

A Midsummer Night's Dream

by William Shakespeare
Presented by Paul W. Collins

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Chapter One In Athens

In his palace on the Attic peninsula in the Aegean, during the golden times of the ancient Greeks' gods and heroes, Athens' powerful ruler, Theseus, stands with a former enemy, the beautiful Queen of the Amazons.

"Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour draws on apace! Four happy days bring in another moon! But, *oh*, methinks how *slowly* this old moon wanes!—she lingers my desires like a step-mother, or a dowager long withering out a young man's revenue!"

The warrior queen smiles. "Four days will quickly steep themselves in night," she assures him, "four nights will quickly dream away the time; and then the moon, like a silver bow new-bent in heaven, shall behold the night of our solemnities."

Theseus directs his master of revels to prepare public celebrations. "Go, Philostrate, stir up the Athenian youth to merriments! Awake the pert and nimble spirit of *Mirth!* Turn Melancholy forth to funerals—the pale companion is not for *our* romp!"

The old nobleman smiles, bows and goes. He will send out heralds to proclaim the invitation, and will search the capital for diversions to entertain the royal couple's guests after the wedding.

"Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, and won thy love doing thee injuries; but I will *wed* thee in another key—with pomp, with triumph, and with revelling!"

They enjoy a kiss. At a pause, they see that Lord Egeus has come before them, bringing three attractive young people

"Happy be Theseus, our renowned duke," says gray-haired nobleman, with a bow.

"Thanks, good Egeus. What's the news with thee?"

"Full of *vexation* come I," says Egeus, "with complaint against *my child*, my daughter Hermia!" That lady, a comely, brown-tressed beauty, looks defiant.

Egeus nods to a handsome young noble with dark, curly locks. "Stand forth, Demetrius. My noble lord, *this* man hath my consent to *marry* her.

"Stand forth, Lysander. My gracious duke, *this* man hath *bewitched* the heart of my child!" The fair-haired lord, at twenty-five a year older than Demetrius, bows courteously to the ruler, but his distress is apparent.

"Thou, *thou*, Lysander," says the father angrily, "thou hast given her *rhymes*, and interchanged love *tokens* with my child! Thou hast by *moonlight* at her window sung, with *feigning* voice, verses of feigning *love!*—and *stolen* the impression of her fancy with trinkets for the hair!—with rings, gawds, conceits, knacks, trifles, nose-gays, sweetmeats, messengers of strong prevailment in unhardened *youth!*

"With *cunning* hast thou filched my daughter's heart—turned her *obedience*, which is due to me, to stubborn harshness!

"And, my gracious duke, if it be that she will not here before Your Grace consent to marry with Demetrius, I beg the ancient privilege of Athens: as she is mine, I may *dispose* of her—which shall be either to this gentleman or to her *death!*—according to our law, provided immediately in that case."

"What say you, Hermia?" asks Theseus. "Be advised, fair maid: to you your father should be as a *god*—one that *composed* your beauties—yea, and one to whom you are but as a form in wax by him imprinted, and within his power to leave the figure, or disfigure it.

"Demetrius is a worthy gentleman," he adds, hoping to return quickly to a blissful mood.

"So is *Lysander!*"

Theseus nods. "In *himself*, he is; but in *this* kind, wanting your father's voice, the other must be held the worthier."

"I would my father looked but with *my* eyes!"

"Rather your eyes must with his judgment look."

“I do entreat Your Grace to pardon me!” says Hermia, polite but determined. “I know not by what power I am made bold, nor how it may concern my modesty in such a presence, here, to plead my thoughts; but I beseech Your Grace that I may know the worst that may befall me in this case, if I refuse to wed Demetrius.”

Theseus solemnly cites the law’s provision: “Either to die the death, or to abjure forever the society of *men*.”

“Therefore, fair Hermia, question your *desires*; examine well your station; know of your *youth* whether—if you yield not to your father’s choice—you can endure the livery of a *nun*, for aye to be in shady cloister mew’d, to live a barren sister all your life, chanting faint hymns to the cold, fruitless moon.”

The duke knows that some do choose to embrace austerity; his betrothed’s Anatolian people customarily accept many sacrifices. “Thrice-*blessèd* are they that so master their blood as to undergo such maiden pilgrimage; but *earthlier* happy is the rose *distillèd* than that which, withering on the virgin thorn-bush, grows, lives and dies in *single* blessedness.”

Hermia is unyielding. “*So* will I grow, so live, so *die*, my lord, ere I will my virgin patent up unto his lordship, whose unwishèd yoke my soul consents not to give sovereignty!”

“Take *time*, due *pause*,” Theseus advises her kindly, “and, by the next new moon—the sealing-day betwixt my love and me, for everlasting bond of fellowship—upon that day either prepare to die for disobedience to your father’s will, or else to wed Demetrius as he would have you; or on Diana’s altar”—in sacrifice for the virgin goddess—“to protest for ever austerity and *single* life.”

Demetrius would assert his claim: “*Relent*, sweet Hermia! And, Lysander, yield thy crazèd title to my certain *right!*”

Lysander scoffs. “You have her *father*’s love, Demetrius; let me have Hermia’s!—do you marry *him!*”

Old Egeus is irked by the impudence. “*Scornful* Lysander! *True*—he *hath* my love, and what is *mine*, my love shall render him!—and *she* is mine, and all my right of her I do estate unto *Demetrius!*”

Lysander protests to Theseus: “I am, my lord, as well derived as he, as well possessèd! My *love* is *more* than his!—my *fortunes* every way as fairly ranked, if not with advantage as Demetrius’s! And what is more than all those boasts can be, *I am belovèd* by beauteous Hermia! Why then should I not prosecute my right?”

“Demetrius—I’ll avouch it to his head!—spoke love to Nedar’s daughter, *Helena*, and won her soul!—and she, sweet lady, *dotes*—*devoutly* dotes, dotes in *idolatry!*—upon this spotted and inconstant man!”

The duke frowns. “I must confess that I have heard so much, and thought to have spoken with him thereof; but, being over-full of self’s affairs, my mind did lose it.

“But, Demetrius, come, and come, Egeus; you shall go with me. I have some private schooling for you both.

“As for you, fair Hermia, look that you charm yourself to fit your fancies to your father’s will, or else the law of Athens yields you up—which by no means may we extenuate—to death or to a vow of single life.

“Come, my Hippolyta.” He sees that the discord has diminished her high spirits. “What cheer, my love?”

“Demetrius and Egeus, come along,” says the duke. “I must employ you in some business for our nuptials, and confer with you on something that closely concerns yourselves.”

Egeus bows. “With duty and desire we follow you.”

The men proceed with Theseus and Hippolyta down to the stable, to arrange for an outing with the duke’s renowned pack of hounds; the queen, too, loves such dogs, and finds joy in the hunt.

The disconsolate duo is left alone.

Asks Lysander—less assertive, out of the presence of his rival. “How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale? How chance the roses there do fade so fast?”

Hermia is furious. “Belike for want of *rain!*—though I could well beteem them from the tempest of my *eyes!*”

“*Ah*, me. For aught that I could ever read, could ever hear by tale or history, the course of true love never did run smooth; but, either it was different in blood,—”

“Oh, *cross!*—too high to be enthralled by *low!*”

“—or else misgrafted in respect to years—”

“Oh, *spite!*—too old to be engaged to *young!*”

“—or else it stood upon the choice of friends—”

“Oh, *hell!*—to choose love by *another’s* eyes!”

“—or, if there were a *sympathy* of choice, war, death, or sickness did *lay siege* to it, making it momentary as a sound, swift as a shadow, short as any dream—brief as the *lightning* in the collied night, that, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth, and—ere a man hath power to say *Behold!*—the jaws of darkness do devour it up! So do bright, living things come to ruin.”

Says Hermia sourly, “If thus true lovers have been ever crossed, it stands as an edict in *destiny!* Then let us teach our trial *patience*, because it is a *customary* cross—as *due* to love as thoughts and dreams and sighs, wishes and tears, poor fancy’s followers!”

“A *good* persuasion!” laughs Lysander—who has a scheme in mind. “Therefore, hear me, Hermia!

“I have a widowed aunt, a dowager of great revenue, and she hath no child. She thinks of me as her only *son*, and from Athens is her house remote *seven leagues*. There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee—and to that place the sharp *Athenian* law cannot pursue us!

“If thou lovest me, then steal forth thy father’s house tomorrow night; and in the wood a league without the town—where I did meet thee once with Helena, to do observance to a morn of May—there will I wait for thee!”

“My good Lysander!” she cries, delighted. “I swear to thee—by *Cupid’s* strongest bow, by his best arrow with a golden head; by the simplicity of *Venus’* doves; by that which knitteth souls and prospers lovers; and by that fire which burned the Carthage queen when the false Trojan under sail was seen!—by *all* the vows that ever men have broke, in number more than ever *women* spoke—in that same place thou hast appointed me, tomorrow truly will I meet with thee!”

“Keep promise, love!” Lysander embraces her, and they kiss.

He sees her closest friend entering the throne room. “Look, here comes Helena.”

“God speed, fair Helena!” cries Hermia. “Whither away?”

The lovely lady, tall and blonde, is dejected. “Call you me *fair*? That ‘fair’ again unsay!—Demetrius loves *your* fair!” She regards Hermia. “O *happy* fair! *Your* eyes are lode-stars, and your tongue’s sweet song more attunable than lark to shepherd’s ear, when wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear!

“*Sickness* is catching; oh, were *favour* so!” she moans. “*Yours* would I catch, fair Hermia, ere I go; my ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye, my tongue should catch your tongue’s sweet melody. Were the *world* mine, *Demetrius* being abated, the *rest* I’d give to be into *you* translated!

“Oh, teach me *how* you look, and with what *art* you sway the motion of Demetrius’ heart!”

Hermia scowls. “I *frown* upon him; yet he loves me still.”

“Oh, that your frowns would teach my *smiles* such skill!”

“I give him *curses*; yet he gives me love.”

“Oh, that my *prayers* could such affection move!”

“The more I *hate*, the more he follows me.”

“The more I *love*, the more he hateth me!”

“His folly, Helena, is no fault of *mine*.”

“None but your *beauty*,” says Helena. “Would *that* fault were mine!”

“Take comfort,” Hermia tells her lifelong friend. “He no more shall see *my* face!—Lysander and myself will fly this place! Before the time I did Demetrius see, Athens seemed a paradise to me! Oh, then what *graces* in thy love do dwell, that he hath turned a heaven to a *hell*?”

Lysander squeezes Hermia’s hand. “Helena, to you our minds we will unfold! Tomorrow night, when Phoebe”—the moon—“doth behold her silver visage in the watery glass, decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass, the time that lovers’ flights doth ever conceal, through Athens’ gates have we devised to steal!”

Hermia tells her, “And in the wood—where often you and I upon faint primrose-beds were wont to lie, emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet—there my Lysander and myself shall meet, and thence from Athens turn away our eyes, to seek new friends and stranger companies!

“*Farewell*, sweet playfellow! Pray thou for us—and good luck grant thee thy Demetrius!

“Keep *word*, Lysander. We must starve our sight from lovers’ food till morrow, deep midnight.”

He nods, and kisses her. “*I will*, my Hermia!” She goes to prepare for her flight from home. “Helena, adieu!” he says, leaving to make his own provisions. “As you on *him*, may Demetrius dote on *you*!”

Helena watches them go. *How happy some o’er other some can be!* she muses.

Through Athens I am thought as fair as she. But what of that?—Demetrius thinks not so; he will not know what all but he do know!

And as he errs, doting on Hermia’s eyes, so do I, admiring of his qualities!

Things base and vile, holding no quality, love can transpose to form and dignity; love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind, and therefore is wingèd Cupid painted blind.

Nor hath Love’s mind any of judgement’s taste; wings and no eyes prefigure unheedy haste! And therefore is Love said to be a child, because in choice he is so oft beguiled! As waggish boys in game themselves forswear, so the boy Love is perjured everywhere!

For, ere Demetrius looked on Hermia’s eyne, he hailed down oaths that he was only mine!—and when that hail some heat from Hermia felt, so it dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt!

Suddenly in her indignation she thinks of a reason to speak with Demetrius. *I will go tell him of fair Hermia’s flight!*

But she frowns. *Then to the wood will he tomorrow night pursue her; and for this intelligence if I have thanks, it is a precious expense!*

But herein mean I to enrich by pain: to have him in sight—thither and back again!

At the far eastern edge of Athens, five artisans meet outside the humble dwelling of carpenter Peter Quince, who is organizing an effort to curry favor with the duke. “Is all our company here?” he asks, coming out of the low entrance.

“You were best to call them generally,” advises portly Nick Bottom, “man by man, according to the script.” He has a shop somewhat nearer the palace.

Quince nods. “Here is the scroll of every man’s name who is thought fit, through all Athens, to play in our interlude before the duke and the duchess on his wedding-day, at night.”

Bottom says, officiously, “First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats of, then read the names of the actors, and so grow to appoint.”

“Marry, our play is *The Most Lamentable Comedy, and Most Cruel Death, of Pyramus and Thisbe*.”

“A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a *merry*!” asserts stout Bottom. “Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors by the scroll. Masters, spread yourselves.” The men step back a pace.

“Answer as I call you. Nick Bottom, the weaver.”

“Ready! Name what part I am for, and proceed.”

“You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.”

“What is Pyramus?” inquires Bottom, “A lover, or a tyrant?”

“A lover that kills himself most gallantly for love.”

Bottom considers. “That will ask some *tears* in the true performing of it. If *I* do it, let the audience look to their eyes!” says the tyro confidently. “I will move *storms!* I will console, in some measure, during the rest.” He pauses, thinking. “Yet my chief inclination is for a *tyrant*: I could play *'Erc'les* rarely, or a part to *tear a cat* in!—to make all *split!*”

He demonstrates—loudly, with fierce relish: “The raging *rocks* in shivering *shocks* shall *break the locks* of prison *gates!* And *Phibbus' car* shall shine from *far*, and make and *mar* the foolish *Fates!*”

“That *was* lofty!” he says, savoring his own declamation. “Now, name the rest of the players,” he tells Quince. “This is *'Erc'les' vein*, a *tyrant's vein*,” he explains to the others. “A lover is more condoling.”

Quince reads: “Francis Flute, the bellows-mender.”

“Here, Peter Quince.”

“Flute, you must take Thisbe on you,” he tells the lad of seventeen.

“What is Thisbe?” asks Flute hopefully, “a wandering *knight?*”

“It is the lady that Pyramus must love.”

“*Nay*, 'faith, let me not play a *woman!*” pleads Flute. “I have a *beard* coming!” he insists, though the others can see no sign of it.

No matter, Quince points out: “That's all one; you shall play it in a *mask*, and you may speak as small as you will.” The youth's voice is quite soft.

Bottom is eager to augment his own participation. “If I may hide my *face*, let me play Thisbe *too!* I'll speak in a monstrously little voice!

“*Thisne, Thisne!*” he bellows, as the man. He replies, simulating—squeakingly—a female voice: “*Ah*, Pyramus, lover dear, thy *Thisne* here, a lady *hear!*”

“No, *no*,” replies Quince quickly, “you must play *Pyramus*. And, Flute, *you* Thisbe.”

Bottom finds forbearance. “Well, proceed.”

“Robin Starveling, the tailor,” calls the carpenter.

“Here, Peter Quince.”

“Robin Starveling, you must play Thisbe's mother.” The frail old man nods.

“Tom Snout, the tinker.”

“Here, Peter Quince.” Young Tom mends metal—pots and pans, mostly.

“You, Pyramus' father.

“Myself, *Thisbe's* father.

“Snug, the joiner—you, the Lion's part.

“And, I hope, here is the play fitted!” concludes the carpenter, beaming at the company.

“Have you the lion's part *written?*” asks Snug, who works for Quince, fitting doors and window sashes. “Pray you, if it be, give it me, for I am slow of study.”

“You may do it *extempore*,” Quince tells him, “for it is nothing but roaring.”

Bottom spots another opportunity. “Let me play the lion *too!* I will roar so that it will do any man's heart good to *hear* me!—I will roar such that I will make the duke say, ‘Let him roar *again!* Let him roar *again!*’”

Quince frowns. “If you should do it *too* terribly, you would fright the duchess and the ladies so that they would shriek!—and that were enough to *hang us all!*”

The artificers all nod. “That *would* hang us,” Snug is sure.

Snout agrees: “Every mother's son!”

Bottom moves to calm them. “I grant you, friends, that if we should fright the ladies out of their wits, they would have no more discretion but to hang us. But I will *aggravate* my voice, so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking *dove!*—I will roar you as 'twere any *nightingale!*”

“You can play no part but *Pyramus*,” Quince tells the weaver firmly. He knows how to persuade this greedy actor: “For Pyramus is a *sweet* faced man, as *proper* man as one shall *see* on a summer's day—a most lovely, *gentleman*-like man. Therefore *you* must needs play Pyramus!”

“Well, I will undertake it,” says Bottom, gruffly acknowledging his destiny. “What beard were I best to play it in?”

“Why, what you will,” replies Quince, thumbing through his written notes of actors’ lines.

Bottom is pondering. “I will discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your crown-colour beard—your perfect yellow!”

“Some of your *French* crowns”—pubic circles—“have no hair at all,” Quince notes, alluding dryly to a syphilis symptom, “and then you will play bare-faced!” The others laugh. “But, masters, here are your parts,” he says. Each man takes one—even Snug, for the Lion must know his cues. “And I am to entreat you, request you, and desire you to *learn* them by tomorrow night, and meet me in the palace wood, a mile without the town, by moonlight.

“*There* will we rehearse; for if we meet in the city we shall be doggèd with company, and our devices known!” Their audience—and competitors—should be surprised.

“In the meantime, I will draw a bill of such properties as our play wants. I pray you, fail me not!”

“We will meet!” confirms Bottom, “and there we may rehearse most obscenely and courageously! Take pains,” he urges the others, “be *perfected!* Adieu.”

“At the duke’s oak we meet,” Quince reminds them.

“Enough,” says Bottom, conclusively. “Hold, or cut *bow*-strings!” the proud craftsman tells the others, whose skills far exceed the trimming of horse hairs to be used for playing stringed instruments.

Chapter Two In the Fairies’ Forest

As the sun dips and dims, tipping the high Acropolis with the day’s last golden warmth, below, to the majestic structure’s east, a forest preserve is already nearly dark. On its leaf-strewn floor, glow-worms envy their early-winged sisters, floating above them and flaring in the deep, timeless wood, which now serve as an enclosure to shelter game—for the sport of the duke and his lords.

But the woodland, with its ancient trees, sparkling brooks and luxuriant foliage, holds many wild creatures, great and small—or *either*: among its denizens are fairies, whose appearance to ordinary persons is determined by the sprites, when they are seen at all.

On this warm spring evening, two such luminous beings, passing through a small glade, encounter each other.

“How now, spirit!” cries boyish Puck, clad in only a few glossy green leaves. “Whither wander you?”

The slender, translucent fairy hovers, pausing in her flight to reply:

“Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Thorough flood, thorough fire!
I do wander every where,
Swifter than the moon’s sphere!
And I serve the fairy queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green:
The cowslips tall her pensioners be;
In their gold coats, spots you see—
Those be rubies, fairy favours—
In those freckles live their savours!
I must go seek some dewdrops here,

And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear!

"Farewell, thou *lob* of spirits!" gibes the lustrous one, her dainty, many-colored wings shimmering. "I'll be gone; our queen and all our elves come here *anon*."

Puck is taken aback. "The *king* doth keep his revels here tonight! Take heed the queen come not within his sight!" he warns, "for Oberon is surpassingly fell in *wrath* because she as her attendant hath a lovely *boy*, stolen from an Indian king! She never had so sweet a changeling—and jealous Oberon would have the child as knight of *his* train, to trace the forests wild!

"But she perforce *withholds* the lovèd boy—crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy!

"And now they never meet in grove or green, by fountain clear, or spangled starlight sheen, but they do *square*, and all their elves for fear creep into acorn-cups, and *hide* them there!"

The floating fairy has been eyeing Puck with interest, keenly aware of his firm muscles' motion. "Either I mistake your shape and making quite, or else you are that shrewd and knavish sprite called *Robin Goodfellow*!

"Are not you he that frights the maidens of the villagery!—skims milk, and bootless makes the breathless housewife churn!—and sometime labours in the quern,"—barley mill, "making the drink to bear no barm!—misleads night-wanderers, laughing at their harm?

"Those that '*hob*' goblin call you, and '*sweet Puck*'—you do *their* work, and they shall have good *luck*! Are not you he?"

The fairy king's sinewy servant bows with lithe elegance. "Thou speak'st aright!—I *am* that merry wanderer of the night!

"I jest for Oberon, and make him smile, when I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile by neighing in likeness of a *filly* foal!

"And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl, in very likeness of a roasted crab"—crabapple. "And when she drinks, against her lips I bob—and on her withered dewlap *pour the ale*!

"The wisest aunt, in telling the *saddest* tale, sometime for a three-foot *stool* mistaketh me; then slip I from under her bum—*down* topples she, and '*Traitor!*' cries, and falls into a cough! And then the whole quire"—family—"hold their hips and laugh, and waxing in their mirth, slap knees, swear a *merrier* hour never was seen!

"But—*Room*, fairy!" He points past her. "Here comes Oberon!"

She points past him. "And here my mistress! Would that he were *gone!*" she cries, piqued.

Two fantastical and regal spirits emerge from either side of the forest; leading their trains in stately fashion, they meet at the center of the dell.

Silver-haired King Oberon frowns. "*Ill*-met by moonlight, proud Titania!"

"*What*, jealous Oberon? Fairies, *skip hence*," the queen tells her retinue. "I have forsworn his bed and company!"

"Tarry, rash *wanton!*—am not I *thy lord*?" chides Oberon.

"Then *I* must be thy lady," replies Titania, her eyes narrowing. "But I know when thou hast *stolen away* from fairy land!—and in the shape of *Corin* sat all day, playing on pipes of horn, and versing love to amorous *Phillidia*!

"Why art thou *here*, come from the farthest steep of India," she demands indignantly, "but that, forsooth, the bouncing *Amazon*—that *buskined* mistress, a *warrior* love!—to *Theseus* must be wedded—and you come to give their bed joy and prosperity!"

Oberon objects. "How canst thou thus—for *shame*, Titania!—tilt at my credit with Hippolyta, knowing I know of *thy* love for *Theseus*? Didst thou not lead him through the glimmering night away from Perigenia, whom he had ravished?—and make him with fair Aegles break his faith? And with Ariadne, and Antiopa!"

Titania denies all. "These are the *forgeries of jealousy!*" She quickly complains of the wider consequences of their marital rift. "And never, since the middle of summer's spring met we, on hill, in dale, forest or mead, by pavèd fountain or by rushy brook, or in the beachèd margin of

the sea, to dance our ringlets to the whistling wind—but with thy *brawls* thou hast *disturbed* our sport!

“Therefore the *winds*, piping to us in vain, as if in *revenge* have sucked up from the sea contagious *clouds*, which, falling on the land, have every pelted river made so proud that they have *overborne* their *continents*!

“The ox hath therefore pressed his yoke in vain, the ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn hath rotted ere its youth attained a beard! The fold stands empty in the drownèd field, and *crows* are fatted with the mutton flock! The nine-men’s-morris”—a place for dance and games—“is filled up with *mud*, and the quaint mazes in the wanton green are, for lack of tread, undistinguishable!”—paths are overgrown.

She scolds him. “The human mortals miss their *winter*! Here no night is now with hymn or *carol* blest; therefore the *Moon*, the governess of floods, pale in her anger, washes all the air, and rheumatic diseases do abound! And thorough this distemperature we see the *seasons alter*: hoary-headed *frost*’s far into the fresh lap of the crimson rose, and old *Hiem*’s”—winter’s—“thin and icy crown is as in *mockery* set, an odious chaplet on sweet summer *buds*!

“The spring, the summer—the chiding *autumn*, *angry* winter—change their wonted liveries; and th’amazèd world now knows not by their surcease which is *which*!

“All this same progeny of evils comes from *our* debate, from our *dissension*!—*we* are their parents and originals!”

Oberon shrugs. “Do you *amend* it then!—it lies in you! Why should Titania *cross* her Oberon? I do but beg a little changeling boy, to be my henchman.”

“Set your heart at rest,” proud Titania tells him haughtily, “the fairy *land* buys not the child from me!

“His mother was a votaress of my order; and, in the spicèd Indian air, by night full often hath she gossiped by my side, and sat with me on Neptune’s yellow sands, marking the embarkèd traders on the flood, when we have laughed to see the sails conceive and grow big-bellied with the wanton wind.

“Which she would imitate, following with pretty and with swimming gait—her womb then rich with my young squire—and sail upon the land to fetch me trifles, and return again as from a voyage, rich with merchandise.

“But she, being mortal, of that child did die; and for her sake do I rear up her boy. And for her sake I will not *part* with him!”

Oberon glares. “How long within this wood intend you to stay?”

“Perchance till after Theseus’ wedding day,” she says pointedly. “If you will *patiently* dance in our round and see our moonlight revels, go with us; if not, shun me, and I will spare *your* haunts.”

“Give me that boy, and I *will* go with thee,” offers Oberon.

“Not for thy fairy *kingdom*!” she cries angrily. “Fairies, *away*! We shall chide downright, if I longer stay!”

The fairy queen and her glowing train return to the now-dark woods.

“Well, *go thy way*.” Oberon fumes. “Thou shalt not leave this grove till I torment thee for this injury!” he vows. “My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou rememberest: once since I sat upon a promontory, and heard a mermaid on a dolphin’s back uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath that the rude *sea* grew civil at her song, and certain stars shot madly from their spheres to hear the sea-maid’s music....”

“I remember.”

“That very time *I* saw, but thou couldst not, *Cupid*, all armèd, flying between the cold moon and the earth,” Oberon recalls. “Certain aim he took at a fair vestal thronèd by the west,”—a lady, perhaps, like one English queen, “and loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow as if it should pierce a *hundred thousand* hearts!

“Only I could see young Cupid’s fiery shaft *quenched*, by the chaste beams of the watery moon! And the imperial votaress”—Elizabeth—“passèd on, in maiden meditation, fancy-free.

“Yet markèd I where the bolt of Cupid *fell*: it fell upon a little western *flower*—before, milk-white, now purple with Love’s wound; and maidens call it ‘love-in-idleness.’

“Fetch me that flower, the herb I showed thee once. The juice of it, laid on the lid of a sleeping eye, will make or man or woman *madly dote* upon the next live creature that it sees! Fetch me this herb—and be thou here again ere the leviathan can swim a league!”

“I’ll put a girdle round about the *earth* in forty minutes!” boasts Puck, already in flight, as he flits out of sight.

Oberon rubs his hands together in gleeful anticipation. “Having once that juice, I’ll watch Titania when she is asleep, and drop the liquor of it on her eyes. The next thing she, then waking, looks upon—be it on lion, bear, or wolf, on bull or meddling monkey, or on busy *ape!*—she shall pursue it with the soul of *love!*”

“And ere I take this charm from *off* her sight—as I *can* take it with another herb—I’ll make her render up her *page* to *me!*”

“But who comes here?” He must wait for Puck to return. “I am invisible,” he decides—so instantly he *is*—“and I will overhear their conference.”

Demetrius, having learned from Helena that Hermia is fleeing Athens, has hurried in pursuit of that dark-haired lady, intent on taking her back. But now he stops in the glade and turns to face the blonde beauty who doggedly has followed him.

“I love thee *not!*” he calls back to her. “Therefore *pursue* me not!”

“Where are Lysander and fair Hermia?” he demands as she catches up, out of breath. “The one I’ll *slay*, the other slayeth *me!* Thou told’st me they were stolen unto this wood, and here am I—and *woe’d* within this wood because I cannot meet my *Hermia!*”

“*Hence!*—get thee *gone*, and follow me no more!”

“You *draw* me, you hard-hearted adamant!” gasps lissome Helena. “But yet you draw not *iron*, for my *heart* is true as steel! *Leave* you your power to draw, and I shall have no power to follow you!”

Demetrius frowns in frustration. “Do I *entice* you?—do I speak you *fair?*—or, rather, do I not in plainest truth tell you *I do not*, nor I *cannot*, *love* you!”

“And even for that do I love you the *more*,” Helena confesses. “I am your spaniel!—and, the more you beat me, Demetrius, the more I will fawn on you! *Use* me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me, neglect me, lose me!—only give me leave, unworthy as I am, to follow you!”

“What *worser* place can I beg in your love—and yet a place of high respect with *me*—than to be usèd as you use your dog?”

Demetrius glowers. “Tempt not so much the hatred of my spirit, for I am *sick* when I do *look* on thee!”

“And *I* am sick when I look *not* on *you!*”

“You do impeach your *modesty* too much, leaving the city and committing yourself into the hands of one who loves you not!—to trust the opportunity of *night*, and the ill counsel of a deserted place with the rich worth of your virginity!”

“*Your virtue* is my privilege,” Helena replies, “in that it is *not* night when I do see your face! Therefore I think I am not *in* the night; nor doth this wood lack *worth* or *company*, for you in *my* respect are *all the world!* Then how can it be said I am alone, when all the world is here to look on me?”

“I’ll run from thee, and hide me in the thicket,” Demetrius warns, “and leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts!”

“The *wildest* hath not such a heart as you!” says she, clutching his arm. “Run when you will; the old story shall be changèd: Apollo *flies*, and *Daphne* holds the *chase!* The *dove* pursues the *griffin!*—the mild *hind* makes speed to catch the *tiger!* Bootless is *speed*, when cowardice pursues and valour flies!”

“I will not stay thy questions!”—listen to arguments, says Demetrius, pulling free. “Let me go!—or, if thou follow me, do not believe but I shall *do thee mischief* in the wood!”

“*Aye!*—in the temple, in the town, the field, you *do me mischief!*” moans Helena, heartsick and weary. “*Fie, Demetrius!* Your wrongs *do* settle a scandal on my sex: we cannot *fight* for love, as men may do! We should be *wooded*, and were not made to woo!”

But he runs, again seeking Hermia among the dark trees.

Left in the moonlight, Helena is undissuaded. “I’ll follow thee, and make a heaven of hell, to die upon the hand I love so well!”

Oberon smiles at the ill-chosen phrasing—*die* can mean *reach sensual satisfaction*—as she enters the forest. But he has been moved by her painful devotion. *Fare thee well, nymph! Ere he do leave this grove, thou shalt fly him, and he shall seek thy love!* vows the king.

Suddenly Puck appears, still sparkling after his thousand-league flight to the quaint Atlantic isles and back.

“Welcome, wanderer! Hast thou the flower there?” asks Oberon eagerly. Puck opens his hand. “*Aye, there it is!* I pray thee, give it me.”

The king smiles. “I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,” he tells his tanned, rosy-cheeked young helper, “where oxlips and the nodding violet grow, quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine. And there the snake throws off its enamelled skin, a hide wide enough to wrap a fairy in.

“There sometimes sleeps Titania in the night, lulled in those flowers with dances and delight.” Examining the flower’s purple petals, he pulls one free. “And with the juice of this I’ll streak her eyes, and make her full of weird fantasies!”

He hands the bloom to Puck. “Take thou some of it, and seek through this grove. A sweet Athenian lady is in love with a disdainful youth. Anoint his eyes!—do it only when the next thing he espies may be the lady! Thou shalt know the man by the Athenian garments he hath on.

“Effect it with some care, so that *he* may prove more foolish for *her* than she in her love!

“And look thou meet me ere the first cock crow.”

Puck bows as he floats up. “Fear not, my lord! Your servant shall do so!” He flies away among the massive old trees’ gnarled and mossy trunks.

With her train of radiant fairies, Queen Titania has come to her favorite place for sleeping in the forest, beside one bank of a placid pool. The still water gleams in the moonlight, and sun-soaked honeysuckle is cooling, fragrantly, nearby.

“Come now, a roundel in a fairy song!” she calls. “Then, for the third part of a minute, *hence!*—some to kill cankers in the musk-rose buds, some to war with rere-mice”—bats—“for their leathern wings, to make my small elves’ coats; and some keep back the clamorous owl that nightly hoots, and wonders at our quaint spirits!

“Sing me now asleep; then to your offices, and let me rest.”

The fairies sing:

“*You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen!
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong;
Come not near our fairy queen!*”

“*Nightingale, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby:
Lulla, lulla, lullaby,
Lulla, lulla, lullaby.*”

“*Never harm, not spell nor charm,
Come our lovely lady nigh!
So, good night, with lullaby:*”

Lulla, lulla, lullaby.

*“Weaving spiders, come not here;
Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence!
Beetles black, approach not near;
Worm nor snail, do no offence!”*

*“Nightingale, with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby:
Lulla, lulla, lullaby,
Lulla, lulla, lullaby.”*

“Hence, away,” calls a fairy captain. “Now all is well.” He motions to a sprite. “One aloof stand sentinel.”

Titania drifts into a pleasant sleep on soft grass among the daisies, and the other fairies flutter off, passing among the trees.

Above, sitting on a branch of an oak, the lone watch, bright-eyed and alert, is suddenly overwhelmed by the need to rest his eyes briefly. He yawns, blinks thrice, and leans back against the boll to droop into peaceful slumber.

King Oberon creeps forward, a flower-petal held between a thumb and forefinger. He leans down, delicately touching it to Titania’s eyelids, leaving a trace on each

What thou seest when thou dost wake, do it for thy true-love take!—love and languish for his sake! Be it lynx or cat or bear, ’pard or boar with bristled hair, in thine eye what shall appear when thou wakest, it is thy dear!

He smiles mischievously. *Wake when some vile thing is near!* He tiptoes away.

A moment later, Lysander and Hermia discover the sheltered, shimmering pond, and the moonlight dappled all around it.

“Fair love, you’re faint with wandering in the wood,” says he, looking around. “And to speak troth, I have forgot our way. We’ll rest us, Hermia, if you think it good, and tarry for the comfort of the *day*.”

She concurs. “Be it so, Lysander. Find you out a bed; for I upon this bank will rest my head.”

“One turf shall serve as pillow for us both,” Lysander suggests. “One heart, one bed, two bosoms and one troth!”

“Nay, good Lysander, for my sake, my dear, lie further off yet; do not lie so near.”

“Oh, take the sense, sweet, of my *innocence*,” he says. “Love takes the *meaning* in lover’s conference. I mean that my *heart* unto yours is so knit that but one heart we can *make* of it—two bosoms interchainèd with an oath; so, then, two bosoms and a single *troth!*”

“Then by your side no bed-room me deny—for lying *so*, Hermia, I do not *lie!*”

She laughs. “Lysander riddles very prettily! Now much beshrew my manners, and my pride, if Hermia meant to say Lysander lied!

“But, gentle friend, for love and courtesy, lie further off in *human* modesty. And such separation as may well be said becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid, that far be distant! Goodnight, sweet friend!—thy love ne’er alter till thy sweet life end!”

He smiles graciously, and moves away. “Amen, *amen*, to that fair prayer, say I; and then *end* life, when I end loyalty! Here is my bed. Sleep give thee all its rest!”

“With *half* that wish”—the latter part—“the *wisher’s* eyes be pressed!” she calls.

The lovers fall into chaste slumber beneath the boughs.

Puck pops forth from the zephyr in which he has ridden. *Through the forest have I gone, but Athenian found I none on whose eyes I might approve this flower’s force in stirring love.*

He peers around at the wide pool’s gently sloping banks. *Night and silence.* He spots Lysander, asleep on the grass, and goes to him. *Who is here? Attire of Athens he doth wear—this is he my master said despisèd the Athenian maid!*

He sees Hermia. *And here the maiden, sleeping sound on the dank and dirty ground. Pretty soul! She durst not lie near this lack-love, this kill-courtesy!*

The lean sprite stretches a bare arm to squeeze the petal's juice onto the young man's closed lids. *Churl, upon thine eyes I throw all the power this charm doth own! When thou wakest, let love forbid Sleep its seat on thine eyelid!*

So awake when I am gone, for I must now to Oberon! He swirls upward and is gone in an instant.

The sleepers sigh contentedly as they dream.

Again the quiet hollow is disturbed, this time by two other Athenians. "Stay, though thou kill me, sweet Demetrius!" pleads lithe Helena, exhausted by pursuit.

Demetrius is angry. "I charge thee, hence, and do not haunt me thus!"

"Oh, wilt thou darkling leave me? Do not so!" she pleads.

He waves her back toward the city. "Stay at thy peril—I alone will go!" Demetrius presses forward in his quest to find Hermia—unwittingly leaving that very lady.

"Oh!" sighs Helena, watching him go. *I am out of breath in this fond chase! The more my prayer, the lesser is my grace!*

She walks toward the water. *Happy is Hermia, wheresoe'er she lies; for she hath blessed and attracting eyes! How came her eyes so bright? Not with salt tears!—if so, mine eyes are oftener washed than hers! No, no, I am as ugly as a bear!—for beasts that meet me run away in fear! Therefore no marvel that Demetrius does as a monster—flys my presence thus!*

What wicked and dissembling mirror of mine made me compare with Hermia's spherie eyne?

She spies a man. *But who is here? Lysander!—on the ground! Dead?—or asleep? I see no blood, no wound....* "Lysander, if you live, good sir, awake!"

The young nobleman sits up and opens his eyes—and the potent essence takes effect. "And run through fire I will for thy sweet sake!" he cries. "Transparent Helena!—Nature shows art that through thy bosom makes me seek thy heart!"

He jumps up and looks around—suddenly stricken with jealousy. "Where is Demetrius? Oh, how fit a word is that vile name to perish on my sword!"

Helena is alarmed. "Do not say so, Lysander!—say not so! What though he love your Hermia?—lord, what though? Yet Hermia still loves you! Then be content!"

"Content—with Hermia?" he says disdainfully. "No! I do repent the tedious minutes I with her have spent!"

"Not Hermia but Helena I love!" he tells her ardently. He smiles. "Who will not exchange a raven for a dove? The will of man is by his reason swayed—and reason says you are the worthier maid! Things growing are not ripe until their season; so I, being young, till now not ripe to reason! And, touching on the point of human skill, reason becomes the marshal to my will, and leads me to your eyes!—where I o'erlook Love's stories, written in Love's richest book!"

But Helena is frowning—offended and hurt. "Wherefore was I to this keen mockery born? When at your hands did I deserve this scorn?"

"Is't not enough," she moans, "is't not enough, young man, that I did never—no, nor never can!—deserve a sweet look from Demetrius' eye, but you must flout my insufficiency?"

"Good troth, you do me wrong!" she says, "good sooth you do, in such disdainful manner me to woo!"

"But fare you well. Perforce I must confess I thought you a lord of more true gentleness! Oh, that a lady, of one man refused, should by another therefore be abused!" Helena runs, distraught, into the darkness among the trees.

She sees not Hermia, notes Lysander, looking at that sleeping lady's dark tresses. *Hermia, sleep thou there, and never mayst thou come Lysander near! For, as a surfeit of the sweetest things the deepest loathing to the stomach brings, or as the heresies that men do leave are hated most by those they did deceive, so thou, my surfeit and my heresy, by all be hated, but the most by me!*

And, all my powers, address your love and might to honour Helena, and to be her knight!

He strides resolutely into the woods, following after the pale lady.

Left behind, Hermia awakens with a start: “*Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best to pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!*” She sits up, still alarmed. “*Ay, me, for pity!—what a dream was here!*”

“Lysander, look how I do quake with fear! Methought a *serpent* ate my heart away, and you sat there, *cruelly smiling* at his *prey!*”

“Lysander?” She looks to where he slept. “What, removed? *Lysander! Lord! What, out of hearing? Gone? No sound, no word? Alack, where are you? Speak, an if you hear!—speak of our loves!*”

But he is gone. Rising in the dark, Hermia peers around her. *I swoon, almost, with fear!*

She listens. *No? Then I well perceive you are not nigh.* Despite the night’s warmth she shivers and rubs her arms. *Either Death or you I’ll find immediately!*

Brushing bits of dead leaves from her clothes, she walks, uneasily, into the forest’s dark stillness.

Nestled on the turf between two thick, brown roots at the further edge of the pond lies Queen Titania, troubled with fitful sleep. Above, in the tall oak, her sentinel-guardian snores, quite content in his own somnolent idyll.

Chapter Three

New Love

A full moon has risen among the stars, and its silvery radiance illuminates the silent glade. On the dark water, glistening arcs glide slowly from the cluster of reeds where a too-eager frog has leapt, just missing a moth as it fluttered by.

Swash from the tail of a big and venerable catfish, his calm disturbed, laps the grassy shore, where the city artisans arrive, tramping through the bushes, their feet snapping dry twigs as they come here to effect their magical transformation into artists.

“Are we all met?” asks Bottom, looking around the sylvan space to which Master Quince has led them.

“Pat, pat,” nods the carpenter as the men assemble. “And here’s a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal: this green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our ’tiring-house,”—attiring space, like a theater’s, “and we will do it in action as we will do it before the duke!”

Bottom clears his throat. “Peter Quince...” He has a comment, of course.

“What sayest thou, bully Bottom?”

“There are things in this comedy of *Pyramus and Thisne* that will never please,” the weaver says gravely. “First, Pyramus must *draw a sword* to kill himself—which the ladies cannot abide! How answer you that?”

“By’r lakin,” cries Snout, “a parlous fear!”

Cautious Starveling concurs. “I believe we must leave the killing out, when all is done.”

“Not a whit!” counters the ebullient Bottom. “I have a device to make all well: write me a *prologue*, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no *harm* with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed *indeed*. And, for the more better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am *not* Pyramus, but *Bottom* the *weaver!* This will put them out of fear.” And, he hopes, bring him some wealthy customers.

Quince agrees to it. “Well, we will have such a prologue, and it shall be written in eight and six”—a ballad meter.

“No,” says line-hungry Bottom, “make it two *more!*—let it be written in eight and *eight.*”

Young Snout now frets. “Will not the ladies be afeard of the *lion?*”

"I fear it, I promise you!" says Starveling.

"Masters, you yourselves *ought* to consider it!" says Bottom. "To bring in—God shield us!—a *lion* among *ladies* is a most dreadful thing—for there is not a more *fearful* wild-fowl than your lion *living*! And we ought to look to 't!"

"Therefore another prologue must tell he is not a lion," says Snout.

Bottom goes further: "Nay, you must name his *name*!—and half his *face* must be seen through the lion's neck; and he himself must *speak* through, saying thus, or to the same defect: 'Ladies'—or 'Fair ladies'—'I would wish you'—or 'I would request you'—or 'I would entreat you'—'not to fear, not to tremble! My life for yours, if you think *I* come hither as a *lion*, it were pity of my life! *No*, I am no such thing!—I am a *man*, as *other* men are!"

"And there indeed let him name his name, and tell them plainly he is Snug the joiner."

"Well, it shall be so," says Quince. "But there is two *hard* things: that is, to bring the *moonlight* into a chamber, for, you know, Pyramus and Thisbe meet by moonlight,—"

"Doth the moon shine that night we play our play?" asks Snout.

"A calendar, a *calendar*!" demands Bottom. "Look in the almanac: find out moonshine, find out *moonshine*!"

Quince has already done so. "Yes, it doth shine that night."

"Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber where we play open, and the moon may shine in at the *window*," says Bottom.

"Aye," says Quince, amiably. "Or *else* one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern, and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the *person* of Moonshine"—a part he has already written for Starveling. "Then there is another thing: we must have a *wall* in the great chamber; for Pyramus and Thisbe, says the story, did talk through the chink of a wall."

Snout frowns. "You can never bring in a *wall*. What say you, Bottom?"

Bottom thinks. "Some man or other must *present* Wall!—and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast"—mortar and pebbles—"upon him, to *signify* wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisne whisper."

Quince approves; his notes for Snout, formerly Thisbe's father, already describe his new function. "If that may be, then all is well."

"Come, sit down, every mother's son, and rehearse your parts!" the carpenter directs. "Pyramus, you begin; when you have spoken your speech, enter into that brake," he says, motioning toward some tall, thick shrubs. "And so every one, according to his cue!"

Peter Quince steps back to oversee the acting, while the players steal last looks at their written parts.

Puck, returning to learn if the petal's spell has yet taken hold with Titania, stands behind a tree-trunk, watching. He chuckles to himself. *What hempen home-spuns have we swaggering here so near the cradle of the fairy queen? What?—a play toward! I'll be an auditor—an actor too, perhaps, if I see cause!*

Quince waves to Bottom. "Speak, Pyramus. Thisbe, stand forth."

Bottom begins: "'Thisne, the flowers of odious savours sweet—'"

"*Odourous*," says Quince. "Odours."

"—'odours savour; so doth thy breath, my dearest Thisne dear,'" says Bottom. "'But *hark*, a voice! Stay thou but here awhile, and by and by I will to thee appear.'" He goes into the thicket.

Thinks Puck, of the humans' world, *A stranger Pyramus than e'er played here!* Then he grins—and vanishes.

Flute is tentative. "Must I speak *now*?"

"*Aye*, marry, you *must*," says Quince, "for, you must understand, he goes but to see a noise that he heard, and is to come again."

Young Flute drones: "'Most radiant Pyramus, most lily-white of hue, of colour like the red rose on triumphant brier; most frisky juvenile, and also most lovely, too. As true as truest horse that yet would never tire, I'll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny's tomb.'" "

“‘*Ninus*’ tomb,’ man!” cries Quince. “But you must not speak *that* yet!—*that* you answer to Pyramus!” He shakes his head. “You speak all your part at once, cues and all!

“Pyramus,” he calls to Bottom, “*enter*—your *cue* is past: it is ‘never *tire*.’”

Flute takes note. “*Oh!*— ‘As true as truest horse, that yet would never *tire*.’”

Bottom emerges from the copse—with the long-eared head of a fuzzy gray ass! Walking beside him, unseen by the men, is the rascal Puck. Says Bottom, unaware of the change, “‘As I were *fair*, Thisne, I were only *thine!*’”

“*Oh, monstrous!*” cries Quince, backing away. “*Oh, strange! We are haunted! Pray, masters! Fly, masters! Help!*”

The men flee, wide-eyed, from Bottom’s startling new face, and they dash into the forest.

Puck, watching them, claps his hands happily. *I’ll follow you! Through bush I’ll lead you about a round—through bog, through brake, through brier! Sometimes a horse I’ll be, sometimes a hound, a hog, a heedless bear; sometimes a fire! And neigh and bark and grunt—then roar and burn, like horse, hound, hog, bear—fire at every turn!*

The lively spirit flies off to enjoy his sport, driving the panicked tradesmen back and forth to circle in the dim woods.

Bottom is puzzled. *Why do they run away?* he wonders. Soon he grows annoyed. *This is a knavery of them to make me afeard!*

Snout runs back into the glade. “*Oh, Bottom, thou art changed!*” he cries, aghast. “What do I see on thee?”

“What do you see?” The weaver is peeved. “You see *an ass’s head* for your own, do you not?” The common “Three Fools” tavern-sign shows two asinine faces—the viewer becoming the third. But Snout is gone—even more frightened, now, by the angry, animal face.

Quince—surprised to find himself here again—pauses, out of breath. “*Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! Thou art translated!*” He, too, flees.

I see their knavery! thinks the massive man. *This is to make an ass of me!—to fright me, if they could!*

But I will not stir from this place, do what they can! I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, so that they shall hear I am not afraid!

He boldly chants:

“The ousel cock, so black of hue,
With orange-tawny bill;
The throstle with his note so true;
The wren with little quill.”

At the edge of the copse, Queen Titania stirs beneath her spreading oak—and sees Bottom. *What angel wakes me from my flowery bed?* she wonders, enchanted.

“The finch, the sparrow and the lark;
The plain-song cuckoo grey,
Whose note full many a man doth mark,
And does not answer, ‘*Nay!*’”—simply enjoys.

Bottom considers the lyric. “For, indeed, who would set his wit against so foolish a bird? Who would give a *bird* the lie,”—challenge it, “though it cry ‘*cuckoo!*’”—sometimes heard as *cuckold*. “Never so!”

Now fully awake, Titania rises. She calls to Bottom: “I pray thee, gentle mortal, *sing again!* Mine ear is much enamoured of thy notes! So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape!—and thy fair virtue force-perforce doth move me, on the first view, to say—to *swear!*—I love thee!”

Bottom’s big, brown ass’s-eyes blink at the beautiful lady. “Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for *that!*” he says, based on experience. “And yet, to say the truth,” he adds, sourly, “*reason* and love keep little company together now-a-days; the more’s the pity that some

honest neighbours will not make them friends!” He smiles, pleased by his cleverness; “Nay, I *can* gleek upon occasion!”

“Thou art as *wise* as thou art *beautiful!*” breathes Titania—without sarcasm.

“Not so, neither,” protests Bottom. He looks around. “But if I have wit enough to get out of this wood, I had enough to serve mine *own* turn....”

Titania wags a finger, smiling. “Out of this wood do not desire to go! Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no! I am a spirit of no common rate!—the *summer* still doth attend upon my state—and I do *love* thee!

“Therefore, *go with me!* I’ll give thee *fairies* to attend on thee!—and they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep, and sing while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep! And I will purge thy *mortal* grossness, so that thou shalt like an airy *spirit* go!

“Peasblossom! Cobweb! Moth and Mustardseed!”

Four boy-sprites sparkle into view, startling Master Bottom.

“Ready!” cries Peasblossom, clad in a few white petals.

“And I,” says Cobweb; a glossy skein keeps his privates private.

“And I,” says Moth, whose silky brown pouch is made of thread from ears of corn.

“And I!” cries tiny Mustardseed, too small to bother with any garb at all.

“Where shall we go?” asks Peasblossom.

“Be kind and courteous to this gentleman!” commands Titania. “Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes!—feed him with apricocks and dewberries, with purple grapes, green figs, and mulberries! The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees, and for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs, and light them at the fiery glow-worms’ eyes, to help my love to *bed!*” Her eyes flash. “And to *arise*, pluck the wings from painted butterflies, to fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes!

“Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies!”

“Hail, mortal!” says Peasblossom, bending gracefully at the middle.

Cobweb bows, arms spread. “Hail!”

“Hail!” cries Moth with a smile.

Mustardseed, bounces up and down. “*Hail!*”

Bottom regards his new attendants curiously. He tells the tannest, “I cry Your Worship’s mercy heartily. I beseech Your Worship’s name....”

“Cobweb.”

The weaver nods. “I shall desire more acquaintance of you, good Master Cobweb; if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you!” A patch of web can stem such bleeding.

Bottom regards the most sinewy. “Your name, honest gentleman?”

“Peasblossom.”

Bottom nods again. “I pray you, commend me to Mistress *Squash*, your mother, and to Master *Peascod*, your father!” The ribaldry is lost on the young fairy. “Good Master Peasblossom, I shall desire of you more acquaintance, too.”

He looks at the littlest. “Your name, I beseech you, sir?”

“Mustardseed.”

“Good Master Mustardseed, I know your oppression well: that same cowardly *ox-beef* hath, giant-like, devoured many a gentleman of *your* house! I promise you, your kindred have made my eyes water ere now!”—facetious condolence for departed mustard and horseradish. “I desire of you *more* acquaintance, good Master Mustardseed!” he says hungrily.

“Come, wait upon him!” orders Titania. “Lead him to my bower! The Moon, methinks, looks with a watery eye—and when *she* weeps, weeps every little flower, lamenting some enforced chastity!” The queen does not encourage abstinences.

Still, she already has enough trouble with Oberon. “Tie up my love’s tongue,” she tells her wiry young minions. “Bring him silently.”

They leave the dell, as other fairies search for tasty delicacies to please the palate of Lord Bottom.

Chapter Four **Lovers' Quarrels**

Deeper within the forest, Oberon waits beneath some low-hanging boughs for his lieutenant. *I wonder if Titania be awakened—and what it was that next came in her eye which she must dote on in extremity!*

Here comes my messenger! “How now, mad spirit! What wight rules *now* within this haunted grove?”

“My mistress with a *monster* is in love!” Puck relates the tale: “Near to her close and consecrated bower, while she was in her dull and sleeping hour, a crew of patches—rude mechanicals that *work* for bread upon Athenian stalls—were met together to rehearse a play intended for great Theseus’ nuptials.

“The shallowest thick-skin of that barren sort, who ‘Pyramus’ presented in their sport, forsook his scene and entered in a brake—where I did him at disadvantage take: an *ass*’s nole I fixèd on his head!

“Anon his ‘Thisbe’ must be answered—and forth my antic comes!

“When they him spy, as wild geese that the creeping *fowler* eye, or russet-pated choughs, many in sort, rising and cawing at the *gun*’s report, sever themselves and madly sweep the sky!—so, at his sight, *away his fellows fly!*—and at our stand there, o’er one another falls!

“He ‘*Murder!*’ cries, and help from Athens calls! Their *senses* weak, with their *fears* made strong, find senseless *things* begin to do them wrong!—for *briers* and *thorns* at their apparel snatch!—some, sleeves, some, hats!—from yielders all things catch!

“I led them on in this distracted tear, and left sweet ‘Pyramus’ translated there.

“When in that moment, as it came to pass, *Titania waked*—and straightway loved an *ass!*”

“This falls out better than I could devise!” laughs Oberon, highly pleased. “But hast thou yet laced the Athenian’s eyes with the love-juice, as I did bid thee do?”

“I took him sleeping; that is finished, too! And the Athenian woman by his side when he wakes—perforce she *must* be eyed!”

Just then the weightless spirits hear the racket that mortals make while pushing through undergrowth; Hermia is approaching, followed by desperate Demetrius.

“Stand close,” whispers Oberon. “This is the same Athenian!”

Puck’s bright eyes open wide in alarm. “This is the woman—but *this* not the *man!*”

The two sprites watch, unseen, as the nobleman stops the lady, pleading to be heard.

“Oh, why *rebuke* you him that *loves* you so?” asks Demetrius. “Lay breath so bitter on your bitter *foe!*”

“*Now* I but *chide*,” replies Hermia, “but I *should* use thee *worse!*—for thou, I fear, hast given me cause to *curse!*” She stands, hands on hips. “If thou hast *slain* Lysander in his sleep, being o’er-shoes in blood, plunge them in deep, and kill *me* too!

“The *sun* was not so faithful unto the *day* as he to me!” she cries, unaware of the spell-induced defection. “That he would have *stolen away* from sleeping Hermia! I’ll believe as soon that this whole *earth* may be bored into so that the *moon* may through the centre creep, and so displease her brother in’s noontide with the Antipodes!

“It cannot be but thou hast *murdered* him!” She points at Demetrius. “So should a murderer look—so *dead*, so *grim!*”

“Thus should the *murdered* look!” retorts the love-stricken lord, “and so should *I*, piercèd through the heart with your stern cruelty!” He sighs. “Yet you, the *murderer*, look as bright, as clear, as yonder Venus in her glimmering sphere!”

“What’s this as to my *Lysander*?” demands Hermia. “Where *is* he? Oh, good Demetrius, wilt thou not *give* him to me?”

Jealousy overwhelms Demetrius. “I had rather give his carcass to my *hounds!*”

Her suspicion seems confirmed. “Out, *dog!* Out, *cur!* Thou drivest me past the bounds of maiden’s *patience!* Hast thou *slain* him, then? Henceforth be never numbered among *men!*”

“Oh, for *once* tell true, tell true even for my sake: durst thou have looked upon him awake—or hast thou *killed him sleeping?*”

Hermia’s fury grows. “Oh, brave *touch!*” she says, bitterly. “Could not a *snake* do so much? An adder *did it!*—for with *doubler* tongue than *thine*, thou serpent, never adder stung!”

Demetrius is exasperated. “You spend your passion on a misprised notion! I am not guilty of Lysander’s blood—nor is he *dead*, for aught that I can tell!”

“I pray thee, tell me then that he is well!”

“And if I *could*, what should I *get* therefore?” asks Demetrius.

Hermia flares, “The privilege of *never seeing me more!* And from thy hated presence *part I so!* See *me* no more, whether he be dead or no!” She storms away, oblivious to the surrounding darkness.

There is no following her in this fierce vein, thinks Demetrius. *Here, therefore, for a while I will remain. So sorrow’s heaviness doth heavier grow, for debt that bankrupt Sleep doth Sorrow owe!* He yawns. *Which now in some slight measure I will pay—for its tender here make some stay.* He lies on the soft moss that slants gently between close-growing maples, and soon falls asleep.

Oberon glares at Puck. “What hast thou *done?* Thou hast *mistaken* quite, and laid the love-juice on some true-love’s sight! From thy misprision must perforce ensue some *true love turned*, and not a *false* turned true!”

Puck shrugs. “Then Fate o’er-rules,” he says glibly. “For the one man holding *troth*, a *million* fail, confounding oath on oath.”

But Oberon demands correction. “About the wood go, swifter than the wind, and *Helena* of Athens look thou find! All fancying-sick she is, and pale of cheek from sighs of love that cost the fresh blood dear! By some illusion, see that thou *bring her here!*” He looks at the sleeping Demetrius. “I’ll charm *his* eyes for when she do appear....”

“*I go, I go!*” cries Puck, “*look* how I go!—swifter than arrow from a Tartar’s bow!” He’s gone even before the sound of his voice can fade.

Oberon stands over Demetrius. “Flower of this purple dye, hit with *Cupid’s* archery, sink in apple of his eye! When his love he doth espy, let her shine as gloriously as the Venus of the sky!”

He looks down. “When thou wakest and she be by, beg of her for remedy!”

Puck pops up and points. “Captain of our fairy band, *Helena* is here at hand!—and the *youth* mistook by me, pleading for a lover’s fee! Shall we their fond pageant see?” He laughs. “Lord, what fools these mortals be!”

Oberon looks toward an opening among tall elms. “Stand aside. The noise they make will cause Demetrius to wake.”

Puck claps silently as they move. “Then will *two* at once woo *one!* That must needs be sport alone! And those things do best please *me* that befall *preposterously!*”

Helena arrives, dodging between trees; *Lysander*, in feverish pursuit, treads upon the fertile soil’s fresh green sprouts—and again asserts, futilely, his fervent new desire.

“Why would you think that I woo in *scorn?*” he asks. “Scorn and derision never come with *tears!* Look!—when I vow, I *weep!*—vows *so* born, in their nativity all *truth* appears! How can these things in me seem *scorn* to you, bearing badges of faith to prove them *true?*”

Helena stumbles to a stop. “You do advance your *cunning* more and *more!*—when *truth* kills *truth*, oh devilish-holy *fray!* These vows are *Hermia’s*; will you *give her o’er?* Weigh oath against oath, and you *nothing* say: your vows to her and me, put in two scales will *even* weigh—and both as light as *tales!*”

“I had no *judgment* when to *her* I swore!” insists Lysander.

“Nor none, to *my* mind, now you give her o’er!”

“*Demetrius* loves her—and he loves not *you!*”

Hearing his name, Demetrius awakens, and—blinking—sees the golden-tressed lady. He jumps to his feet. “*O Helena—goddess*, nymph, perfect—*divine!* To what, *my love*, shall I compare thine eyne?—*crystal* is *muddy!* Oh, how ripe in show thy *lips*, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!

“That pure congealèd *white* of high mountain snow with the eastern wind fanned turns to *crow* when thou hold’st up *thy hand!*—*oh*, let me *kiss* this, princess of pure white, this *seal* in bliss!”

But Helena pulls back her hand. “Oh, *spite!* Oh, *hell!*” she cries “I see you *all* are bent to set against me for your merriment! If you were *civil* and knew *courtesy*, you would not do me thus much injury! Can you not but *hate* me, as I know you do; must you join insults to *mock me*, too?

“If you were *men*, as men you are in *show*, you would not use a *gentle* lady so!—to vow, and swear, and superpraise my parts, when I am sure you *hate* me with your hearts!

“You both are *rivals*, and love *Hermia*—and *now* both rivals in *mocking Helena!* A *trim* exploit, a *manly* enterprise, to conjure up tears in a poor maid’s eyes with your derision! None of *noble* sort would so offend a virgin, and extort a poor soul’s patience, all to make you sport!”

Lysander frowns sternly at the other man. “You are *unkind*, Demetrius! Be not so—for *you love Hermia*; this you know I know! And here, with all good will, with all my heart, of *Hermia’s* love I yield you up my part!

“And yours of *Helena* to *me* bequeath, whom *I* do love—and will so till my death!”

Helena moans: “Never did mockers waste more idle breath!”

“Lysander, keep thy *Hermia!*—I will none!” cries Demetrius. “If e’er I loved her, all that love is *gone!* My heart to her but as *guest-wise* sojourned, and now to Helena is it *home* returned, there to remain!”

“Helena, it is not so!” says Lysander.

Demetrius moves toward him. “Disparage not the faith thou dost not know, lest, to thy peril, thou buy it dear!”—pay heavily. He points: “Look, where thy love comes!—*yonder* is *thy* dear!”

Hermia, relieved to have found the others, hurries forward. “Thou art not, Lysander, by mine eye, found; mine *ear*, I thank it, brought me to thy *sound!* Dark night, that from the eye its function takes, the ear more quick of apprehension makes; wherein it doth impair the seeing sense, it pays the hearing *double* recompense!

“But why didst thou unkindly *leave* me so?”

Lysander cannot pull his gaze from Helena. “Why should he stay whom *love* doth press to go?”

Hermia is puzzled. “What could press Lysander from my side?”

He says, cheeks aglow, “Lysander’s *love* would not let him *abide!*—*for Helena!*—who more engilds the *night* than all your fiery *ohs* and *ahs* at light!” He frowns at Hermia. “Why seek’st thou me? Could not that make thee know?—the hate I bear thee made me leave thee so.”

She is stunned. “You speak not as you think!—it cannot *be!*”

For her part, Helena sees added betrayal. *Lo, she is one of this confederacy! Now I perceive they have conjoined, all three, to fashion this false sport in spite of me!* “Injurious Hermia!—most *ungrateful* maid! Have you conspired, have you with these connived, to bait me with this foul derision? Is all the counsel that we two have shared—the sisters’ vows, the hours that we have spent, when we have chid the hasty-footed Time for parting us—*oh*, is it all *forgot?*—all school-days’ friendship, childhood innocence?

“We, Hermia, like two artificing gods have with our needles created both one *flower*, both on one *sampler*, sitting on one cushion, both warbling of one *song*, both in one key, as if our hands, our sides, voices and minds, had been incorporate!

“So we *grew* together, like to a double cherry, seeming parted, but yet an union in partition: two lovely berries moulded on one stem! So with two seeming *bodies*, but one *heart!*—two of the first, like coats in heraldry due but to one, and crownèd with one crest!

“And will you our ancient love asunder rend, to join with *men* in scorning your poor *friend*? It is not friendly, ’tis not *maidenly!* Our *sex* as well as I may chide you for it, though I alone do *feel* the injury!”

Hermia stares. “I am amazèd at your passionate words! I scorn you not!—it seems that *you* scorn *me!*”

“Have you not set Lysander as in scorn to follow me and *praise* my eyes and face?” demands Helena. “And made your *other* love, Demetrius, who but even now did spurn me with his foot,”—by running away, “calling me ‘*goddess,*’ ‘*nymph,*’ ‘*divine and rare,*’ ‘*precious,*’ ‘*celestial!*’”

“Wherefore speaks he that to her he *hates?* And wherefore doth Lysander deny *your* love, so rich within his soul, and tender *me,* as sooth, *affection,* but by your *setting on,* by your *consent?*—

“*What?*—though I be not so in grace as you, so *hung upon* with love, so fortunate, but miserable most, to love unlovèd—this you should *pity* rather than *despise!*”

Hermia is quite taken aback. “I understand not what you *mean* by this!”

Helena flushes with anger. “*Aye, do!*—*persevere!*—counterfeit *sad* looks!” she cries, in sarcasm. “Make mouths at me when I turn my back; wink each at other; hold the sweet jest up! This sport, well carried, shall be *chronicled!*” She shakes her head. “If you had any pity, grace, or manners, you would not make me such an argument!

“But fare ye well,” she says sorrowfully. “’Tis partly my own fault—which death or absence soon shall remedy!”

Lysander is appalled. “*Stay,* gentle Helena! Hear my explanation!—my love, my life my *soul,* fair *Helena!*”

“Oh, *excellent!*” she replies sourly.

Hermia urges Demetrius, “Sweet, do not scorn her so!”

But he is scowling at his competitor. “If she cannot *entreat,* I can *compel!*”

Lysander laughs. “*Thou* canst compel no more than she entreat! Thy *threats* have no more strength than her weak *prayers!*”

“Helena, I *love* thee!—by my *life* I do! I swear by that which I will hazard for thee, to prove him *false* that says I love thee not!”

Demetrius is not cowed. “I say I love thee more than *he* can do!”

“If thou *say* so, withdraw, and *prove* it, too!”

Demetrius nods agreement: “Quick, come!” He heads toward the woods.

Hermia is now even more perplexed. “Lysander, whereto tends all this?” she asks, grasping his sleeve as the noblemen start away to fight.

Lysander glares at the dark-haired lady. “Away, you *shadow!*” He tries to pull free.

Demetrius turns back. “Oh, *no,*” he says contemptuously. “He’ll *seem* to break loose!” he tells Helena. He sneers at Lysander. “*Take on* as if you would *follow,* but yet come *not!* You are a *tame* man! *Go!*”

Lysander brusquely pushes Hermia back. “*Hang off,* thou *cat,* thou *burr!* Vile *thing,* let loose, or I will shake thee from me like a serpent!”

Hermia regards the rivals. “Why are you grown so *rude?* What change is *this?*” She touches Lysander’s arm again. “Sweet love—”

“*Thy* love?” he says, disgusted. “*Out,* tawny *Tartar,* *out!* *Out,* loathèd drug!—hated *potion,* hence!”

Hermia stares, wide-eyed. “Do you not *jest?*”

Helena’s anger at the mockers overflows: “*Yes,* in sooth!—and so do *you!*”

Lysander growls, “Demetrius, I will keep my word with thee!”

Demetrius scoffs: "I would I had your *bond!*—for I perceive a weak hand holds you!" Hermia is still clutching at Lysander. "I'll not trust *your* word!"

"*What?*—should I hurt her," demands the gentleman, "*strike* her, kill her dead? Although I *hate* her, I'll not harm her so!"

"By what can you do me greater harm than *hate?*" cries Hermia, now in tears. "*Hate* me?—*wherefore?* *Oh, me!* What is *new*, my love? Am not I *Hermia?* Are not you *Lysander?* I am as fair now as I was erewhile! Till night you *loved* me!—yet *since* night you *left* me....

"Why, then you've left me—O, the gods forbid!—in *earnest*, shall I say?"

"*Aye*, by my life!" shouts Lysander, "and did desire never to see thee more! Therefore be out of *hope*, of *question*, of *doubt!*—be *certain* nothing's *trueer!* 'Tis no jest that I do *hate* thee, and love Helena!"

Hermia staggers. "*Oh, me!*" She turns to Helena—livid. "*You juggler!* You *canker-blossom!* You *thief* of love! *What?*—have you come by night and stolen my love's *heart* from him?"

"*Fie!*" replies Helena. "*I' faith*, have you no *modesty*, no maidenly *shame*, no touch of *bashfulness?* What, will you tear impertinent answers from *my* gentle tongue? *Fie, fie!* You *counterfeit*, you *puppet*, you!"

"*Puppet!* Why *so!* *Aye!*—*that* way goes the game!" cries Hermia, her eyes narrowing. "Now I perceive that she hath made compare between our *statures*: she hath urged her *height*; and with her personage—her *tall* personage, her *height*, forsooth!—she hath prevailed with him!

"And you are grown so *high* in his esteem because *I* am so dwarfish and so *low!* How low *am* I, thou *painted maypole?* Speak: *how low am I?*" She starts forward menacingly. "I am not yet so low but that my *nails* can reach unto thine eyes!"

Helena backs away. "I pray you, though you mock me, gentlemen, let her not hurt me! I was never curst; I have no gift at all in shrewishness!—I am a right *maid* for my *cowardice!* Let her not strike me! You perhaps may think because she is something lower than myself, that I can match her...."

"*Lower!*" cries Hermia, furious. "*Hark! Again!*"

Helena turns conciliatory. "Good Hermia, do not be so *bitter* with me! I evermore did *love* you, Hermia, did ever keep your counsels, never wronged you—save that, in my love for Demetrius, I told him of your stealth unto this wood.

"He followed *you!* For love I followed *him*, but he hath chid me hence, and *threatened* me: to strike me, spurn me—nay, to *kill* me, too!

"And now, if you will let me quiet go, to Athens will I bear my folly back, and follow you no further. Let me go; you see how simple and how loyal I am!"

Hermia disdains the willowy lady. "Well, get you *gone!* Who is't that *hinders* you?"

Helena says, softly, "A foolish heart, that I leave here behind."

"What, with Lysander?"

"With Demetrius," Helena tells her sadly—prompting another attack.

Lysander blocks her. "Be not afraid! She shall not harm thee, Helena!" he says, fawning.

"No, sir, she *shall* not," jealous Demetrius tells him, "though *you* take her part!"

Helena cautions the young lords. "Oh, when she's angry she is keen and shrewd! She was a *vixen* when she went to school!—and though she be but little, she is *fierce!*"

"*'Little'* again!" cries Hermia. "Nothing but '*low*' and '*little!*'" She frowns at Demetrius. "Why will you suffer her to *flout* me thus?" She again starts toward Helena, but the men move between them. "Let me come to her!"

"Get you gone, you *dwarf!*" Lysander tells Hermia, "you *minimus* of hindering *knot-grass* made; you *bead*, you *acorn!*"

Demetrius objects: "You are too officious in her behalf who *scorns* your services! Let her alone!—speak not for *Helena!*—take not *her* part! For if thou dost pretend even so *little* a *show* of love to her, thou shalt *pay* for it!"

Lysander again faces him. “Now she holds me not!—now *follow*, if thou *darest*, to try whose right, thine or mine, is *most* in Helena!”

Demetrius moves closer, pushing his face in front of his opponent’s. “*Follow?* Nay, I’ll go with thee *cheek by jowl!*”

The belligerents stamp away into the dense brush, each pressing to be first, looking for a space in which to fight a duel.

“*You, mistress!*” cries Hermia, “all this coil is due to *you!*” As she advances, Helena retreats. “Nay, go not back!”

But the other lady is already running. “I will not trust you, I, nor longer stay in your curst company! Your hands than mine are quicker for a fray; my *legs* are longer, though—to *run away!*” And with that, she is gone.

Hermia looks around in frustration.

I am amazèd, and know not what to say!

Shaking her head, she walks back toward the city.

Chapter Five **Remedies Applied**

Oberon is disturbed by the turmoil among lovers. “This is thy *negligence!* Ever thou mistakest!—or else committ’st thy knaveries wilfully!”

“*Believe* me, King of Shadows, I *mistook!*” cries Puck. “Did not you tell me I should know the man by the Athenian garment he had on? And so far blameless proves my enterprise that I have ’nointed an *Athenian’s* eyes!

“And so far I am glad it so did sort,” he admits, “as this their jangling I esteem a sport!”

Oberon points to the fresh path the men have made moving clumsily through the brush. “Thou see’st these lovers seek a place to *fight!*” Wounds could end the mortals’ lives, brief as they are. “*Hie* therefore, Robin!—overcast the night: the starry welkin cover thou anon with drooping *fog* as black as Acheron, and lead those testy rivals so astray as one comes not within another’s way!

“Like to *Lysander* sometime frame thy tongue, and stir Demetrius up with bitter wrong. Then sometime rail thou like *Demetrius*—and *from* each other look thou lead them thus, till o’er their brows death-counterfeiting sleep with folding wings and leaden legs doth creep.”

He pulls a damp brown stem from a leather pouch. “Then crush this herb over Lysander’s eye; the liquid hath this virtuous property: to take from thence all *error* with its might, and make his eyeballs roll with *wonted* sight.

“When they next wake, all this derision shall seem a *dream* and *fruitless* vision—and back to Athens shall the lovers wend, with league whose date till death shall never end!

“Whiles I in that affair do *thee* employ, I’ll to my queen and beg her Indian boy, and from monster’s view her charmèd eye release.

“Then all things shall be at peace!” says the king hopefully.

“My fairy lord, this must be done with haste,” notes Puck, “for night’s swift dragons cut the clouds’ full host, and yonder shines Aurora’s harbinger!—at whose approach, ghosts, wandering here and there, troop home to churchyards. Damnèd spirits all, that in crossways and floods have burial, already to their wormy beds are gone. For fear lest day should look their shames upon, they willfully themselves exile from light, and must for ever consort with black-browèd night.”

Oberon smiles benignly. “But *we* are spirits of another sort! I with the *morning’s* love have *oft* made sport, and like a forester the groves may tread, even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red, opening on Neptune with fair, blessèd beams, turns to yellow golden his salty green streams.

“But, notwithstanding, *haste!* Make no delay!—we may effect this business yet ere day!”

King Oberon goes to find Queen Titania.

Puck, laughing, relishes this assignment. “Up and down, *up and down*, I will lead them *up* then *down*! I am feared in field and town! Goblin leads them up and down!”

With an elegant wave of his lean right arm, he swirls fingers inward to draw from the nearby woods all of its moonbeams. A motion of his splayed left hand dims the star-filled sky over the trees—and thus he sets the two Athenian lords to stumbling about in total darkness.

Puck, though, still sees all they could have seen—and more. He surveys the area. *Here comes one!* he notes, as Lysander, sword drawn, backs from the bushes into the dark open space.

“Where *art* thou, proud Demetrius?” calls the young noble, unseeing, his hand and blade held forward. “*Speak* thou now!”

Puck imitates Demetrius: “*Here, villain!*—drawn and ready! Where art *thou*?”

Lysander gropes about. “I will be with thee straight!”

Puck’s adopted voice summons: “Follow me, then, to plainer ground!”

Lysander, listening, turns toward the sprite and walks unsteadily back among the trees.

After a short while, Demetrius pushes his way through the brush. “Lysander!” he calls. “*Speak* again! Thou *runaway*, thou *coward*, art thou *fled*? *Speak*! In some *bush*? Where dost thou hide thy head?”

Puck—sounding like Lysander—replies tauntingly: “Thou *coward!*—art thou bragging to the *stars*, telling the *bushes* that thou look’st for wars—but wilt not *come*? Come, *recreant*; come, thou *child!*—I’ll whip *thee* with a *rod!*—he is defiled who draws a *sword* on thee!”

Demetrius turns, and moves toward the gibe, sword raised. “Yea, art thou there?”

“Follow my voice!” demands Puck’s Lysander. “We’ll try no manhood *here!*”

Demetrius angrily stalks forward, feeling his way back into the woods.

Puck stretches his arms upward, then slowly lowers them, hands flat, to settle an enchantment for sleep upon this opening in the forest. Then he glides in among the trees.

Lysander, tired of the futile search, again steps from the wood. *He goes before me and still dares me on! When I come where he calls, then he is gone! The villain is much lighter-heeled than I! I followed fast, but faster he did fly, so that fallen am I in dark uneven way!*

He yawns, and, feeling his way, sits on dry leaves between two rounded roots of the huge old oak. *And here will rest me!* He lies back, wearily. *Come, thou gentle day! For if but once thou show me thy grey light, I’ll find Demetrius and revenge this spite!* He soon falls asleep.

Now Puck returns to the glen, skipping merrily just ahead of Demetrius, and says—in the voice of Lysander, “*Coward*, why comest thou not?”

“*Abide* me, if thou *darest!*” growls Demetrius, “for well I wot thou *runn’st* before me, shifting every place, and *darest not stand*, nor look me in the face!” He stops, peering around. “Where art thou *now*?” he cries angrily.

“Come *hither!* I am *here!*” calls Puck’s Lysander.

But Demetrius has had enough. “Nay, then; thou mock’st me! Thou shalt buy this *dearly*, if ever I thy face by daylight see! Now, go thy way!” *Faintness constraineth me to measure out my length on this cold bed*, he thinks. He calls into the dark, “By day’s approach, look to be visited!” Beside an elm, he lies down on some fallen leaves, and soon is fast asleep.

Puck checks his work; he finds that both young lords are dreaming—of retribution.

Helena wanders slowly into the hollow. *Oh, weary night!* she groans; her feet are sore from circling through the old forest. *O long and tedious night, abate thine hours! Shine, comfort from the east, that I may go back to Athens by daylight, from these that my poor company detest!*

And sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow’s eye, steal me awhile from mine own company! Despite the darkness she finds a soft spot on the grass; she leans back, fearful but tired, and soon she, too, sleeps.

Yet but three? thinks Puck. *Come, one more!*—two of both kinds make up four!

He smiles as Hermia succumbs to the silent summons. *Here she comes, cursèd and sad. Cupid is a knavish lad, thus to make poor females mad!*

Suddenly the dark-eyed lady feels exhausted. *Never so weary, never so in woe!—bedabbled with the dew and torn with briars, I can no further crawl, no further go! My legs can keep no pace with my desires! Here will I rest me till the break of day.*

She wonders about the fight. *Heavens shield Lysander, if they mean a fray!* Hermia lies down and closes her eyes.

Puck regards the Athenian nobles, two dark-haired, two fair. *On the ground, sleeping sound!*

He goes to Lysander. *I'll apply to your eye, gentle lover, remedy.* He squeezes a drop of juice from the brown stem onto each of the young lord's lids.

When thou wakest and takest true delight—of thy former lady's eye the sight—then the country proverb known, that every man should take his own—in your waking shall be shown!

Jack shall have Jill; nought shall go ill! pronounces Puck to himself. *The man shall have his mate again—and all shall be well!*

Come, sit thee down upon this flowery bed," the Queen of the Fairies tells Bottom, "while I with thine amiable cheeks do toy, and stick musk-roses on thy sleek, smooth head, and kiss thy fair, large ears, my gentle joy!"

Titania has led him, with his four attendants and her train, to the moonlit glade where the four noble Athenians lie, unnoticed, in enchanted slumber. Hidden at the edge of the wood, King Oberon is watching.

"Where's Cobweb?" asks Bottom, as Titania gently adorns his fuzzy face with bright, plaited flowers.

"Ready!" cries the sprite.

"Scratch my head, Cobweb," says Bottom lazily. "Where's Mounsieur Peasblossom?"

"Ready!"

"Mounsieur Peasblossom, good mounsieur, get you your weapons in your hand, and kill me a round-hipped humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and, good mounsieur, bring me the *honey*-bag.

"Do not fret yourself too much in the action, mounsieur," says Bottom languorously, "and, good mounsieur, have a care the honey-bag *break* not—I would be loath to have you overflowen by a honey-bag, signior! Where's Mounsieur Mustardseed?"

"Ready!"

"Give me your ear, Mounsieur Mustardseed." The fairy spreads his thin arms to begin an elaborate, courtly bow. "Pray you, leave your courtesy, good mounsieur."

"What's your will?"

"Nothing, good mounsieur, but to help Cavalieri Cobweb to *scratch!* I must to the barber's, mounsieur," says the fat, pampered weaver, "for methinks I am marvellous *hairy* about the face; and I am such a tender ass, if my hair do but tickle me, I must scratch," he moans—motionless in utter indolence.

Titania nestles happily beside him. "What, wilt thou hear some *music*, my sweet love?"

"I have a reasonable good ear in music," says Bottom, his big gray ones twitching. "Let's have the tones—and the bones!"

"Oh, say, sweet love, what thou *desirest* to eat."

Bottom is hungry. "Truly, a *peck* of provender: I could munch your good dry *oats*; methinks I have a great desire for a helping of *hay!* Good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow!"

Titania thinks. "I have a venturous fairy that shall seek the squirrel's hoard, and fetch thee new *nuts.*"

"I had rather have a handful or two of dried peas." He yawns. "But, I pray you, let none of your people stir me; I have an exposition to *sleep* come upon me."

Titania lovingly strokes his very long cheek. "Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms!

"Fairies, begone, and be all ways away!" The sprites, smiling knowingly, slip into the forest.

"So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle gently entwine," says the queen, sliding an arm around the thick neck. "The female ivy so enrings the barky fingers of the elm.

“Oh, how I *love* thee! How I *dote* on thee!”

He is snoring.

She sighs, and drifts into sleep, anticipating happily the time when he will arise for her.

Oberon emerges just as Puck floats into view. “*Welcome*, good Robin!

“See’st thou *this* sweet sight?” says the king, looking at the sleeping couple. “Her dotage now I do begin to pity,” he confesses. “For, meeting her of late, behind the wood seeking sweet favours from this revolting fool, I did *upbraid* her, and fall out with her!

“For she his hairy temples then had rounded with a coronet of fresh and fragrant *flowers!* And that same dew which sometime on the buds was wont to swell like round and orient pearls, stood now within the pretty flowerets’ eyes like *tears* that did their own *disgrace* bewail!

“When I had at my pleasure taunted her; she in mild terms begged my patience! I then did ask of her her changeling child—which straight she *gave* me, and sent her fairy to bear him to my bower in Fairyland!

“And now that I have the boy, I will *undo* this hateful imperfection of her eyes! Then, gentle Puck, take this transformèd scalp from off the head of this Athenian *swain,*”—the irony is heavy, “so that he, awaking when the others do, may to Athens back again repair, and think no more of this night’s happenings but as the fierce vexation of a *dream.*”

“But first, *I* will release the fairy queen.” He touches the stem to her eyes, and kisses her parted lips softly. “Be as thou wast wont to be; see as thou wast wont to see.” He realizes how much he has missed her attention. “Diana’s bud o’er Cupid’s flower hath much force—and *blessèd* power.

“Now, my Titania, *wake* you, my sweet queen.”

Her eyes open, and, blinking, she sits up straight. “My Oberon, what *visions* have I seen!” She shakes her head, puzzled. “Methought I was enamoured of an *ass!*”

Oberon points to the napping weaver. “There lies your love.”

“How came these things to pass?” asks the mortified Titania. “*Oh*, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!”

“Silence awhile.” Oberon, feigning jealous anger, points. “Robin, *take off his head!*”

Puck grins, and strokes it vigorously, restoring Bottom’s customary cranium. The wag laughs. “Now, when thou wakest, with thine *own* fool’s eyes peep!”

The king addresses the queen. “Titania, *music* call, and in all these five,”—the turf-cradled Athenians, “strike the senses more dead than *common* sleep.”

She readily agrees, and summons her fairies. “*Music, ho!*—such music as *charmeth* sleep.” Quickly the players assemble, instruments ready.

“Sound, music,” says Oberon. Pipes’ delicate strains and hautboys’ soothing tones softly suffuse the dim glen, just as the eastern horizon is beginning to glow.

“Come, my queen, take hands with me,” says Oberon. “Enrich the ground whereon these sleepers be!” As they dance, he holds her near, and once again—without herb or artifice—each falls under the other’s loving spell.

He beams. “Now thou and I are new in amity, and will, tomorrow midnight, dance in Duke Theseus’ house triumphantly—and *bless* it to all fair prosperity!

“There shall these pairs of faithful lovers be wedded, with Theseus, all in jollity!”

Puck comes to alert the regal spirits. “Fairy king, attend, and mark: I do hear the morning lark!”

“Then, my queen, in silence arrayed, trip we after this night’s shade!” says Oberon, ready to follow it westward. “We the globe can compass soon, swifter than the wandering moon!”

Titania smiles up at his face. “Come, my lord, and in our flight, tell me how it came this night that I sleeping here was found with these *mortals* on the ground!”

Soundlessly, the fairies ascend and float away, tracking the starlight as it glides across lands along the seven seas.

Below, in the glimmering of Athenian dawn, only the crickets now make music.

Sunlight sparkles on water-lily leaves, and glinting reflections dance among the nearby trees as Theseus and Hippolyta pause by the pond this morning with their train of courtiers and attendants. Lord Egeus has, at the duke's direction, organized a tour, to be followed by a hunt.

The nobles dismount, and while their horses nibble the lush grasses, the duke sends for the keeper of his game preserve. "Go, one of you; find out the forester, for now our observation is performed; and since we have the vaward of the day, my love shall hear the music of my *hounds!*"

"Uncouple in the western valley—let them go!" he commands. "*Dispatch*, I say, and find the forester!" An attendant bows and hurries away. "We will, fair queen, up to the mountain's top, and mark the musical confusion of *hounds* and *echo* in conjunction!"

Hippolyta enjoys dogs' jubilating as much as he does. "I was with my Hercules and Cadmus once, when in a wood on Crete they, along with hounds from Sparta, bayed a bear. Never did I hear such gallant chiding! For, besides the groves, the skies, the fountains, every region near seemed all one mutual cry! I'd never heard so musical a *discord*, such sweet *thunder!*"

"My hounds are bred out of the *Spartan* kind," says Theseus, "so flewed, so sanded! And their heads are hung with ears that sweep away the morning dew—crook-kneed and dew-lapped like Thessalian bulls—slow in pursuit, but matched in mouth like *bells*, each under each!"

In his dogs' howling he hears harmony: "A cry more tuneable was never *hollaed* to, nor cheered with horn, in Crete, in Sparta, nor in Thessaly! Judge when you *hear!*"

"But, soft!—what nymphs are *these?*" He has spotted the two gentlewomen.

Egeus goes to see. "My lord," he cries, "this is my *daughter* here asleep!—and this, Lysander! This Demetrius is; this Helena, old Nedar's *Helena!*"

"I wonder at their being here together!"

High-minded Theseus is jovial on his wedding day. "No doubt they rose early to observe the rite of May, and, hearing our intent, came here in grace of our solemnity!"

"But speak, Egeus; is not this the day that Hermia should give answer of her choice?"

The old man nods gravely. "It is, my lord."

Theseus tells an attendant, "Go, bid the huntsmen wake them with their horns." The ensuing clamor startles the couples. They sit up—and Lysander blinks, staring in rapture at Hermia.

"Good *morrow*, friends!" cries the duke. "Saint Valentine's is *past*; begin these wood-birds but to couple *now?*" he asks wryly.

Realizing who is speaking, Lysander stammers, "Pardon, my lord!"

"I pray you all, stand up," says Theseus. As the ladies curtsey, the young noblemen come forward and bow. "I know you two are rival enemies; how comes this gentle concord in the world, that hatred is so far from jealousy as to *sleep beside hated*, yet fear no enmity?"

Lysander replies. "My lord, I shall reply amazedly, half asleep, half waking—and as yet I swear, I cannot truly say *how* I came here!"

"But, as I think—for *truly* would I speak—and now do I bethink me, so it *is!*—I came with Hermia hither; our intent was to be gone from Athens, where we might marry without the peril of the Athenian law."

"Enough, *enough*, my lord!—you have *enough!*" cries Egeus angrily. "I beg the law, the *law*, upon his head! They would have stolen away, they would! Thereby to have defeated you, Demetrius, and *me*—you of your *wife*, and me of my *consent*, of my consent that she should be *your* wife!"

Demetrius faces him. "My lord, fair Helena *told* me of their stealth, of their purpose hither to this wood—and I in fury hither followed them, fair Helena in fancy following me!"

"But, my good lord, I wot not by what power—but by *some* power it *is!*—my love for Hermia melted as the *snow!*—seems to me now like the remembrance of an idle gaud which in my *childhood* I did dote upon!"

“And all the faith, the virtue of my *heart*—the object and the pleasure of mine *eye*—is only *Helena!*” He goes to stand beside her. “To *her*, my lord, was I betrothèd ere I saw Hermia. But if as in *sickness* did I loathe this food—yet as in *health*, come to my natural taste, now I do *wish* it, *love* it, *long* for it!—and will for ever more be *true* to it!”

Theseus smiles, very pleased. “Fair lovers, you are *fortunately* met! Of this discourse we more will hear anon.

“Egeus, I will overbear your will!—for in the temple by and by, with *us* these couples shall eternally be knit!

“And, as the morning now is somewhat worn, our purposed hunting shall be set aside.

“Away with us to Athens! Three and three, we’ll hold a *feast* in great solemnity!

“Come, Hippolyta.” The duke and his party mount their horses, and soon they have ridden away, headed for the palace overlooking the great metropolis.

The four city-dwellers look around, regarding each other sheepishly as they struggle to remember.

“These things seem small and undistinguishable, like far-off mountains turned into clouds,” says Demetrius.

Hermia frowns slightly. “Methinks I see these things with parted eyes, when everything seems *double*....”

Helena nods. “So methinks. And I have found Demetrius like a *jewel* mine own, yet *not* mine own....”

He is still dazed. “Are you sure that we are *awake*? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we *dream!*” He looks at the women. “Do not you think the *duke* was here, and bade us follow him?”

“Yea—and my *father*,” Hermia replies.

“And Hippolyta,” adds Helena.

Lysander concurs. “And he did bid us follow to the *temple*.”

“Why, then, we *are* awake!” says Demetrius. “Let’s follow him, and along the way let us recount our dreams!”

Chatting gaily, the two pairs of lovers turn to walk together, hand-in-hand in the sunshine, returning home.

Chapter Six **Wedding Celebrations**

Butterflies flutter and bees buzz among the flowers, as gentle afternoon breezes stir the blossoms on Lord Bottom’s coronet, tickling the sleeping weaver’s brow.

“When my cue comes, call me,” he mumbles to the absent players, “and I will answer. My next cue is, ‘Most *fair Pyramus*.’” Slowly he awakens, stretches his arms, and closes his eyes for a huge yawn.

Suddenly he staggers up, blinking and looking around the verdant glade.

“Peter *Quince!* *Flute* the bellows-mender!” he calls. “*Snout* the tinker! *Starveling!*”

God save my life!—stolen hence, and left me asleep!

He frowns; his memory is already beginning to fade. *I have had a most rare vision.... I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was!*

A man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream!

Methought I was— He squints, puzzled. *There is no man can tell what!*

Methought I was— He reaches to touch his ears. *And methought I had.... But man is but a patchèd fool if he will offer to say what methought I had! The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen—man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report—what my dream was!*

He has an inspiration: *I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream! It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream,' because it hath no bottom.* In his view, the tale of his being an ass is baseless.

And I will sing it in the latter end of the play before the duke!

An actor's sensibilities are stirred as he pictures Francis Flute's charming Thisbe. *Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death!*

Outside Peter Quince's wooden home that evening, he paces. With him are Masters Flute, Snout, and Starveling. The carpenter pauses. "Have you sent to Bottom's house? Is he come home yet?"

"He cannot be heard of," Starveling reports sorrowfully. "Out of doubt he is transported!"—taken by the same magic that transformed him.

Flute is dejected. "If *he* come not, then the play is marred! It goes not forward, doth it?"

Quince shakes his head in frustration. "It is not possible! You have not a man in all Athens able to discharge Pyramus but *he!*"

Flute concurs sadly. "No, he hath simply the best wit of any handicraft man in Athens."

Quince resumes pacing. "Yea, and has the best *person* too—and he is the very paramount for a sweet *voice.*"

Flute objects to the term. "You must say *paragon*. A *para-mount* is, God bless us, a thing of *naught.*" He is thinking of *paramour*.

Snug now joins them—bringing news. "Masters, the duke is coming from the temple—and there is two or three lords and ladies *more* married!"

"If our sport had gone forward, we had all been *made men!*" he moans, lamenting the missed opportunity.

"Oh, sweet, bully *Bottom!*" says Flute. "Thus hath he lost sixpence a day during his *life!*—he could not have 'scaped sixpence a day! If the duke had not given him sixpence a day for playing Pyramus, I'll be hanged! *He* would have *deserved* it! Sixpence a day in Pyramus, or nothing!"

As if summoned, Bottom ambles around the corner. "Where *are* these lads?" he demands cheerfully. "Where *are* these hearts?"

"*Bottom!*" cries Quince, clapping him on the back, as the other men welcome the weaver. "Oh, most *courageous day!* Oh, most *happy hour!*"

Bottom grins. "Masters, I am able to discourse *wonders!* But ask me not what—for if I *tell* you, I am no true Athenian." For a moment he enjoys their perplexity, then relents. "I will tell you *everything*, right as it fell out!"

"Let us hear, sweet Bottom!" says Quince eagerly.

The large man starts to recount his extraordinary night—and discovers that what little he remembers of his blissful time in the woods is ineffable. He touches a finger to his lips, so as to appear discreet. "Not a *word* from *me!*"

He does recall, though, what he was told at palace on the way here. "All that I will tell you is that *the duke hath dined!*

"Get your apparel together!—good strings for your beards, new ribbons on your pumps—meet presently at the palace; every man look o'er his part—for the short and the long is: *our play is preferred!*

"In any case, let Thisne have *clean* linen"—a bedsheet serves as the lady's gown, "and let him that plays the lion not pare his *nails*, for they shall hang out for the lion's claws. And, most dear actors, eat no *onions* nor *garlic*—for we are to utter sweet breath, and I do not doubt but to hear them say it is a *sweet* comedy!"

"No more words!—*away!*" he cries, and the performers scramble to find their false whiskers and newly adorned shoes.

"*Go! Away!*"

Burning brightly in their iron brackets along the high marble walls, torches illuminate the great central chamber of Duke Theseus' massive palace, where dozens of candlesticks have been brought to side tables from the dining hall following the evening's sumptuous supper.

At the back of the room, two of the servants hoist another log to drop onto those still burning or smoldering on the huge hearth, where spiced ale is being heated, and chestnuts are roasting. On the trestles, each bearing pewter flagons of wine and ready cups, candles now impart a soft and flattering glow to the smiling faces of the lords and ladies celebrating the duke's wedding, and that of two noble Athenian couples.

As the guests engage in polite chatter ranging from political to amorous, the duke and his bride stand talking at the front of the hall, where an open space has been reserved for the evening's entertainment.

"'Tis *strange*, my Theseus, what these lovers speak of," says Hippolyta thoughtfully.

"More strange than *true*," says Theseus. "I never have believed these antique fables, nor these fairy stories. Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fancies, that they apprehend more than cool *reason* ever comprehends.

"The lunatic, the lover, and the poet are of *imagination* all compacted! One sees more devils than vast Hell can hold—that is the *madman*. The *lover*, all as frantic, sees *Helen's* beauty in a brow ordinary. The *poet's* eye, in fine frenzy rolling, doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven—and as imagining bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.

"Such tricks hath strong fancy that, if it but apprehend some toy, it would comprehend some *bringer* of that toy—for in the night, imagining in some *fear*, how easily is a bush supposed a *bear!*"

"But *all* have the story of that night told over," says Hippolyta, "and all their minds transfigured so *together* witnesseth more than *fancy's* images, and grow to something of great constancy!" Her husband, she sees, is still a skeptic. "But, howsoever," she says, "strange and admirable!"

"Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth," says Theseus, as Lysander and Hermia approach, with Demetrius and Helena. "*Joy*, gentle friends! Joy and fresh days of *love* accompany your hearts!"

As the men bow, Lysander returns the duke's warm wishes: "May *more* than to us wait in *your* royal walks, your board, your bed!" The other three, smiling, nod concurrence.

Theseus is eager for the evening's pleasures—all of them. "Come now," he cries, "what *masques*, what *dances* shall we have, to wear away this long age of three hours between our after-supper and bed times?"

He looks around the hall. "Where is our usual manager of mirth? What *revels* are in hand? Is there no *play* to ease the anguish of a torturing hour? Call Philostrate!"

The master of revels has heard him; he comes forward and bows. "Here, mighty Theseus."

"Say: what abridgement have you for this evening—what masque, what music? How shall we beguile the lazy time, if not with some *delight?*"

Philostrate offers the duke a list. "There is, in brief, how many sports are ripe. Make choice of which Your Highness will see first."

Theseus reads aloud: "'The battle with the Centaurs, to be sung by an Athenian eunuch, to the harp.' We'll none of *that!*" But he notes the master's disappointment. "That have I *told* my love, in glory of my kinsman Hercules.

"'The riot of the tipsy Bacchanals, tearing the Thracian singer in their rage.' That is an old device, and it was played when I from Thebes came last as conqueror.

"'The thrice-three Muses' mourning for the death of Learning, late deceased in beggary.'" He shakes his head. "That is some *satire*, keen and critical, not sorting with a nuptial ceremony.

“‘A tedious brief scene of young Pyramus and his love, Thisbe—very tragical mirth.’ Merry and tragical; tedious and brief!—that is *hot ice*, and wondrous strange, now! How shall we find the concord of this discord?”

Philostrate frowns. “A *play* is there, my lord—some ten words long, which is as brief as I have known a play. But *by* ten words, my lord, it is *too long!* Which makes it ‘tedious’—for in all the play there is not one word *apt*, one player *fitted!*”

“And ‘tragical,’ my noble lord, it is: for Pyramus therein doth kill himself; which, when I saw rehearsed, I must confess, made mine eyes water—and more *merry* tears the passion of *loud laughter* never shed!”

Theseus is interested. “Who are they that do play it?”

“Hard-handed men that work in Athens, here, who never laboured in their *minds* till now, and now have toiled their unexercised memories with this same play, against your nuptials.”

The duke decides. “And we will *hear* it!”

“No, my noble lord!” pleads Philostrate. “It is not for you! I have heard it over, and it is *nothing*, nothing in the world—unless you can find *sport* in their *intents*—extremely stretchèd, and studied with cruel pain to do you service!”

Theseus, otherwise facing nine Muses’ lecturing on Learning’s demise, is resolved. “I will hear that play; for never can anything be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it,” he says, in comfortable magnanimity. “Go, bring them in—and take your places, ladies!”

Philostrate bows and goes to find Peter Quince and his men, who are waiting near the kitchen.

Soft-hearted Hippolyta is concerned: “I love not to see wretchedness o’ercharged, and *duty* in its service *perishing*.”

“Why, gentle sweet, you shall see no such thing!” the duke assures her; he intends to laugh, but not to harm.

“He says they can do nothing of this kind...”

“Then kinder are *we* to give them *thanks* for nothing,” says Theseus, taking her hand. “Our sport shall be to take what they *mis*-take; and what poor duty *cannot* do, *noble* respect takes for its ‘*might*,’ not its merit.

“Where I have gone, great clerks have purposed to greet me with premeditated welcomes—and I have seen some shiver and look pale, make periods in the midst of sentences, throttle their practised emphasis in their fears—and, in conclusion, speechlessly have broken off, *not* paying me a welcome!

“Trust me, sweet: out of that silence, yet I *picked* a welcome—and in the modesty of *fearful* duty I read as much as from the rattling tongue of saucy and audacious eloquence! *Love*, therefore, the least in tongue-tied simplicity, speaks *most* to my capacity.”

Philostrate returns. “So please Your Grace,” he says, “the Prologue is addressed.”

Theseus nods. “Let him approach!”

The six newly married nobles move to one side, ready to listen and watch.

Chapter Seven **Performances**

Peter Quince is silently studying his speech yet again. It reads: “If we offend, it is our will that you should think we come not to offend, but with *good will!* To show our ample skill—that is the true beginning of our end. Consider, then, we come but in delight; we do not come as minding to *content* you; our true intent is all for your *delight!* We are not here so that you should *repent* you!

“The actors are at hand, and by their show you shall know all that you may want to know!”

He jumps, startled by a flourish of court musicians' cornets. Pocketing the paper, the carpenter steps out, warily, from behind a high, folding screen set between rows of tall potted plants, and pauses before the painted panel. Gulping down anxiety, he adopts the formal stance appropriate for reciting a prologue.

Peter remembers his *words*, and manages to speak all of them—this way:

“If we *offend*, it is our *will*—that you should think. We come not to offend but with good will, to show our *ample skill*. That is the true beginning of our end. Consider, then, we come but in delight: we do not come as minding to content *you*; *our* true intent is all. For *your* delight we are not here!

“So that you should repent you, the actors are at hand; and by their show, you shall know all that you may *want* to know.”

The tickled listeners are smiling—already pleased, Peter assumes. Relieved, he takes a bow.

- Theseus chuckles. “This fellow doth not stand upon points!”—let such details as punctuation slow him.

- “He hath *ridden* his prologue like a *rough colt*: he knows *not to stop!*” says Lysander. “A good moral, my lord: it is not enough to speak, but to speak *through!*”

- “Indeed, he hath played on his prologue like a child on a flute—a *sound*, but not under *government!*” admits Hippolyta.

- “His speech was like a tangled *chain*,” adds Theseus kindly, “nothing impaired, but all disordered!”

“Who is next?” calls the duke.

At the front of the hall, an impressive picture is soon presented: posed in fine stances are the well known, legendary figures of Pyramus and Thisbe, a silent but savage Lion, a cunningly executed Wall, and a skillful representation of Moonshine, including his little dog.

Prologue proceeds, moving among the other players, noting each actor:

“Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show;
But wonder on, till truth make all things plain!
This man is *Pyramus*, if you would know;
This beauteous lady, *Thisbe* ’tis certain.
This man with lime and rough-cast doth present
Wall—that vile wall which did these lovers sunder;
And through *Wall*’s chink, poor souls, they are content
To whisper! At the which let no man wonder.
This man, with lanthorn, dog, and bush of thorn,
Presenteth *Moonshine*; for, if you will know,
By moonshine did these lovers think no scorn
To meet at Ninus’ tomb, there, there to woo.
This grisly beast, which *Lion* hight by name,
The trusty *Thisbe*, coming first by night,
Did scare away, or rather did affright;
And, as she fled, her mantle she let fall—
Which *Lion* vile with bloody mouth did stain.
Anon comes *Pyramus*, sweet youth, and tall,
And finds his trusty *Thisbe*’s *mantle* slain!
Whereat, with blade, with bloody, blameful blade,
He bravely broached his boiling, bloody breast!
Then *Thisbe*, tarrying in mulberry shade,
His dagger drew, and died! As for all the rest,
Let *Lion*, *Moonshine*, *Wall*, and lovers twain
At large discourse, while here they do remain.”

Prologue bows, and motions courteously toward Thisbe, Lion, and Moonshine.

- "I wonder if the lion be to *speak*," says Theseus.

- Demetrius thinks so: "No *wonder*, my lord—one lion may, when *many asses* do!"

Wall steps forward.

"In this same interlude it doth befall
That I, one Snout by name, present a *wall*;
And such a wall as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or *chink*,
Through which the lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe,
Did whisper often, very secretly!
This loam, this rough-cast, and this stone doth show
That I am that same wall; the truth is so."

He holds up an oval formed by touching his thumbs and forefingers.

"And this the cranny is, right and sinister,"—left,

"Through which the fearful lovers are to whisper."

- Theseus dryly commends the portrayal: "Could you desire *lime-and-hair*"—more costly plaster, reinforced with horse hair—"to speak better?"

- "It *is* the wittiest *partition* that ever I heard discourse, my lord," says Demetrius dryly.

At the front, Bottom has stepped forward, and he strikes a pose.

- "Pyramus draws near the wall," whispers Theseus. "Silence!"

"*O grim-looking night!*" exclaims Bottom. "O night with hue so *black!*
O night, which ever art when day is not!
O night, O night, *alack, alack, alack,*
I fear my Thisne's promise is *forgot!*"

The weaver's most stentorian baritone calls out:

"And *thou*, O wall, O sweet, O lovely *wall*,
That stand'st between her father's ground and mine!
Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne!"

Snout holds up his hands.

Pyramus peers through.

"Thanks, courteous wall! Jove shield thee well for this!
But what see I? No *Thisne* do I see!
O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss!
Cursèd be thy stones, for thus *deceiving* me!"

Theseus laughs—*stones* can mean testicles. "The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse back!"

Bottom is certain the script says otherwise. "No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisne's cue: she is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall.

"You shall see; it will fall pat as I told you." He points: "Yonder she comes."

Flute—a lovely Thisbe—comes forward, to say:

"O wall, full often hast thou heard my moans,
For parting my fair Pyramus and me!
My cherry lips have often kissed thy stones,
Thy stones with lime and hair knit up on thee!"

Pyramus—ignoring the nobles' loud laughter—responds:

"I see a voice! Now will I to the *chink*,
To spy if I can hear my Thisne's face..."

Thisne!”

She answers: “My love thou art!—my love, I think!”

Pyramus: “Think what thou wilt; I *am* thy lover’s grace;

And, like *Limander*, I am trusty still!”

Thisbe: “And I like *Helen*, till the Fates me kill!”

He: “Not *Shafalus* to *Procrus* was so true!”

She: “As *Shafalus* to *Procrus*, *I* to *you!*”

Pyramus: “Oh, *kiss me* through the hole of this vile wall!”

Thisbe moans. “I kiss the wall’s *hole*, not your lips at all!”

Pyramus is eager. “Wilt thou at *Ninny’s* tomb meet me straightway?”

Thisbe agrees: “Betide life, ’tide death, I come without delay!”

Pyramus exits boldly to the right of Wall, while Thisbe drifts left, and moves behind the wood-framed panel.

Tom Snout lowers his hands and steps forward. “Thus have I, Wall, my part discharged so; and, being done, thus Wall away doth go.” He moves, much relieved, behind the screen.

“Now is the pile *well* down between the two neighbours!” laughs Theseus.

Demetrius nods. “No remedy, my lord, when walls are so wilful as to fall without warning!”

Even Hippolyta is amused. “This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard!”

Theseus likes actors. “The *best* of this kind are but shadows,” he replies, “and the worst are no worse, if *imagination* mend them.”

Hippolyta laughs: “It must be *your* imagination, then, and not theirs!”

Theseus shrugs. “If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for *excellent* men.” He glances at the performance area. “Here come two noble beasts in—a lion and a man.”

Snug and Starveling—whose terrier trots along beside him—step forward, as Lion and Moonshine.

The journeyman, wearing the ragged old hide of a lioness, the tail dragging, is solicitous.

“You *ladies*, you whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor,
May now perchance both *quake* and *tremble* here,
When *lion* rough in wildest rage doth *roar!*
Then know that I, one *Snug the joiner*, am
A lion of *felt!*—not else of lion’s *dam!*
For if I should as *Lion* come in *strife*
Unto this place, ’twere the pity of my life!”

- “A very *gentle* beast,” says Theseus, “of a good conscience!”

- “The very *best* beast, my lord, that e’er *I* saw!” says Demetrius.

- Lysander noted that the actor mentioned his name and trade. “This lion is a very *fox* in his valour.”

- “True—and a *goose* in his discretion!” says the duke.

- Demetrius quibbles: “Not so, my lord, for his valour cannot carry”—*support*—“his discretion as a fox carries a goose!”

- Theseus counters, “His *discretion*, I am sure, cannot carry his *valour*—for the goose carries not the *fox!*”

“It is well,” he says, motioning for quiet. “Leave it to *his* discretion; and let *us* listen to the man.”

Old Starveling, his slender arm extended, lifts a light. “This lanthorn doth the hornèd”—two-pronged—“*moon* present.”

“He should have worn the horns on his *head!*” gibes Demetrius; horns are the cuckold’s emblem.

“He is now *crescent*,”—a rising quarter moon, Theseus explains, “and his horns are invisible within the circumference”—in the dark part.

The player has overheard. “This *lanthorn* doth the hornèd moon present; *myself* the *man i’* the moon do seem to be.”

“This is a greater error than all the rest!” argues Theseus. “The man should be put *into* the lanthorn!—how is it else the ‘man i’ the moon’?”

“He dares not go there because of the *candle*,” says Demetrius, as it flickers out, “for you see it is already in *snuff*!”

As the lords quip, Robin stands motionless, apprehensive, not knowing what to do.

“I am awearry of this moon,” says Hippolyta. “Would it would change!”

“It appears, by his small light of direction, that he *is* on the *wane*,” Theseus tells her. “But yet in courtesy, for all seasons we must stay the time.”

Lysander sees that Starveling is waiting, and nods to him. “*Proceed*, Moon.”

Robin lowers his dark lantern; a thin gray wisp is rising from it. “All that I have to say is to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon; I, the man in the moon.” He holds up a small branch. “This thorn-bush, my thorn-bush; and this dog, my dog”—images that sky-watchers have long discerned on the lunar face.

Demetrius frowns facetiously. “Why, *all these* should be in the lanthorn, for all these are in the moon! But, *silence!*—here comes Thisbe!”

Flute returns to charm the nobles. Says his Thisbe, “This is old Ninny’s tomb. Where is my love?”

But just then the Lion roars—softly. “*Oh!*” cries the terrified Thisbe; dropping her cloak, she runs behind the potted plants.

“Well *roared*, Lion!” cries Demetrius.

“Well *run*, Thisbe!” adds Theseus.

“Well *shone*, Moon!” calls Hippolyta to poor Robin. The others look at her, surprised. “Truly, the Moon shines with a good *grace*,” she says defensively.

The Lion, with a mild growl, gently paws at Thisbe’s cloak, then makes his exit.

“Well *moused*, Lion!” says Theseus.

“And so the *lion’s* banished,” says Lysander, glad to see progress.

Demetrius points: “And then came Pyramus....”

Bottom’s Pyramus arrives indeed—booming out boldly:

“*Sweet Moon*, I thank thee for thy sunny *beams*;
I thank thee, Moon, for *shining* now so bright;
For, by thy gracious, golden, glittering streams,
I trust to taste of truest Thisne *sight!*

But stay!—Oh, *spite!*

But *mark*, poor knight!

What dreadful dole is here?

Eyes, do you *see?*

How can it *be?*

O dainty duck! O *dear!*

Thy mantle good,

What?—stained with *blood!*

Approach, ye *Furies* fell!

O *Fates*, come, come,

Cut thread, and *thrum!*

Quail, *crush*, *conclude*, and *quell!*”

- “*This* passion at the death of a dear friend would go near to making a man look *sad*,”
Theseus comments sourly to Hippolyta.

- But she is watching Bottom, who is trying—earnestly. “Beshrew my heart, but I *pity* the man!”

Pyramus continues:

“O, *wherefore*, Nature, didst thou *lions* frame?
—Since lion vile hath here deflowered my *dear!*
Which is—no, no!—which *was* the fairest dame
That lived, that loved, that liked, that looked with cheer!
Come, *tears*, confound!
Out, *sword*, and wound
The pap of Pyramus!—
Aye, that left pap,
Where *heart* doth hap!”

At this point, he strikes a wooden dagger against his chest.

“Thus *die* I—*thus, thus, thus!*
Now am I *dead*,
Now am I *fled*;
My soul is in the *sky!*
Tongue, lose thy light;
Moon take thy flight!”

Right on cue, Moonshine exits.

“Now *die, die, die, die, die!*”

And so Pyramus does, very theatrically—and quite slowly.

- “No die”—half of a pair of dice, “but an *ace* for him; for he is but *one!*”—*unique*, rules Demetrius.

- “*Less* than an ace, man,” laughs Lysander, “for he is dead—he is *nothing!*”

- *Thing* is a term for *penis*; no thing inspires Theseus: “With the help of a *surgeon*, he might yet recover—and prove a *lass!*”

- Hippolyta frowns. “How chances it *Moonshine* is gone before Thisbe comes back and finds her lover?”

- Says Theseus, “She will find him by *starlight*.” Thisbe creeps toward the front, still fearful, it seems, of the Lion. “Here she comes—and her mourning ends the play!” says the duke brightly.

- “Methinks she should not use a *long* one for such a Pyramus,” says Hippolyta. “I hope she will be brief.”

- Demetrius regards the players. “A *mote* will tip the scale which is the *better*—he, as Thisbe, playing a *woman*, God bless us!—or *he*, as Pyramus, playing a *man*, God warrant us!”

- Lysander points to the front. “She hath spied him already with those sweet eyes.”

Thisbe finds her lover, sprawled near the cloak. Pyramus’s leg still twitches.

- Says Demetrius eager for conclusion, “And thus she moans, *videlicet*”—*as follows*.

The lady speaks:

“*Asleep*, my love?
What, *dead*, my dove?
O Pyramus, arise!
Speak, *speak!* Quite dumb?
Dead?—*dead!* A tomb
Must cover thy sweet eyes!
These lily lips,
This cherry nose,
These yellow cowslip cheeks,
Are gone, all *gone!*”

Lovers, make moan!—
His eyes were green as leeks!”

She summons the Fates:

“O Sisters Three,
Come, come to me,
With hands as pale as milk;
Lay them in gore,
Since you have shore
With shears his thread of silk!
Tongue, not a word!
Come, trusty *sword*—
Come, blade, my breast imbrue!”

Thisbe drops to her knees, the wooden sword, clasped to her side, wagging.

“And, *farewell*, friends!
Thus Thisbe ends!
Adieu, adieu, *adieu!*”

She perishes—falling sideways with a *clack* of the weapon.

Notes Theseus, “Moonshine and Lion are left to bury the dead.”

“Aye,” says Demetrius, “and the Wall, too.”

Bottom, hearing them, struggles to his feet, eager to make all clear. “No, I assure you; the wall is *down* that parted their fathers!

“Will it please you to see the Epilogue, or to hear a Bergomask dance between two of our company?” he asks, as Flute rises, brushing dust from his one spare sheet.

“No epilogue, I pray you,” says Theseus hastily, “for your play needs no excusing. Never excuse; when the players are all *dead*, there needs none be blamed.

“Marry, if he that *wrote* it had played Pyramus and hanged himself by Thisbe’s garter, it would have been a *fine* tragedy,” murmurs the duke. He sees the actors’ alarm: “And so it *is*, truly!—and very notably *dischargèd!*”

Bottom bows.

“But come, your *Bergomask*; let your epilogue alone,” says Theseus, to his companions’ relief.

Quince, Snug, Snout and Starveling join Bottom and Flute before the screen. As Snug and Snout perform a lively, rustic dance, the others clap hands, urging them on.

At the end, the players all receive vigorous applause. They smile and bow, then file out, pleased with their triumphant initiation to public performance.

Theseus hears the tower’s bell, and he calls to the noble guests: “The iron tongue of midnight hath told *twelve!*”

“Lovers, to bed; ’tis almost *fairy* time! I fear we shall outsleep the coming morn as much as we this *night* have overwatchèd! This palpably gross play hath *well* beguiled the heavy gait of night!

“Sweet friends, *to bed!* A *fortnight* hold we this solemnity in nightly revels and new jollity!” he promises.

The duke and his bride retire to their chambers, and the other four new spouses proceed to the visitors’ fine quarters.

Before long the guests, Athenian gentlemen and their ladies, have departed, and the big room is empty. Weary servants return, briefly, to douse the last lights still burning.

The vast hall is silent.

A lock clicks open, although untouched, and Puck steals in as scout for the fairies, leaving the door set slightly ajar. He smiles, sensing the still-echoing merriment, the soft,

lingering warmth of love. Surveying the noble setting, a haven in the wide world, he nods approvingly.

*Now the hungry lion roars,
And the wolf howls the moon,
Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,
All his weary tasks fore done.
Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of the shroud!
Now it is the time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth its sprite,
In the church-way paths to glide!
And we fairies, that have run
Past Hecate's triple team
From the presence of the sun,
Follow darkness like a dream
Now do frolic! Not a mouse
Shall disturb this hallowed house!
I am sent with broom before,
To sweep the dust behind the door!*

A wide, magical wave of his hand wards off danger—and interruption.

At the entrance he gives a whistled signal; in a twinkling, the regal party led by King Oberon and Queen Titania glides in, followed by their stately train of fairy folk.

Oberon addresses his luminous subjects:

*“Through the house go gather light!
By the dead and drowsy fire,
Every elf and fairy sprite
Hop as light as bird from brier,
And this ditty after me sing!—
And dance it trippingly!”*

Titania directs, as well:

*“First rehearse your song by rote;
To each word a warbling note!
Hand-in-hand, with fairy grace,
Will we sing—and bless this place!”*

Oberon brings a benediction:

*“Now, until the break of day,
Through this house each fairy stray!
To the best bride-bed will we,
Which by us shall blessed be!
And the issue there create
Ever shall be fortunate!
So shall all the couples three
Ever true in loving be!—
And the blots of Nature's hand
Shall not in their issue stand:*

Ne'er mole, hare-lip, nor scar,
Nor mark prodigious, such as are
Despisèd in nativity,
Shall upon their children be!"

From his cloak, the king shakes sparkling drops onto the floor before the sprites.

"With this field-dew, consecrate,
Every fairy take his gait,
And each several chamber bless,
Through this palace, with sweet peace;
And the owner of it, blest,
Ever shall in safety rest!
Trip *away!*—make no stay!
Meet me, all, by break of day!"

With that, he and his queen, their love renewed, join in the ceremony.

Puck moves forward to address his own vast audience—spirits great and small, noble and low, bright and not—attending in the corridors of time.

"If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended:
That you have but *slumbered* here
While these visions did appear,
And this weak and idle theme
No more yielded than a dream!
Gentles, do not reprehend;
If you pardon, we will mend!
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have had unearnèd luck,
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue
We will make amends ere long—
Else this Puck a liar call!
So, good night unto you all!
Give me your hands, if we be friends—
And *Robin* shall restore amends!"