bassanio's hand. And so they parted."

"I think he only loves the world for *him*," says Solanio. "I pray thee, let us go and find him out, and quicken his embracèd heaviness with some delight or other!"

"Do we so!"

At Portia's mansion, Nerissa dashes into the hall of three caskets. "Quick, *quick*, I pray thee, draw the curtain straight!" she tells a servant. "The *Prince of Aragon* hath ta'en his oath, and comes to his election presently!"

A flourish of cornets announces the prince, a tall, red-faced man with white hair and a trim, pointed white beard. He sweeps into the room beside Lady Portia, as their trains follow.

"Behold, there stand the caskets, noble prince," says she. "If you choose that wherein I am contained, straight shall our nuptial rites be solemnized. But if you fail, without more speech, my lord, you must be gone from hence immediately."

Aragon, dignified and erect, nods curtly. "I am enjoined by oath to observe three things. First, never to unfold to anyone which casket 'twas I chose; next, if I fail of the right casket, never in my life to woo a maid in way of marriage; lastly, if I do fail in fortune of my choice, immediately to leave you and be gone." Clearly he is chafed, unaccustomed to restrictions.

Notes Portia, "To these injunctions, *every* one doth swear who comes to hazard for my worthless self."

"And so have *I* addressed me," says Aragon. Nerissa almost laughs, noting his gaffe: he would demur at Portia's purely polite attempt to sooth, were he concerned about anyone but himself. He steps toward the three locked chests. "Fortune now to my heart's hope!

"Gold, silver—and base *lead*. 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.'" He sniffs. "You shall look fairer, ere *I* give or hazard.

"What says the *golden* chest, *eh*? Let me see. 'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.' What many men desire!" But he strokes his beard. "By that 'many' may be meant the fool *multitude* that choose by *show*, not learning more than the fond *eye* doth teach—which pries not to the interior, but, like the martlet, builds in the weather on the *outward* wall, even in the road and force of casualty.

"I will not choose what *many* men desire, because I will not jump with common spirits, and rank me with the barbarous multitudes!

"Why, then to thee, thou *silver* treasure-house! Tell me once more what title thou dost bear: 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.' And *well said*, too!—for some shall go about to *cozen* fortune and *seem* honourable. Let none without the stamp of merit presume to wear an *undeservèd* dignity!

“Oh, that estates, degrees and offices were not derivèd corruptly, and that clear honour were purchased by the *merit* of the wearer! How many *then* should cover that now stand bare?”—wear plumed hats, instead of holding humble caps. “How many be *commanded* who command?—how much low *peasantry* would then be separated from the true seed of *honour*? And how much honour picked from the chaff and ruin of the times, and newly *varnishèd*!

“Well, but to my choice. ‘Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.’ *I* will assume *deserving*! Give me a key for this, and instantly unlock my fortunes here!”

Portia nods to an attendant, and the prideful prince opens the silver casket. Only he can see inside. He stares.

As the assembly waits, eyes turn to Portia, who murmurs, “Too long a pause for that which you find there.”

“What’s *here*?” asks Aragon angrily. “The portrait of a blinking *idiot*, presenting me a schedule!

“I will read it.” He takes up the paper, but still glares at the silver case. “How much unlike art *thou* to Portia! How much unlike my hopes and my deservings!” He cites its promise: “‘Who chooseth me shall have as much as he *deserves*.’”

“Did I deserve no more than a *fool’s* head?” he demands loudly. “Is *that* my prize? Are my deserts no better?”

Portia declines to be questioned—especially as the answer could hardly please her guest. And she is annoyed that the nobleman who has pledged and has chosen would now argue. Still, she sounds soothing. “To offend and to *judge* are distinct offices—and of opposèd natures.”

“What is here?” grumbles the haughty nobleman, unfolding the sheet. He reads aloud:

“The fire seven times trièd this:
Seven times tried his *judgment* is
Who did ever choose *amiss*!
Some there be that *shadows* kiss;
Such have but a shadow’s bliss.
There be *fools* alive, I wis,
Silvered *o’er*—and so was *this*!
Take what wife you will to bed;
I will ever be your *lead*!
So be gone! You are sped.”

He thinks, his face hot, *Still more fool I shall appear for the time I linger here! With one fool’s head I came to woo, but I go away with two!*

“Sweet, adieu,” he tells Portia. “I’ll keep my oath, patiently to bear my wrath.” He bows, stiffly, and leaves, silently followed by his attendants. Soon the room has nearly emptied.

“Thus hath the candle singed the moth!” the lady tells Nerissa happily. “Oh, these *deliberative* fools; when they do choose, they have the wisdom by their *wit* to *lose*!”

The gentlewoman laughs. “The ancient saying is no heresy: ‘Hanging and wiving goes by destiny!’”

Portia sighs; what will her destiny supply? “Come, draw the curtain, Nerissa.” Standing at a window, she looks out pensively over the wide green lawn below, as the paper is replaced, and the caskets are again locked and concealed.

An older member of Portia’s household enters the hall. “Where is my lady?” he asks Nerissa. “Here,” Portia answers, turning. “What would my lord?”

“Madam, there is alighted at your gate a young *Venetian*, one that comes before to signify the approaching of his lord—from whom he bringeth *sensible* regrets—to wit: besides commends and courteous breath, *gifts* of rich *value*!

“As yet I have not *seen* so likely an ambassador of *love*!—a day in April never came so sweet to show how close a summer was at hand as this fore-spurrer comes before his lord!”

Portia is smiling. “No *more*, I pray thee!—I am half afeard thou wilt say anon he is some *kin* to *thee*, thou spend’st such heyday wit in praising him!

“Come, come, Nerissa, for I long to see quick *Cupid’s* post, who comes so mannerly!”

As they go, Nerissa whispers a request to that Roman god: “*Bassanio*, Lord Love, if thy will it be!”

Solanio again meets Salerio, on a Venetian thoroughfare near the Jewish community’s island. “Now what news on the Rialto?” he asks.

“Why, yet it lives there unchecked that Antonio hath a ship of rich lading wrecked on the narrow seas—the Goodwins, I think they call the place—a very dangerous flat, and fatal, where the carcasses of many a tall ship lie buried, as they say—if my gossip Report be an honest woman of her word.”

“I would she were as lying a gossip in *that* as ever knapped ginger or made her neighbours believe she wept for the death of a third husband!” says Solanio. “But it is true, without any slips of prolixity or crossing the plain highway of talk, that the good Antonio—the honest Antonio!—oh, that I had a title good enough to keep *his* name company—”

Salerio resists the effluence of volubility: “Come to a full stop!”

“What sayest thou? Why, the *end* is: he hath lost a ship.”

“I would it might prove the end of his *losses*!”

“Let me say ‘Amen’ *betimes*, lest the Devil cross my prayer,” says Solanio, “for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew. How now, Shylock! What news among the merchants?”

“*You* know—none so well, *none* so well as *you*, of my daughter’s flight!” growls Shylock, pausing on his way to the exchange.

Salerio taunts: “That’s certain! I, for *my* part, know the tailor that made the *wings* she flew withal!”—the page-boy clothes.

Adds Solanio, “And Shylock, for *his* own part, knew the bird was *fledged*! And it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam....”

The widower sneers at their rude mockery. “She is damned *for* it!”

“That’s certain—if the *Devil* may be her judge!” laughs Solanio.

Shylock seethes: “My own flesh and blood, *rebellin*!”

Solanio pretends to be shocked by a crude confession: “*Out* upon it, old carrion!—rebels it at *these* years?”

Shylock scowls at the dapper wags. “I say my *daughter* is my flesh and blood!”

“There is more difference between *thy* flesh and hers than between *jet* and *ivory*, more between your *bloods* than there is between red wine and Rhenish!” argues Salerio. “But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea, or no?”

“There I have *another* bad match,” says Shylock with disgust, “a *bankrupt*, a *prodigal*, who scarcely dare show his head on the Rialto!—a *beggar* that was used to come so smug unto the mart! Let him look to his bond.

“He was wont to call me *usurer*—let him look to his *bond*.

“He was wont to lend money as a Christian *courtesy*.” There is powerful menace in his unblinking glare. He utters again, gravely, “Let him *look to his bond*.”

Salerio frowns. “Why, I am sure if he forfeit thou wilt not take his *flesh*! What’s *that* good for?”

“To *bait fish* withal!” cries Shylock. “If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my *revenge*! He hath *disgraced* me, and hindered me half a million!—*laughed* at my *losses*, *mocked* at my gains, scorned my *nation*, *thwarted* my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine *enemies*!

“And what’s his *reason*? I am a *Jew*!

“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?—fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?”

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

“And if you *wrong* us, shall we not *revenge*? If we are like you in the *rest*, we will resemble you in *that*! If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his revenge?—*humiliation*! If a Christian wrong a *Jew*, what should *his* sufferance be, by Christian example?—why, *revenge*!

“The villainy *you* teach me I will *execute*!—and it shall go hard but I will *better* the instruction!”

The glib young merchants have been silenced—briefly—by the graybeard’s grim fury. A serving-man approaches them. “Gentlemen, my master Antonio is at his house, and desires to speak with you both.”

“We have been up and down *seeking* him!” says Salerio.

“Here comes another of the tribe,” notes Solanio, as a heavy, stolid man clumps up the street from the ghetto. “A third cannot be matched, unless the Devil himself turn Jew!” He and Salerio go with the servant toward Antonio’s house.

Shylock greets the man. “How now, Tubal. What news from Genoa? Hast thou found my daughter?”

“I often came where I did hear of her, but cannot find her.”

Shylock groans: “Why, there, *there, there, there*!—a *diamond gone*!—cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! A *curse* never fell upon our nation till now—I never *felt* it till now!” he wails. “Two thousand ducats in *that*!—and *other* precious, *precious jewels*! I would my daughter were *dead* at my foot with the *jewels* at her ears!—would she were *hearsed* at my foot, and the *ducats* in her coffin!

“No *news* of them?” Tubal shakes his head. “Why, so . . .” Shylock runs his hands down his beard, moaning. “And I know not *what’s* spent in the *search*!—*why*, thou *loss* upon loss? The thief gone with so much, and so much to *find* the thief!” He grows morose. “And no satisfaction, no *revenge*—nor any ill luck stirring but what lights on *my* shoulders; no sighs but of *my* breathing; no tears but of *my* shedding!”

“Yes, other men have ill luck, too,” says Tubal. “Antonio, as I heard in Genoa—”

“*What, what, what*?” cries Shylock eagerly. “Ill luck, *ill luck*?”

“—hath an argosy cast away, coming from Tripolis.”

“I thank God, I thank *God*! Is’t true, *is’t true*?”

“I spoke with some of the sailors that escaped the wreck.”

“I *thank* thee, good Tubal! Good news, *good news*!” He laughs. “Where—in Genoa?”

Tubal nods. “Your daughter spent in Genoa, as I heard, in one night fourscore ducats.”

“Thou stickest a *dagger* in me!” cries Shylock. “I shall never see my gold again! Fourscore ducats at a *sitting*! *Fourscore ducats*!”

“There came divers of Antonio’s creditors in my company to Venice who swear he cannot choose but break.”

“I am very glad of it!” says the old man fiercely. “I’ll *plague* him; I’ll *torture* him! I am *glad* of it!”

“One of them showed me a ring that he had from your daughter for a monkey,” Tubal reports blandly. He enjoys switching his sometime competitor between joy and despair.

Shylock is livid. “*Out upon her*! Thou torturest me, Tubal! It was my *turquoise*!—I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor! I would not have given it for a *wilderness* of monkeys!”

“But Antonio is certainly undone,” says Tubal unctuously.

“Nay, that’s true, that’s *very true*! Go, Tubal, fee me an *officer*; bespeak him a fortnight before!”

“I will have the *heart* of him if he forfeit; for, were *he* out of Venice, I can make what merchandise I will.” Shylock wants to be ready. “Go, *go*, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue.”

Tubal heads away toward the Court of Justice, to retain a deputy who could arrest Antonio should he fail to repay the money on time.

“Go, good Tubal,” mutters Shylock, descending further into his darkening dream of revenge and retribution. “At our synagogue, Tubal....”

Chapter Five Matches Made

Lady Portia touches Signior Bassanio’s hand. “I pray you, *tarry!*—*pause* a day or two before you hazard,” she pleads, “for if choosing wrong, I lose your company!” Failed suitors are bound by the pledge to leave. “Therefore forbear a while....”

With them in the casket-test hall are Nerissa, Gratiano and several attendants.

Usually assured and decisive, the modest lady is much perturbed. Given the conditions of her father’s will, she should simply await a successful suitor; but a warming heart heeds no reason, and during the delightful days following Bassanio’s return, her affection and admiration have quickly grown.

She tries to sound casual as she explains. “There’s something tells me I would not lose you—yet it is not *love*; still, you know yourself *hatred* counsels not in such a quality....

“But lest you should not understand me well... and because a maiden hath no tongue but *thought*... I would detain you here some *month* or two before you venture for me.”

She paces, wringing her hands. “I could teach you how to choose right... but I am then *forsworn*; and so will I never be! So may you miss me; but if you *do*, you’ll make me wish a *sin*: that I had been forsworn!”

She stops, trying valiantly to regain reserve as he gazes at her lovingly. “*Beshrew* your eyes, they have o’erlooked me and *divided* me! One *half* of me is yours, the other half *yours!* ‘Mine own,’ I *would* say—but if mine, then yours—and so *all* yours!

“*Oh*, these wicked times put *bars* between the owners and their *rights!*—and so, though *yours*, not yours!” At the prospect of losing Bassanio, rare anger flashes upon her lovely face. “Prove it so, let *Fortune* go to hell for it, *not I!*”

She looks yearningly at the gentleman man from Venice. “I speak too long; but ’tis to piece the time, to eke it and to draw it out in length, to stay you from election,” she admits.

Bassanio, who had returned to Belmont entranced, is now enthralled. He, too, now pleads. “Let me choose!—for as I am, I live upon the rack!”

Her eyebrows rise. “Upon the *rack*, Bassanio?” Such torment is for traitors. “Then confess what *treason* there is, mingled with your love!”

“*None* but the ugly treason of *worry*, which makes me fear for the enjoying of my love! There may as well be amity and life ’tween *snow* and *fire* as treason and my love!”

Portia pretends to be suspicious. “Aye, but I *fear*: you speak upon the rack where men are enforced to speak *anything!*”

“Promise me *life*, and I’ll confess the *truth*,” counters Bassanio.

“Well, then confess and live!”

“Confess *in love* had been the very *sum* of my confession!” He takes her hand firmly. “Oh, happy torment, when my torturer doth teach me *answers* for deliverance!”

He knows—as does she—that he must now choose. “But let me to my fortune and the caskets.”

“Away, then,” says Portia, turning pale. “I am locked in one of them; if you do love me, you will find me out.” She turns to her other companions. “Nerissa and the rest, stand all aloof.

“Let music sound while he doth make his choice. Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end, fading in music! So that the comparison may stand more proper, my eye shall be the stream and watery death-bed for him,” she says, tearfully.

She brightens. “He may *win!*—and what is music then? *Then* is music even as the *flourish* when true subjects bow to a new-crownèd *monarch!*”

“Such it is as are those dulcet sounds in break of day that creep into the dreaming bridegroom’s ear, and summon him to marriage!”

As a servant draws the curtain aside, she chews her lip, and Bassanio moves toward the heavy table.

Portia watches intently. *Now he goes, with no less presence, but with much more love, than young Alcides when he did redeem the virgin tribute paid by Troy to the howling sea-monster! I stand for the sacrifice; the rest aloof are the Dardanian wives, with bleared visages come forth to view the issue of the exploit.*

Go, Hercules! Live thou, I live! With much, much more dismay I view the fight than thou that makest the fray!

Bassanio stands before the caskets. While he ponders, the lady’s most loyal musician, a lutenist, plays and sings a dirge—for preference based on appearance:

*“Tell me, where is fancy bred,
In the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourishèd?
It is engenderèd in the eyes,
With gazing fed. But when it lies,
In the cradle fancy dies.
Let us all ring fancy’s knell
I’ll begin it: Ding, dong, bell!
Ding, dong, bell!”*

Hearing the solemn song—but not noting its five rhymes for *lead*—Bassanio ponders it: *So may the outward shows be least themselves; the world is ever deceived with ornament. In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt but, being seasoned with a gracious voice, obscures the show of evil? In religion, what damnèd error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair argument?*

There is no vice so simple but assumes some mark of virtue on its outward parts. How many cowards, whose hearts are all as false as stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins the beards of Hercules and frowning Mars, who, inward searched, have livers white as milk! And these assume but valour’s excrescence to render them redoubted.

Look on beauty, and you shall see ’tis purchased by the weight—which therein works a miracle in nature: making them lightest that wear the most of it! Those crispèd, snaky golden locks—which make such wanton gambols with the wind upon supposed fairness—are such, often known to be the dowry of a second head, the skull that bred them now in the sepulchre!

Women can wear tresses made from the hair of cadavers—but not those of gentlewomen.

Thus adornment is but the gilded shore to a most dangerous sea, the beauteous scarf veiling a fallen beauty—in a word, the seeming truth which cunning times put on to entrap the wisest!

Ignoring the caskets’ engraving, he muses. *Therefore, thou gaudy gold, hard food for Midas, I will none of thee! Nor none of thee, thou pale and common drudge ’tween man and man!*

But thou, thou meagre lead, which rather threatenest than dost promise aught, thy paleness moves me more than eloquence.

And here choose I! Joy be the consequence!

He steps to the casket.

Portia is overjoyed. Grasping Nerissa’s hand tightly she can barely breathe. *Now all the other passions fleet to air!—doubtful thoughts, and rash-embracèd despair, and shuddering fear, and green-eyed jealousy!*

O Love, be moderate! Allay thy ecstasy; in measure rein thy joy; scant this excess! I feel too much thy blessing!—make it less, for fear I surfeit!

Bassanio has received the key and turned it in the lock. “What find I here?”

He opens the casket. "Fair Portia's portrait!" He holds up her picture—and is captivated even further. "What demi-god hath come so near Creation? *Move* these eyes?—or, rather, riding on the balls of *mine* seem they in motion! Here are open lips, parted with sugar breath, so sweet a bar as *should* sunder such sweet friends! Here in her hair the painter plays the spider, and hath woven a golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men, held faster than gnats in cobwebs!

"But her *eyes!*—how could he *see* to do them? Having made *one*, methinks it would have power to steal both of *his*, and leave itself unfinished!" He turns to find Portia beside him, her glistening eyes on his.

Smiling at her, he lowers the painting. "Yet look how far the subject of my praise doth wrong this shadow, underprizing it, so far this shadow doth limp behind the substance!"

He reaches into the lead-sheathed box. "Here's a scroll, containing the summary of my fortune." He reads aloud the words of Portia's father:

"You that choose not by the view,
Chancèd as fairly, and chose as true!
Since this fortune falls to you,
Be content, and seek no new!
If you be well pleased with this,
Then *hold* your fortune for your bliss:
Turn you to where your lady is
And claim her with a loving kiss!"

"A gentle scroll," says Bassanio softly. "Fair lady," he smiles, "by your leave: I come by note—to give, and to receive!"

The gentleman is in rapture. "Like one of two contending for a prize, who thinks he hath done well in people's eyes—hearing applause and universal shout, giddy in spirit, still gazing in a doubt whether these pearls of praise be his or no—so, thrice-fair lady, stand I, even so, as doubtful whether what I see be true, until confirmèd, signed—ratified by *you!*"

With that, they kiss—and Portia's confirmation is wholehearted.

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand, such as I am," says Portia simply. "Though for myself alone I would not be so ambitious as to wish myself much better; yet for *you* in my wish I would be *treble twenty* times myself!—a *thousand* times more fair, *ten thousand* times more rich!—that only to stand high in your accounting I might in virtue, beauties, livings, friends, *exceed* account!"

She has studied some music, mathematics and philosophy. "But the full sum of me is a sum of *some-ing*—which, in gross terms, is an *unlessoned girl*, unschooled, unpractisèd. Happily in this she is not yet so old but she may *learn*; happier than this, she is not bred so dull but she *can* learn; happiest of all is that her gentle spirit *commits* itself to yours to be directed, as from her lord, her governor, her *king!*

"Myself and what is mine, to you and yours is now converted. Just now I was the lord of this fair mansion, master of my servants, queen o'er myself.; but now, even now, this house, these servants and this same myself are yours, my lord."

She removes a gold ring from her hand. "I give them with *this ring*—which when you part from, lose, or give away, let it presage the ruin of your love, and be my vantage to exclaim on you!"

Bassanio slides the warm circle onto his left hand. "Madam, you have bereft me of all words—only my blood speaks to you in my veins! And there is such dazzling of my powers—as after some oration fairly spoke by a beloved prince, there doth appear among the buzzing, pleasèd multitude—where every something, being blent together, turns to a wild of nothing save of *joy*, expressed and not expressed!

"But when this ring parts from this finger, then parts *life* from *hence!*"—he puts a hand over his heart. "Oh, *then* be bold to say *Bassanio's dead!*"

The lovers kiss again; it takes a while, to the amusement of the charmed onlookers.

Nerissa comes forward. "My lord and lady, it is now our time, who have stood by and seen our wishes prosper, to cry, 'Good joy!' *Good joy*, my lord and lady!"

Gratiano is with her, smiling. "My lord Bassanio and my gentle lady, I wish you all the joy that *you* can wish, for I am sure you could wish no more from any *need*!"

"And when your honours mean to solemnize the bargain of your faith, I do beseech you that even at that time *I* may be married *too*!"

Bassanio beams. "With all my heart!" But he adds, teasing, "if thou canst get a *wife*!"

Gratiano takes Nerissa's hand. "I *thank* Your Lordship—*you* have got me one!"

"*My* eyes, my lord, can look as swiftly as yours!—you saw the mistress, I beheld the maid; you loved, and I loved in the intermission! No more pertains to you, my lord, than to me: your fortune stood upon the casket there, and so did mine, too, as the matter falls.

"For, wooing her until I'd swear *again*, then swearing until my very roof was *dry* with oaths of love,"—Nerissa playfully smacks his arm, "at last, from *promise* last I got the promise of this fair one here to have her love, provided that *your* fortune achieved her *mistress*."

"Is this true, Nerissa?" asks Portia.

"Madam, it *is*, so you stand pleasèd withal...."

Bassanio asks, "And do you, Gratiano, mean good faith?"

Gratiano looks at Nerissa—and, for once, he's completely earnest. "Yes, i' faith, my lord!"

"Our feast shall be much honoured in your marriage!" declares Bassanio.

Gratiano squeezes Nerissa's hand. "We'll bet them a thousand ducats we have the first boy!"

"What, and stake down?"—something wagered on the outcome.

"No," laughs Gratiano, "we shall ne'er win at *that* sport with stake *down*!" His betrothed blushes becomingly at the ribald quip.

The doors have been opened to admit new visitors.

"But who comes here?" asks Gratiano. "Lorenzo and his infidel! *What?*—and my old Venetian friend Salerio!"

"Lorenzo and Salerio, welcome hither," Bassanio tells the gentlemen, "if that the youth of my new interest here have power to bid you welcome. By *your* leave, sweet Portia, I bid my very friends and countrymen welcome!"

"So do *I*, my lord!" says she. "They are entirely welcome!"

"I thank Your Honour," says Lorenzo. "As for my part, my lord, my purpose was not to have seen you *here*," he admits, Jessica at his side. "But meeting with Salerio by the way, he did entreat me, past all saying nay, to come with him along."

"I did, my lord," says Salerio, gravely, "and I have *reason* for it." He gives Bassanio a letter. "Signior Antonio commends him to you."

"Ere I ope his letter, I pray you, tell me how my good friend doth!" says Bassanio eagerly.

Salerio's expression reveals his concern. "Not sick, my lord, unless it be in mind; nor well, unless in mind. His letter there will show you his state."

Gratiano regards Lorenzo and Jessica. "Nerissa, cheer yon stranger; bid her welcome!"

"Your *hand*, Salerio!" he says, and they shake hands warmly. "What's the news from Venice? How doth that royal merchant, good Antonio? I know he will be glad of our success! We are the *Jasons*—we have won the *fleece*!"

Salerio nods; but he says, sadly, "I would you had won the *fleet* that he hath lost."

Portia watches her affianced as he reads—and she frowns. *There are some cruel contents in yon same paper*, she thinks, *that steal the colour from Bassanio's cheek—some dear friend dead; else nothing in the world could turn so much the constitution of any constant man!*

What?—worse and worse! She steps forward. "With leave, Bassanio, *I* am half your self, and I must freely have the half of anything that this same paper brings you!"

Bassanio looks up, alarmed. "Oh, sweet Portia, here are a few of the unpleasant'st words that ever blotchèd paper!"

“Gentle lady, when I did first impart my love to you, I freely told you all the wealth I had ran in my veins: I was a gentleman, I told you. True—and yet, dear lady, in rating myself at nothing, you shall see how much I was a *braggart*! When I told you my estate, I should then have told you that it was *worse* than nothing; for, indeed, I have indebted myself to a dear *friend*, indebted my friend to his sheer *enemy*, to feed my means!

“Here is a letter, lady—the paper as the *body* of my friend, and every word in it a gaping *wound*, issuing life-blood!”

He turns to the newcomers. “But is it true, Salerio? Have *all* his ventures failed? What, not *one* hit? From Tripolis, from Mexico and England, from Lisbon, Barbary and India, and *not one vessel* ’scape the dreadful touch of merchant-marring rocks?”

“Not one, my lord,” Salerio reports. “Besides, it would appear that if he *had* present the money to discharge the Jew, Shylock *would not take it!*”

“Never did I know a creature that did bear the *shape* of man to be so keen and greedy as to *confound Man!* He plies the duke at morning and at night, and doth *impeach the freedom of the state* if they deny him justice! *Twenty merchants*, the duke *himself*, and the magnificoes of greatest port have all implored him; but none can drive him from the injurious plea for *’justice’*—for *forfeiture*, and *his bond!*”

“When I was with him,” Jessica tells them, “I have heard him swear to Tubal and to Chus, his countrymen, that he would rather have Antonio’s flesh than *twenty times* the value of the sum that he did owe him! And I know, my lord,” she adds direly, “if law, authority and power deny not, it will go hard with poor Antonio!”

Portia asks, “Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?”

“The *dearest* friend to me!—the kindest *man*, the best-conditioned and unwearied spirit in doing courtesies, and one in whom the ancient Roman honour more appears than any other that draws breath in Italy!”

“What sum owes he the Jew?”

“For *me*, *three thousand ducats!*”

“What, *no more?*” cries Portia. “Pay him *six thousand*, and deface the bond! *Double* six thousand—and then treble *that!*—before a friend of this description shall lose a *hair* through Bassanio’s fault!

“First go with me to church and call me *wife*, and then away to Venice to your friend! For never shall you lie by Portia’s side with an unquiet soul! You shall have gold to pay the petty debt twenty times over! When it is paid, bring your true friend along.

“My maid Nerissa and myself meantime will live as maids and widows,” she says with a laugh. “Come, *away!*—for you shall hence upon your *wedding* day! Bid your friends welcome, show a merry cheer! Since you are dearly bought, I will love you dear!

“But let me hear the letter of your friend.”

He reads: “Sweet Bassanio, my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew is forfeit.

“And since in paying it it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and me, if I might but *see* you at my death!

“Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.””

Portia is deeply moved—and she understands what Antonio’s sacrifice has meant for *her*. “Oh, love, dispatch all business and be *gone!*”

“Since I have your good leave to go away, I *will* make haste,” says Bassanio, kissing her hand. “But, till I come again, no bed shall e’er be guilty of my stay—no rest be interposer ’twixt us twain!”

Chapter Six New Help

Shylock is irate. Antonio had failed meet his obligation, he had been arrested, and he was being held in custody to secure his bond of flesh. But now the debtor, thinner and pale, stands here before the creditor on a street in the ghetto of Venice.

“Jailer, look to *him!*” growls Shylock. “Tell not *me* of mercy!—this is the fool that lent out money *gratis!* Jailer, look to *him!*”

“Hear me yet, good Shylock,” pleads Antonio.

“I’ll have my *bond!* Speak not against my bond!” says Shylock. “I have sworn an *oath* that I will have my bond! Thou calledst me *dog* before thou hadst a cause; and since I am a dog, beware my *fangs!* The duke shall grant me *justice!*”

He frowns at the deputy. “I do *wonder*, thou worthless jailer, that thou art so simple as to come *abroad* with him at his request!”

Antonio tries again: “I pray thee, hear me speak—”

“I’ll have my bond!” Shylock insists. “I will *not* hear thee speak!—I’ll have my bond; and therefore speak no more! I’ll not be made a soft and dull-eyed *fool*, to shake the head, relent, and sigh, and yield to Christian intercessors!” He stalks away. “Follow not; I’ll have no speaking; I will have my *bond.*”

Solanio has accompanied Antonio. He watches Shylock go. “It is the most *impenetrable* cur that ever kept with men!”

Antonio is disheartened. “Let him alone. I’ll follow him no more with bootless prayers. He seeks my *life!* His reason well I know: I oft delivered from his forfeitures many who have at times made moan to me; for that he hates me.”

Solanio holds out hope: “I am sure the duke will never grant *this* forfeiture to hold!”

But Antonio shakes his head. “For the assurance that strangers need from us in Venice, the duke *cannot deny recourse of law.* Since in trade and profit the city consorteth with all nations, denying it would much *impeach* the justice of this *state.*”

“Therefore, go.” He smiles wanly, looking down at his now loose-fitting clothes. “These griefs and losses have so abated me that I shall hardly *spare* a pound of flesh tomorrow to my bloody creditor!

“Well, jailer, *on.*”

“Pray God *Bassanio* come to see me pay his debt,” he moans, “and then I care not.”

Bassanio, Gratiano and Salerio have soon departed for Venice, taking along a heavy chest of gold for Antonio’s rescue. Lady Portia waves as they ride away.

“Madam, although I speak it in your presence,” says Lorenzo, “you have a noble and a truly godlike ideal of *amity*, which appears most strongly in bearing thus the absence of your lord!

“But if you knew to whom you show this honour—how *true* a gentleman you send relief, how *dear* a friend of my lord your husband—I know you would be prouder of the work than even your customary bounty can enforce in you!”

Portia smiles. “I never did repent for doing good, nor shall not now; for in companions who do converse and expend the time together, whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love, there must needs be a like proportion of lineaments, of manners and of spirit. Which makes me think that this Antonio, being the bosom lover of my lord, must needs be *like* my lord. If it be so, how little is the cost I have bestowed in purchasing the semblance of *my* soul from out the state of hellish misery!

“This comes too near the praising of myself; therefore no more of it. Hear other things.

“Lorenzo, I commit into your hands the husbandry and manage of my house until my lord’s return. For mine own part, I have toward heaven breathed a secret vow to live in prayer and

contemplation, attended only by Nerissa, here, until her husband and my lord return. There is a monastery two miles off, and there will we abide.

“I do desire you not to deny this imposition, the which my love and some necessity now lays upon you.”

“Madam, with all my heart, I shall obey you in all fair commands!” pledges Lorenzo.

“My people do already know my mind,” Portia tells him, “and will acknowledge you and Jessica in place of Lord Bassanio and myself. And so farewell till we shall meet again!”

Lorenzo bows. “Fair thoughts and happy hours attend on you.”

Jessica curtsies. “I wish your ladyship all heart’s content.”

“I thank you for your wish, and am well pleased to wish it back on you! Fare you well!”

As Lorenzo and Jessica go with the chief steward of the extensive Belmont estate, Portia calls forth a trusted courier to undertake a critical mission; he comes to her and bows.

“Now, Balthasar, as I have ever found thee honestly true, so let me find thee still! Take this same letter, and use thou all the endeavour of a *man in speed* to Padua, to *Doctor Bellario*! See thou render this into my cousin’s hand. And, look you, what notes and garments he doth give thee, *bring* them—I pray thee, with *all imagined speed* unto the project!—to the common *ferry* which trades to Venice!” Although Venetians can travel by gondola among the many canals within the city, to reach it from the mainland, two and a half miles away, one must cross the water by ferry.

“Waste no time in words, but get thee *gone*!” says Portia. “I shall be there before thee.”

“Madam, I go with all available speed!” cries Balthasar, already dashing toward the stable.

“Come on, Nerissa,” says Portia. “I have work in hand that you yet know not of! We’ll see our husbands before they *think* of us!”

Nerissa laughs. “Shall they *see* us?”

“They shall, Nerissa!—but in such clothing that they shall think we are accomplished with what we lack!

“I’ll hold thee any wager,” she says merrily, “when we are both accoutred like young *men*, I’ll prove the prettier fellow of the two!—and wear my *dagger* with the bolder grace, and speak the change between boy and man with a *great voice*, and turn two mincing steps into a *manly stride*!”

She strikes a haughty pose. “And speak of *frays* like a fine, bragging youth!—and tell quaint lies—how honourable ladies *sought* my love—which I denying, they fell sick and died!” Grandly, she waves away the annoyance: “I could not do withal!”

Laying a hand on one cheek in mock distress, she mouths a silent *Oh!* of dismay. “Then I’ll *repent*, and wish, for all that, that I had not killed them.” Nerissa laughs at the satire.

Portia laughs, too. “And *twenty* of these puny lies I’ll tell, so that men shall swear I have discontinued school above a twelvemonth! I have within my mind a thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks, which I will practise!”

But Nerissa is puzzled. “Why shall we turn to men?”

Portia laughs. “Fie, what a question’s *that* if thou wert near a *lewd* interpreter!

“But come, I’ll tell thee all my whole device when I am in my coach, which stays for us at the park gate.

“And therefore haste *away*, for we must measure twenty miles today!”

In the elaborate formal garden beside the mansion at Belmont, Jessica has encountered once again the redoubtable wit of young Launcelot Gobbo, now a liveried member of Signior Bassanio’s retinue, and—willy-nilly—something of a jester.

“Yes, *truly*,” he continues, “for, look you, the sins of the *father* are to be laid upon the children; in *that*, I promise ye, I *fear* for you! I was always plain with you, and so now I speak my agitation of the matter; for truly I think you are *damned*!”

“But be of good cheer: there is *one* hope in it that can do you any good. Yet that is but a kind of bastard hope neither....”

“And what hope is that, I pray thee?” she asks, amused.

“Marry, you may partly hope that your father got you *not*—that you are not the *Jew’s* daughter!”

Jessica laughs. “That *were* a kind of bastard hope, indeed! Were it so, the sins of my *mother* should be visited upon me!”

“Truly, then, I fear you are damned by father *and* mother!” He cites a mythological dilemma: “Thus when I shun Scylla, your father, I fall into Charybdis, your mother!”

Jessica frowns at the crude *fall into*, and hits his arm playfully.

“Well, you are *gone* both ways!” he argues glibly, spreading his hands wide.

But Jessica is serene. “I shall be saved by my *husband*; he hath made me a Christian.”

“Truly, the more to *blame*, he!” grumbles Launcelot. “We were Christians *enough* before: e’en as many as could live well, one beside another! This making of Christians will raise the price of hogs!—if we grow *all* to be pork-eaters, shortly we shall not have a rasher on the coals for *any* money!”

Jessica pretends to scold: “I’ll tell my *husband* what you say, Launcelot! Here he comes!”

Lorenzo joins them; he feigns a frown. “I shall grow *jealous* of you shortly, Launcelot, if you thus get my wife into corners!”

Jessica giggles. “Nay, you need not fear us, Lorenzo: Launcelot and I are out! He tells me flatly there is no mercy for me in heaven because I am a Jew’s daughter; and he says you are no *good* member of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians, you raise the price of *bacon*!”

Lorenzo knows that servants accompanied foreign visitors to Belmont; he invents an indiscretion: “I shall answer *that* better to the commonwealth than *you* can for the getting up of a woman’s belly!—the Moor is *with child* by you, Launcelot!”

The boy is undaunted: “It *is* much that the Moor should be more than her *season*; but if she be *less* than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I *took* her for!”

Lorenzo laughs, shaking his head. “Today *every* fool can play upon a word! I think the *best* grace of wit will shortly turn into *silence*, and discourse grow commendable in none but *parrots*!” He motions toward the mansion. “Go in, sirrah; bid them prepare for dinner.”

“That is *done*, sir: they have all stomachs”—appetites.

“Goodly *Lord*, what a wit-snapper are you! Then bid them *prepare* dinner.”

The clown takes “prepare” as *setting the tables*. “That is done, *too*, sir—but ‘cover’ is the word.”

“Will you *cover* then, sir?” demands Lorenzo.

“Not *so*, sir, neither!—I know *my* duty!” *Cover* can also mean *wear a hat*, and by rank he is not entitled do so at table, as gentlemen may.

“Yet *more* quarrelling with th’ occasion! Wilt thou show the whole *wealth* of thy wit in an *instant*? I pray thee, understand a plain man in his plain meaning: go to thy fellows, bid them cover the table; serve in the meat, and we will come in to dinner!”

Launcelot nods. “As for the table, sir,” he says with high dignity, “it shall be served on; as for the meat, sir, it shall be covered; as for your coming in to dinner, sir—” He sees Lorenzo starting for him. “—why, let it be as humours and conceits shall govern!” Nimbly ducking a swing of Lorenzo’s hat, he saunters to the kitchen.

“Oh, a *choice* discretion, how his words are *suit*ed!”—pressed into service, laughs Lorenzo. “The fool hath planted in his memory an *army* of good words! But I do know of *many* fools garnished like him, who stand in better *place*, and for *one* *tricksy* word defy the subject matter!

“How cheerest thou, Jessica?” She replies with a smile—and a kiss. “And now, good sweet, say thy opinion: how dost thou like the Lord Bassanio’s wife?”

“Past all expressing!” She moves closer to him. “It is very meet the Lord Bassanio live an *upright* life,” she says suggestively. “For, having such a blessing *in* his lady, he finds the joys of *heaven* here on earth!—and if on earth he do not *measure* it,” she adds, unabashed, “then in reason he should never *come* into heaven!”

“Why, if two *gods* should play some heavenly match, and on the wager lay two earthly women, and Portia one, there must be *something else* pawned with the *other*, for the poor rude world hath not her fellow!”

Lorenzo’s grin grows as he holds her: “Even as she is for a wife, such a *husband* hast thou in *me!*”

Jessica cocks her head to one side and touches his cheek. “Nay,” she says, “but ask *my* opinion, too, of that!”

Lorenzo kisses her lightly. “I will—anon; first, let us go to dinner.”

Jessica pulls herself against him. “Nay, let me *praise* you while I have an *appetite*....”

“No, pray thee, let it serve for *table*-talk; then, howsome’er thou speak’st, ’mong other things I shall digest it.”

“Well, I’ll set you forth!” the young woman promises; and her flashing eyes confirm it.

Chapter Seven Venetian Equity

A Court of Justice convenes, with the Duke of Venice presiding, to hear the case against Signior Antonio. In attendance, crowding the hall, are many of the city’s wealthy merchants and powerful lords, along with lawyers and clerks of the high court.

“What, is Antonio here?” asks the duke, taking his seat..

Frail and weary from lack of sleep, his hands bound before him, the accused nobleman follows a deputy to the front of the courthouse chamber. “Ready, so please Your Grace.”

The duke speaks from the judge’s bench. “I am sorry for thee: thou art come to answer a stony adversary, an inhuman wretch incapable of pity, void and empty from any dram of mercy!”

Antonio smiles. “I have heard that Your Grace hath ta’en great pains to modify his rigorous course. But since he stands obdurate, and no lawful means can carry me out of his envy’s reach, I do oppose my patience to his fury, and am armèd to suffer, with a quietness of spirit, the very tyranny and rage of *his*.”

“Go, one, and call the Jew into the court,” the duke orders.

“He is ready at the door,” says Salerio, opening it. “He comes, my lord.”

“Make room, and let him stand before our face,” says the judge.

The usurer—having permission, now, to enter—walks to the center and stands looking up the judge.

The duke speaks calmly. “Shylock, the world thinks—and I think so, too—that thou but lead’st this *fashion* of thy malice unto the last hour of an act.

“And *then*, ’tis thought, thou’lt show thy mercy, and remorse more strange than is thy strangely apparent cruelty! And where thou now exact’st the penalty, which is a pound of this poor merchant’s flesh, thou wilt not only loose the *forfeiture*, but, touched with human gentleness and love, forgive a portion of the *principal*, glancing an eye of *pity* on his losses, that have of late so huddled on his back—enough to press a *royal* merchant down and pluck commiseration with his state from brassy bosoms and rough hearts of flint, from stubborn Turks and Tartars, never trained to offices of tender courtesy!

“We all expect a *gentle answer*, Jew!”

Shylock faces the presiding officer with cold determination. “I have possessed Your Grace of what I purpose; and by our holy Sabbath have I sworn to have the due-in-forfeit of my bond.

“If you *deny* it, let the danger light upon your charter, and your city’s freedom!”

He hears grumbling among the worried magnificoes attending.

“You’d ask me *why* I rather choose to have a weight of carrion flesh than to receive three thousand ducats; I’ll not answer that but to say *it is my humour!*”

“Is it answered?”

“What if my house be troubled with a *rat*, and I be pleased to give ten thousand ducats to have it *baned*?”

“What?—are you *answered* yet?”

“Some men there are that love not a gaping *pig*; some that are mad if they behold a *cat*—and others, when the *bagpipe* sings i’ the nose, cannot *contain their urine!* For affection, *mistress* of passion, sways it to the mood of what she likes or loathes.

“Now for your answer: as there is no firm *reason* to be rendered why *he* cannot abide a roasting pig; why *he* a harmless household cat—why *he* a swollen bagpipe, but must of force yield to such inevitable shame as to offend *himself*, being offended!—so can *I* give no reason.

“Nor will I!—not more than a *lodgèd hate* and a certain *loathing* I bear Antonio, that I follow thus a *losing* suit against him!”

“*Are you answered?*”

Bassanio replies hotly: “This is no answer, thou unfeeling man, to *excuse* the current of thy cruelty!”

Says Shylock, not turning from the judge, “I am not bound to please thee with my answers.”

“Do all men *kill* the things they do not love?”

“Hates any man the thing he would *not* kill?”

“Not every offence is a hate at *first*,” argues Bassanio.

“What?—wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee *twice*?”

Antonio, humiliated by days of futile entreaty, interrupts. “I pray you, think you to question with the *Jew*?” he asks Bassanio. “You may as well go stand upon the beach and bid the main *flood* abate its usual height; you may as well use question with the *wolf* why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb; you may as well forbid the mountain pines to wag their high tops and to make no noise, when they are fretted with the gusts of heaven! You may as well do *anything* most hard, as seek to *soften* that—than which what’s harder?—his *Jewish* heart!”

“Therefore, I do beseech you, make no more offers, use no further means, but with all brief and plain conveniency let me have judgment, and the Jew his will.”

Bassanio tries a potent argument. “For thy *three* thousand ducats, here is *six!*”

Shylock, his back still to Bassanio, answers: “If every ducat in six thousand ducats were in six parts, and every part a ducat, I would not draw them! I would have my *bond*.”

“How shalt thou hope for *mercy*, *rendering* none?” demands the duke.

Shylock spreads his arms. “What judgment shall *I* dread, doing no wrong?” His face hardens into an expression of utter contempt, as he turns to survey the room. “You have among you many a purchased *slave*, which, like your asses and your dogs and mules, you use in abject and in slavish parts—because you *bought* them! Shall I say to you, ‘Let them be free, marry them to your heirs! Why sweat *they* under burthens? Let their beds be made as soft as yours, and let their palates be seasoned with such viands!’

“You will answer, ‘The slaves are *ours!*’ So do *I* answer *you*: the pound of flesh which I demand of him is dearly bought; ’tis *mine*, and I *will have it!*”

“If you deny me, *fie* upon your *law!*—there is no force in the decrees of Venice!”

“I stand for *judgment!*” he cries. “*Answer!* Shall I *have* it?”

The judge fumes at Shylock’s intractability. He looks around the courtroom in frustration. “Upon my power I may *dismiss* this court, unless Bellario, a learnèd doctor, whom I have sent for to determine this, come here today!”

Salerio tells the court, “My lord, here stays without a messenger with letters from the doctor, new-come from Padua..”

“Call the messenger, bring us the letter;” says the duke. Salerio steps out into the corridor.

“Good cheer, Antonio!” says Bassanio quietly, at his side. “*What, man—courage yet! The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones and all, ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood!*”

Antonio is disconsolate. “*I am the tainted wether of the flock, meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit drops earliest to the ground, and so let me! You cannot better be employed, Bassanio, than to live still, and write mine epitaph.*”

A lawyer’s clerk enters the courtroom. “Came you from Padua, from Bellario?” the presiding judge asks him. The University of Padua is renowned for its school of law.

The clerk bows. “From both, my lord. Bellario greets Your Grace.” He presents a letter to the duke, who opens it and begins to read.

Shylock leans against a table, draws his dagger, and hones its cutting edge on the bottom of his shoe.

“Why dost thou whet thy knife so carefully?” asks Bassanio, irked by the churlishness.

“To cut the forfeiture from that bankrupt there.”

Gratiano scowls. “Not on thy sole, but on thy *soul*, harsh Jew, thou makest thy knife keen! But no metal—no, not the *hangman’s* axe!—can bear half the keenness of *thy sharp envy!* Can no *prayers* pierce thee?”

Shylock returns the look. “No—none that *thou* hast wit enough to make.”

“*Oh, be thou damnèd, execrable dog!*” cries Gratiano. “And for thy *life* let *Justice* be accused! Thou almost makest me waver in my faith!—to hold opinion with Pythagoras that souls of *animals* infuse themselves into the trunks of men! *Thy* currish spirit is governed a *wolf* hanged for human slaughter; even from the *gallows* did his fell soul fleet, and whilst thou lay in thy unhallowèd dam, infused itself in *thee!* For thy desires are *wolvish!*—bloody, starved and *ravenous!*”

Shylock is imperturbable. “Till thou canst rail the *seal* from off my *bond*, thou but offend’st thy lungs to speak so loud. Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall to cureless ruin. I stand here for *law.*” He continues to hone the blade.

At the front, the justice speaks. “This letter from Bellario doth commend a young and learnèd doctor to our court. Where is he?”

“He attendeth here hard by,” the law clerk replies, “to know your answer whether you’ll admit him.”

“With all my heart!” says the duke. “Some three or four of you go give him courteous conduct to this place! Meantime the court shall hear Bellario’s letter.”

He reads aloud: “‘Your Grace shall understand that, at the receipt of your letter, I am very sick. But at the instant that your messenger came, in loving visitation with me was a young doctor of Rome; his name is Balthasar.

“I acquainted him with the cause in controversy between the Jew and Antonio the merchant. We turned o’er many books together. He is furnished with my opinion, which—bettered with his own learning, the greatness whereof I cannot enough commend!—comes with him, at my importuning, to fill up Your Grace’s request in my stead.

“I beseech you, let his lack of *years* be no impediment, nor let him lack reverend estimation, for I never knew so young a body with so old a head! I leave him to your gracious acceptance, whose trial shall better publish his commendation!”

The judge regards the courtroom. “You hear the learned Bellario, what he writes. And here, I take it, is the doctor come.” A slender, dignified young man with delicate features enters the room; he wears black-rimmed spectacles, and is dressed in the robe and cap of a doctor of laws. “Give me your hand,” says the duke warmly. “Come you from old Bellario?”

The lawyer shakes his hand. “I did, my lord.”

“You are *welcome!* Take your place. Are you acquainted with the difference that this present question holds in the court?”

The professor nods. "I am informèd thoroughly of the cause. Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?"

"Antonio and old Shylock, both stand forth," says the duke, waving them forward.

The scholar can see the gabardine. "Is your name Shylock?"

"Shylock is my name."

"Of a strange nature is the suit you follow; yet in such rule that the Venetian law cannot impugn you as you do proceed," says the expert in jurisprudence. He looks at Antonio. "You stand within his danger, do you not?"

Antonio nods, wearily. "Aye, so he says."

"Do you confess the bond?"

"I do."

"Then must the Jew be merciful."

Shylock is loudly indignant. "On what *compulsion* must I? Tell me that!"

"The quality of mercy is not constrained; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: it blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.

"'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes the thronèd monarch better than his crown.

"His sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings. But *mercy* is above this sceptred sway; it is enthronèd in the *hearts* of kings; it is attributed to God Himself. And earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice!

"Therefore, Jew, though justice be thy plea, consider this: that by the course of *justice*, *none* of us should see salvation; we do pray for *mercy*; and that same prayer doth teach us all to *render* the deeds of mercy.

"I have spoken thus much to mitigate the 'justice' of *thy* plea—which if thou follow, this strict court of Venice must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there."

"My deeds upon my head!" says Shylock defiantly. "I crave the *law*, the penalty and forfeit of my *bond*!"

"Is he not able to discharge the money?" asks Balthasar, adjusting his eyeglasses.

"*Yes!*—here I tender it *for* him in the court!" cries Bassanio. "Yea, *twice* the sum! If that will not suffice, I will be bound to pay it *ten* times o'er, on forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart!

"If this will not suffice, it must appear that *malice* bears down *truth!*—and I beseech you: wrest, once, the law to your *authority!* To do a great *right*, do a little wrong, and curb this cruel devil from his will!"

"It must not be!" the Paduan warns. "There is no power in Venice can alter a decree establishèd; 'twill be recorded for a *precedent*, and many an error by the same example will rush into the state." He shakes his head. "It cannot be."

"A Daniel come to judgment! Yea, a *Daniel!*" cries Shylock in delight. "O wise young judge, how I do *honour* thee!"

"I pray you, let me look upon the bond," says the professor.

"Here 'tis, most reverend doctor, here it is!"

The man of law examines the paper briefly; he looks up at Bassanio, then at the usurer. "Shylock, there's *thrice* thy money offered thee."

"An oath, an *oath!* I have an oath in *heaven!*" Shylock insists. "Shall I lay *perjury* upon my soul? *No!*—not for *Venice!*"

The lawyer pushes the round-rim spectacles upward on his nose, and looks further through the document.

He addresses the duke solemnly. "Why, this bond is forfeit; and lawfully, by this, the Jew may claim a pound of flesh, to be by him cut off nearest the merchant's heart."

He turns back to Shylock. "Be merciful: take *thrice* thy money; bid me tear the bond."

“When it is *paid* according to the *tenor*,” says Shylock. “It doth appear you are a worthy judge; you know the law—your exposition hath been most sound. I charge you, by the law whereof you are a well-deserving pillar, proceed to judgment!”

“By my soul I swear there is no power in the tongue of *man* to alter me!” A faint smile flickers on the lawyer’s lips, but Shylock reiterates: “I stay here on my *bond!*”

Antonio is exhausted. “Most heartily I do beseech the court to give the judgment.”

“Why then, thus it is,” Balthasar tells him. “You must prepare your bosom for his knife,—”

“O noble judge!” cries Shylock, “O excellent young man!”

“—for the *intent* and *purpose* of the law hath full relation to the penalty which here appeareth due upon the bond.”

“’Tis very true!” says Shylock. “O wise and upright judge! How much more elder art thou than thy looks!”

The doctor points a slender finger at Antonio’s chest. “Therefore lay bare your bosom.”

“Aye, his breast!—so says the bond, doth it not, noble judge?” asks Shylock eagerly.

“Nearest his *heart*’—those are the very words!”

“It is so. Are there balances here to weigh the flesh?”

Shylock nods. “I have them ready.”

“Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your charge, to stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death?”

“Is it so nominated in the bond?”

“It is not so expressed; but what of that? ’Twere good you do so much for charity.”

Shylock makes a great show of poring over the document. “I cannot find it; ’tis not in the bond.”

Balthasar turns to Antonio. “You, merchant, have you anything to say?”

“But little. I am resigned and well preparèd,” he says quietly, ready to pay the penalty. “Give me your hand, Bassanio. Fare you well! Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you. For herein Fortune shows herself more kind than is her custom: it is ever her use to let the wretched man *outlive* his wealth, to view with hollow eye and wrinkled brow an age of *poverty*—from which lingering penance of such misery doth she cut *me* off!”

“Commend me to your honourable wife. Tell her the process of Antonio’s end; say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death, and, when the tale is told, bid her be judge whether Bassanio had not once a love!”

“Repent but you that you shall lose your friend, as he repents not that he pays your debt!” He smiles at Bassanio with a flash of his old humor: “For if the Jew do cut but deep enough, I’ll pay it presently with all my heart!”

“Antonio, I am married to a wife who is as dear to me as *life itself*,” Bassanio tells him, “but life itself, my wife, and all the *world* are not with me esteemed above thy life! I would lose all, aye, sacrifice them all here to this devil, to deliver you!”

Thinks the scholar, *Your wife would give you little thanks for that, if she were by to hear you make the offer!*

Gratiano moves to Antonio’s side. “I have a wife, whom I protest I love! I would she were in *heaven*, so she could entreat some power to change this curish Jew!”

Thinks the law clerk from Padua, *’Tis well you offer it behind her back! The wish would make else an unquiet house!*

Shylock is disgusted. *These be Christian husbands! I have a daughter; I would that any of the stock of Barrabas had been her husband rather than a Christian!* But aloud he says only, “We trifle time. I pray thee, pursue sentence.”

At a nod from the duke, the professor raises a hand to pronounce judgment. “A pound of that same merchant’s flesh is *thine*. The law doth give it; the court awards it.”

“Most *rightful* judge!” says Shylock, bowing.

“And *you* must cut this flesh from off his breast: The court awards it, and the law allows it.”

“Most *learnèd* judge! A sentence!” He moves toward Antonio, the sharp knife gleaming in his grip. “Come, prepare!”

Tarry a little,” says the distinguished visitor, “there is something else. “This bond doth give thee here no jot of *blood*; the words expressly are ‘a pound of flesh.’ Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh—but, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed one drop of Christian *blood*, thy lands and goods are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate unto the state of Venice.”

“O *upright* judge!” cries Gratiano. “*Mark*, Jew! O *learnèd* judge!”

Shylock is stunned. “Is that the law?”

The lawyer nods. “Thyself shalt *see* the act—for, as thou urgest *justice*, be assured thou shalt *have* justice—more than thou desirest!”

“O *learnèd* judge!” crows gleeful Gratiano. “*Mark*, Jew! A *learnèd* judge!”

Shylock sheathes the dagger. He goes to Bassanio. “I take this offer, then; pay the bond *thrice*, and let the Christian go.”

“Here is the money,” says Bassanio, proffering the chest of gold ducats on a table.

But the scholar intercedes. “*Soft!*—the Jew shall have *all justice!* *Soft!*—no *haste*—he shall have *nothing but the penalty.*”

Gratiano fairly dances with delight. “Oh, Jew! An *upright* judge—a *learnèd* judge!”

“Therefore prepare thee to cut off the flesh,” the visitor orders. “Shed thou no *blood*, nor cut thou less nor more but just a *pound* of flesh,” he warns. “If thou cut’st more or less than a just pound, be it but so much as makes it light or heavy in the substance on the division of the twentieth part of one poor *scruple*—nay, if the scale do turn but in the *estimation* of a hair!—thou *diest*, and all thy goods are confiscate!”

Gratiano jubilates: “A second Daniel, a *Daniel*, Jew! *Now*, infidel, I have you on the hip!”—like a wrestler throwing another.

“Why doth the Jew pause?” the judge asks Shylock. “Take thy forfeiture.”

“Give me my principal, and let me go.”

Bassanio is willing. “I have it ready for thee; here it is!” He lifts a sack of gold coins.

But Doctor Balthasar is rigid. “He hath refused it in the open court. He shall have merely justice and his bond.”

“A *Daniel*, still say I, a second *Daniel*,” laughs Gratiano. “I *thank* thee, Jew, for teaching me that word!”

Shylock pales. “Shall I not have barely my principal?”

The lawyer is adamant. “Thou shalt have nothing but the *forfeiture*—to be so taken *at thy peril*, Jew.”

“Why, then the devil give him good of it. I’ll no longer stay the question.” Shylock starts to leave, dismayed and disgusted.

The professor shakes his head. “*Tarry*, Jew. The law hath yet *another* hold on you. It is enacted in the laws of Venice: if it be proved against an alien that by direct or indirect attempts he seek the *life* of any citizen, the party ’gainst the which he doth connive shall seize *one half his goods*; the *other* half comes to the privy coffer of the state!

“And the offender’s *life* lies in the mercy of the duke only, ’gainst all other voice. In which predicament I say *thou* stand’st—for it appears, by manifest proceeding, that indirectly, and *directly*, too, thou hast contrived against the very life of the defendant; and thou hast incurred the danger formerly by me rehearsed.

“Down, therefore, and beg *mercy* of the duke!”

The onlookers’ general approval is audible.

“*Beg* that thou mayst have leave to *hang thyself!*” growls Gratiano. “But yet, thy wealth now being forfeit to the state, thou hast not left the value of a *cord!*—therefore thou must be hanged at the state’s charge!”

The duke raises a hand for silence. “So that thou shalt see the difference between our spirits,” he tells Shylock, “I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it. As for half thy wealth, it is *Antonio*’s; the other half comes to the general state—which your *humbleness* may drive down to a fine.”

“Aye, as for the *state*,” nods the visiting judge, “not for Antonio.”

Shylock is devastated. “Nay, take my *life* in all!—pardon not *that!* You take my house when you do take the prop that doth *sustain* my house; you take my *life* when you do take the *means* whereby I live!”

The lawyer from Padua goes to the man he has saved and unties the cord binding his hands. “What *mercy* can you render him, Antonio?”

Gratiano has a ready answer: “A *halter, gratis!*—nothing else, for God’s sake!”

But Antonio regards his enemy in a new way; recent experience of powerless poverty has softened his disposition. “So please it my lord the duke and all the court to drop the *fine* of one half his goods, I am content if he will let *me* have the other half *in use*—to render it, upon his death, unto the gentleman that lately stole his daughter.

“And two things provided *more*: that, in return for this favour he presently become a *Christian*; the other, that he do record here in the court all he dies possessed of as *gift* unto his son-in-law Lorenzo and his daughter.”

“He *shall* do this,” warns the duke, glaring at Shylock, “or else I do recant the pardon that I late pronounced here!”

“Art thou contented, Jew?” asks the young lawyer. “What dost thou say?”

“I am content.” He will retain the use of his wealth for business. He can simulate charitableness as well the gentiles; his heart will be Hebrew—and still beating.

“Clerk, draw a deed of gift,” the judge orders the young man.

“I pray you, give me leave to go from hence,” says Shylock quietly. “I am not well. Send the deed after me, and I will sign it.”

“Get thee gone,” says the duke, “—but *do* it!”

Ask Shylock walks past him and out of the courtroom, Gratiano mutters after: “In *christening* shalt thou have two *god-fathers*”—Antonio and the duke. “Had *I* been judge, thou shouldst have had *ten more*—to bring thee to the *gallows*, not the font!”

At the bench, the duke is mightily relieved. “Sir, I entreat you home with me to dinner!” he tells Balthasar.

“I humbly do desire pardon of Your Grace,” says the scholar, bowing. “I must away this night toward Padua, and it is meet I set forth immediately.”

“I am sorry that your leisure serves you not,” says the duke. “Antonio, gratify this gentleman, for, in my mind, you are much bound to him!” He and his attendants prepare to leave the courthouse.

Bassanio comes to the doctor of laws. “Most *worthy* gentleman,” he says, tears in his eyes, “I and my friend have by your wisdom been this day acquitted of grievous penalties!—in lieu whereof, three thousand ducats, due unto the Jew, we freely offer for your courteous pains withal!”

“And stand indebted, over and above, in *love* and *service* to you *evermore*,” says Antonio, his voice wavering with emotion.

The professor turns down the gold Portia provided. “He is well paid that is well satisfied; and I, delivering you, *am* satisfied—and therein do account myself well paid. My mind was never yet more *mercenary*.”

The clerk shows him the new document for Shylock’s signature; he nods and takes it. “I pray you, know me when we meet again,” he tells Bassanio. “I wish you well; and so I take my leave.” He bows and turns to go.

But Bassanio’s gratitude overwhelms him. “Dear sir, of force I must tempt you further: take *some* remembrance of us, as a *tribute*, not as a fee!”

“You press me far, and therefore I will yield,” says Balthasar. “Grant me *two things*, I pray you: not to *deny* me, and to *pardon* me.

“Give me your gloves,” he tells Antonio. “I’ll wear them for your sake.

“And, for *your* love,” he tells Bassanio, “I’ll take this *ring* from you—do not draw back your hand! I’ll take no more; and you in love shall not deny me this.”

But Bassanio’s right hand moves to touch Portia’s gift. “*This* ring, good sir—alas, it is a *trifle!*” he sputters. “I will not shame myself to give you *this!*”

“I will have nothing else, but only this,” says the doctor, examining it on Bassanio’s hand. “And now methinks I have a *mind* to it...”

Bassanio pleads. “There’s more depends on this than in the value! The *dearest ring in Venice* will I give you!—and find it out by proclamation!—only for *this*, I pray you, pardon me!”

The young scholar raises an eyebrow. “I see, sir, you are liberal in *offers*. You taught me first to *beg*—and now methinks you teach me how a beggar should be answered!”

Bassanio is distraught. “Good sir, this ring was given me by my *wife*; and when she put it on, she made me vow that I should never sell nor give nor lose it!”

The lawyer scoffs. “That ’scuse serves *many* men to save their gifts. If your wife be not a madwoman, and knew how well I have *deserved* the ring, she would not hold out enmity forever for giving it to me!

“Well, peace be with you.” With a curt bow, the doctor leads his clerk away.

Now Antonio pleads. “My Lord Bassanio, let him *have* the ring! Let his deservings and my love withal be valued against your wife’s commandment!”

Bassanio pulls the ring from his finger. “Go, Gratiano, run and overtake him! Give him the ring, and bring him, if thou canst, unto Antonio’s house. *Away!* Make *haste!*”

Gratiano, delighted with the professor’s performance, happily takes the ring and goes out to follow the two university men.

“Come, you and I will thither presently,” Bassanio tells his friend. “And in the morning, early, will we both fly toward Belmont! Come, Antonio.”

That kindly nobleman, his ordeal finally ended, goes home at last.

Chapter Eight Restoration

At sunset on a narrow street near Shylock’s dark, lonely home in the ghetto, Portia and Nerissa, still garbed as the travelers from Padua, pause briefly.

“Enquire the Jew’s house out, give him this deed, and let him sign it,” says the lady. “We’ll away tonight, and be home a day before our husbands!” She hands the paper to Nerissa. “This will be welcome to Lorenzo!”

And just then Gratiano reaches them. “Fair sir, you are well o’ertaken!” he tells the lawyer. “My Lord Bassanio, upon more advice, hath sent you here *this ring!*—and doth entreat your company at dinner!”

“*That* cannot be,” Balthasar tells him. “His ring I do accept most thankfully; and so, I pray you, tell him. Furthermore, I pray you, show my youth to old Shylock’s house.”

“That will I do,” says Gratiano.

The clerk tells the professor, “Sir, I would speak with you.” Nerissa draws Portia aside—and whispers mischievously, “I’ll see if I can get *my* husband’s ring, which I did make him swear to keep forever!”

“Thou mayst, I warrant,” says Portia gleefully. “We shall have *both* swearing that they did give the rings away to *men*, but we’ll outface them—and out-*swear* them, too!”

“Away,” says the lawyer loudly. “Make haste! Thou knowest where I will tarry”—by the landing of the ferry boat back to the mainland.

“Come, good sir,” says the clerk to Gratiano, “will you show me to this house?”

At Belmont the scent of roses wafts through warm night air from the garden’s lush bowers. On the slope of soft green lawn behind Lady Portia’s mansion overlooking the low hills, Lorenzo and his intended share a mellow moment suffused with romance.

“The moon shines bright,” he murmurs. “On a night such as this—when the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees, and they did make no noise—on such a night, methinks, *Troilus* mounted the Trojan walls and sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents where Cressid lay.”

But Trojan War mythology says the beautiful young lovers had only one night together. Jessica feels waggish. “In such a night did *Thisbe* fearfully o’ertrip the dew, and saw the *lion’s shadow* before it’s self—and dismayèd *ran away!*” In the Roman poet’s tale, both *Thisbe* and her lover, *Pyramus*, come to ruin.

Lorenzo tries again. “On such a night stood *Dido* with a willow in her hand upon the wild sea banks, and wished her love to come again to Carthage.” As Virgil tells it, *Dido* loved the Trojan hero *Aeneas*—who betrayed her.

Jessica grins as Lorenzo steps behind, arms enfolding her. “In such a night, *Medea* gathered the enchanted herbs that did renew old *Æson!*” The man was restored from impotence to youthful vigor.

Lorenzo laughs. “On such a night did *Jessica* steal from the wealthy Jew, and with an *unthrift* love did run from Venice as far as Belmont!”

“In such a night did young Lorenzo *swear* he loved her well, stealing her soul with many vows of faith,” she moans, “—and ne’er a *true* one!”

He laughs, tightening his arms around her. “On such a night did pretty Jessica, like a little shrew, *slander* her love!—but he forgave her!”

She laughs, turning. “I would out-*night* you, did nobody come, but, hark, I hear the footing of a man!”

Lorenzo releases her. “Who comes so fast in silence of the night?” he asks the messenger walking across the terrace.

“A friend,” the man replies with courtly dignity, despite his haste; he bows, hat in hand.

“A friend! What friend?—your name, I pray you, friend?”

“Stephano is my name; and I bring word my mistress will, before the break of day, be here at Belmont! She doth stray about by holy crosses,”—travels from church to church, “where she kneels and prays for happy wedlock hours.”

“Who comes with her?” asks Lorenzo.

“None with the holy hermit but her maid. I pray you, is my master yet returned?”

“He is not, nor we have heard from him. But go we in, I pray thee, Jessica, and let us prepare some ceremonious welcome for the mistress of the house!”

Just then from an open window comes a clamorous *whoop!*—and the strident, high-pitched noise of lips buzzing to mimic a fox-hunt bugle.

Lorenzo looks toward the dark building. “Who calls?”

A door flies open and out bursts Launcelot. Head tipped back, still trumpeting, eyes on the starry skies, he gives the hunter’s yell, “*Sola!*” then calls ahead, “Did you see Master Lorenzo? Master *Lorenzo! Sola, sola!*”

“Leave *hollaing*, man!” shouts Lorenzo over the noise. “*Here!*”

But young Launcelot enjoys attention. He squints at the three. “Where?” he asks Stephano, “*where?*”

“*Here!*” says Lorenzo, laughing in spite of himself. The reserved Stephano, long a member of Portia’s orderly household, raises a bushy gray eyebrow.

“Tell him there’s a post come from my master, with his horn full of *good news!* My master will be here *ere morning!*” cries Launcelot. The fool hurries back into Lord Bassanio’s new home.

“Sweet soul, let’s in, and there expect their coming,” says Lorenzo. “And yet no matter—why should we go *in*?”

“My friend Stephano, signify, I pray you, within the house that your mistress is at hand; and bring your music forth into the air!”

Stephano bows; he goes to summon sleeping servants, and to wake the musicians.

“How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!” says Lorenzo. “Here will we sit and let the sounds of music creep into our ears. Soft stillness and the night become the touches of sweet harmony.”

Along the black sky’s deep-blue horizon a shade of pink is blooming upward, hinting at the approach of dawn.

“Sit, Jessica,” he invites, and she joins him on the well-tended grass.

Lorenzo surveys the starry firmament, as an array of distant clouds begins to glow in shafts of sunlight. “Look how the floor of heaven is thick-inlaid with patterns of bright gold! There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st but in its motion like an angel sings, ever choiring to the young-eyed cherubins!

“Such harmony is in immortal souls; but whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.”

The musicians of Lady Portia’s court bring their instruments to the terrace. “Come, *ho!* and wake Diana with a hymn!” Lorenzo tells them. “With sweetest touches pierce your mistress’ ear, and draw her home with music!”

The players begin their gentle, mellifluous harmonies.

Jessica sighs. “I am never merry when I hear sweet music.”

“The reason is, your spirits are *attentive*,” says Lorenzo. “For do but note a wild and wanton *herd*—or a race of youthful and unhandled *colts*—fighting in mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud, which is the hot condition of their blood. If they but hear perchance a trumpet sound, or if any air of music touch their ears, you shall perceive them make a mutual stand, their savage eyes turned to a modest gaze by the sweet power of *music!*”

“Therefore did the poet feign that Orpheus could summon trees, stones and floods, since naught is so stockish, hard and full of rage but that *music* for a time doth change its nature!

“The man who hath no music in himself, nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils; the motions of his spirit are dull as night, and his affections dark as Erebus! Let no such man be trusted!”

Smiling, she presses a finger to his lips. “Mark the music....”

At her request, the lady’s carriage has stopped at Belmont’s stable; she asks her coachman and attendants to carry the baggage inside later. Portia and Nerissa, again in their customary attire, walk together along the dim lane up to the house.

“That light we see is burning in my hall,” says Portia, pointing. “How far that little candle throws its beams! So shines a good deed in a wicked world!”

Nerissa nods as they come up the rise. “When the moon still shone, we did not see the candle.”

“So doth the greater glory dim the less; a *substitute* shines brightly as a king until the king be by; and then his state empties itself as doth an inland brook into the main of waters.” They reach the edge of the garden. “Music—*hark!*”

“It is your music, madam, of the house.”

Portia pauses to listen in the twilight. “Their noting is good; they ‘see’ without respect”—are not hindered by lack of light. She smiles. “Methinks it sounds much *sweeter* than by day.”

“Silence bestows that virtue on it, madam.”

Portia concurs. “The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark—when neither is attended! And I think the nightingale, if she should sing by day, when every goose is cackling, would be thought

no better a musician than the wren. How many things by *season* are seasoned to their right praise and true perfection.”

The gentlewomen have reached the house. “Peace,” Portia tells the musicians, smiling as she walks across the terrace. She spots Lorenzo, sitting with his arm around Jessica, their heads tilted together, and points to the couple. “The moon sleeps with Endymion, and would not be awaked!”

Lorenzo hears her. “That is the voice, or I am much deceived, of *Portia!*” he says happily, rising to greet her, and offering a hand to help Jessica to her feet.

Portia laughs. “He knows me as the blind man knows the *cuckoo*, by the bad voice!”

“Dear lady, welcome home!” Lorenzo bows, and Jessica curtsies.

“We have been praying for our husbands’ healths,” says Portia, “which speed, we hope, the better for our words! Are they returned?”

“Madam, they are not yet; but there is come a messenger before, to signify their coming.”

Portia acts quickly. “*Go in*, Nerissa! Give order to my servants that they take *no note at all* of our being absent hence!—nor *you*, Lorenzo!—Jessica, nor *you!*” Nerissa hurries inside.

Soon a flourish of horns—real ones—is sounded at the front of the house.

“Your husband is at hand! I hear his trumpet,” says Lorenzo. “We are no tell-tales, madam; fear you not!” Nerissa returns.

As the new lord of the manor nears Portia, arriving with Antonio and Gratiano and their attendants, she glances up at the sky—and seems troubled. “This night methinks is but the daylight *sick*; it looks a little paler. ’Tis a day such as the day is when the sun is hid.”

Bassanio rushes to kiss her. “We should hold day with the Antipodes”—share time with the other side of the world, still light—“if *you* would walk, in the absence of the sun!”

“Let me *give* light, but let me not *be* light,” says Portia, “for a light wife”—an unfaithful one—“doth make a heavy husband”—a sorrowful one. “And never be Bassanio so for me! But God sort all. You are welcome *home*, my lord!”

“I thank you, madam! Give welcome to my *friend!*—this is the man, this is *Antonio*, to whom I am so infinitely bound!”

“You *should* in all sense be much bound to him,” says Portia, “for, as I hear, he was *much* bound for *you!*”

Antonio assures her., “No more than I am well *acquitted of!*”—repaid, with a play on acquittal.

Portia takes his hand. “Sir, you are very welcome to our house! It must appear in other ways than *words*; therefore I scant this breathing courtesy”—say so little now.

Gratiano has greeted Nerissa with a kiss; and she has already commented privately on his missing ring.

“By yonder moon I swear you do me wrong!” he insists. “In faith, I gave it to the *judge’s clerk!*” He adds, annoyed, “As for my part, I would he who had it were *gelt*,”—castrated—“since you do take it, love, so much at heart!”

Portia hears him. “A quarrel, *ho*, already? What’s the matter?”

“About a hoop of gold, a paltry ring that she did give me,” protests Gratiano, “whose poem was for all the world like cutler’s poetry upon a knife: ‘Love me, and leave me not.’”

Nerissa is indignant. “What talk you of the *poesy*, or the *value?*—you *swore* to me, when I did give it you, that you would wear it till your hour of death, and that it should lie with you in your grave!

“Though not for *me*, yet for your vehement oaths you should have been respective, and have *kept* it! Gave it a judge’s *clerk?*” she cries. “*No*, God’s my judge!—the ‘clerk’ will ne’er wear hair on ‘*his*’ face who had it!”

“He will, an if he *live* to be a man!” says Gratiano.

Nerissa huffs: “*Aye*—if a *woman* live to be a man!”

Gratiano is exasperated. “Now, by this hand, I gave it to a *youth!*—a kind of *boy*, a little scrubbèd boy, no higher than thyself—the judge’s *clerk*, a prating boy that begged it as a fee! I could not for my heart deny it him!”

Portia wags her head. “You were to *blame*—I must be plain with you—to part so slightly with your wife’s first gift!—a thing stuck on your finger with *oaths*, and so riveted with *faith* unto your flesh!”

She looks up proudly at tall Bassanio. “I gave *my* love a ring, and made him swear never to part with it—and here he stands! I dare be sworn for him, *he* would not leave it, nor pluck it from his finger, for the wealth that the *world* masters!

“Now, in faith, Gratiano, you give your wife too unkind a cause of grief! An ’twere to *me*, I should be furious at it!”

Thinks poor Bassanio, *Why, I were best to cut my left hand off, and swear I lost the ring defending it!*

Gratiano tells Portia, “My Lord Bassanio gave *his* ring away unto the *judge* that begged it—and indeed *deserved* it, too! And then the boy, his clerk, that took some pains in writing, he begged *mine*. And neither man nor master would take aught but the two *rings!*”

Portia fixes Bassanio with a stare. “What ring gave *you* my lord?—not that, I hope, which you received from me!”

“If I could add a lie unto a fault, I would deny it,” says the crestfallen gentleman, “but you see my finger hath not the ring upon it; it is gone.”

Portia seems incensed. “Even so void is your *false heart of truth!* By heaven, I will ne’er come in your bed until I see the ring!”

Nerissa tells Gratiano, “Nor I in *yours* till I again see mine!”

“Sweet Portia, if you did know *to whom* I gave the ring,” Bassanio argues, “if you did know *for* whom I gave the ring, and would conceive for *what* I gave the ring, and how unwillingly I left the ring, when naught would be accepted *but* the ring, you would abate the strength of your displeasure!”

Portia frowns. “If you had known the *virtue* of the ring, or half her *worthiness* who gave the ring, or your own *honour* to retain the ring, you would not then have *parted* with the ring!

“What man is there so *unreasonable*—if you had pleased to have defended it with *any* terms of *zeal*—as to demand a thing held in decency or ceremony?”

“Nerissa teaches *me* what to believe!—I’ll die for’t but some *woman* had the ring!”

“*No, by my honour*, madam!—by my *soul*, no woman had it!” claims Bassanio, “but a civil doctor who did refuse *three thousand ducats* of me, and begged the *ring!*—the which I did *deny* him and suffered him to go displeasèd *away*—even he that did uphold the very *life* of my dear *friend!*”

“What should I *say*, sweet lady? I was *enforced* to send it after him: I was beset with *shame* in courtesy! My *honour* would not let ingratitude so much besmear it! Pardon me, good lady; for,”—he gestures, a hand sweeping across the stars—“by these blessèd candles of the night, had *you* been there, I think you would have *begged* the ring of me to give the worthy doctor!”

Portia scowls. “Let not that doctor e’er come near *my* house!” she cautions. “Since he hath got the jewel that I loved, and that which you did swear to keep for me, I will become as *liberal* as *you!*—I’ll not deny him *anything* I have—no, not my body, nor my husband’s *bed!*”

“*Know* him I *shall!*—I am well sure of it! Lie not a night away from *home!*” she warns. “Watch me like *Argus!*”—the hundred-eyed giant of myth. “If you do *not*—if I be left *alone*, now, by mine honour, which is yet mine own—I’ll have that doctor for my bedfellow!”

“And I his *clerk!*” declares Nerissa. “Therefore be well advisèd how you do leave me to mine *own* protection!” she tells Gratiano.

He remembers the reedy-voiced boy—and not fondly. “Well, do you so, let not *me* take him then!—for if I do I’ll mar the young clerk’s *pen!*”

Antonio, highly distressed, intervenes: “I am the unhappy subject of these quarrels!”

“Sir, grieve not you,” Portia hastens to tell him, “you are *welcome* notwithstanding!”

“Portia, forgive me this enforced wrong,” says Bassanio, “and, in the hearing of these many friends, I *swear* to thee, even by thine own fair eyes, wherein I see myself—”

“Mark you but that!” cries Portia. “In both my eyes he *doubly* sees himself: in each eye *one*! Swear by your *double self*,” in duplicity, she implies sourly, “and *there’s* an oath of credit!”

“Nay, but *hear* me,” says Bassanio earnestly. “Pardon this fault, and by my soul I swear I never more will break an oath with thee!”

Antonio tells Portia, “I once did lend my body for his wealth—which, but for him that had your husband’s ring, had quite miscarried! Advisedly I dare be bound *again*—my *soul* upon the forfeit!—that your lord will never more break faith!”

Says Portia kindly, touching his sleeve, “Then you *shall* be his surety. Give him *this*, and bid him keep it better than the other!” She hands him a ring.

Antonio turns to his friend. “Here, Lord Bassanio; swear to keep this ring!”

Bassanio takes it, and—“*By heaven!*—it is *the same I gave the doctor!*”

Portia shrugs. “I had it from him. Pardon me, Bassanio; for, by this ring, the doctor lay with me.”

“And pardon me, my gentle Gratiano,” says Nerissa, “for that same scrubbèd boy, the doctor’s clerk, in lieu of *this* last night did lie with me.” She hands him her ring—again.

Cries Gratiano, “Why, this is like the mending of highways in summer where the ways are *fair enough!* What, are we *cuckolds* ere we have *deserved* it?”—by being unfaithful.

“Speak not so grossly!” chides Portia. “You are all puzzled,” she says, laughing. “Here is a letter; read it at your leisure. It comes from Padua, from Bellario. There you shall find that Portia was the *doctor*, Nerissa, here, her *clerk!* Lorenzo shall witness that I set forth as soon as you, and even but now returned; I have not yet entered my house!

“Antonio, you *are* welcome!—and I have better news in store for you than you expect! Unseal this letter anon.” She hands him a folded sheet blotched with red wax. “There you shall find that three of your argosies are richly, suddenly, *come to harbour!* You shall know by what strange accident it chancèd in this letter.”

Antonio clutches the paper detailing his good fortune. “I am stricken dumb!”

Bassanio is still almost speechless: “Were *you* the doctor—and I knew you not?”

“Were you the *clerk* that is to make me cuckold?” asks Gratiano, already grinning.

“Aye,” laughs Nerissa, “but the clerk hath never the *means* to do it, ‘unless he live until he be a *man!*’”

Bassanio embraces Portia. “Sweet doctor, you shall be *my* bed-fellow! When I am absent, then lie with my wife!”

Antonio has glanced through the letter. “Sweet lady, you have given me life and *living!*—for here I read for certain that my ships are safely come to road!”

Portia turns to the other couple. “How now, Lorenzo! My clerk hath some good comforts for *you*, too.”

“Aye, and I’ll give them him without a fee!” says Nerissa, handing him a document. “There do I give to you and Jessica, from the rich Jew, a special deed of gift, after his death, of all he dies possessed of!”

Lorenzo bows deeply. “Fair ladies, you drop manna in the path of starvèd people!”

Portia looks up at the sky, where stars can still be seen, twinkling in the lightening blue. “It is almost morning, and yet I am sure you are not satisfied of these events at full. Let us go in, and”—she adopts the law doctor’s demeanor—“depose us there upon inter’gatories.

“And we will answer all *things* faithfully!” *Thing* is a term for the male member.

Gratiano heartily agrees. “Let it be so! The first inter’gatory that my Nerissa shall be sworn on is whether until the *next* night she had rather wait—or go to bed *now*, being two hours to day!

“And were the day come, I should wish it dark!—and that I were couching with the doctor’s clerk!”

As the lovers all head indoors, lusty Gratiano makes it clear that he has learned a lesson.
“Well, while I live I’ll fear no other thing so sore as keeping safe Nerissa’s *ring!*”