

The Merchant of Venice

(The Story)

Antonio was a rich merchant of Venice. He had many friends. He was very intimate with Bassanio. One day he was in a sad mood, by chance he met Bassanio with Lorenzo and Gratiano in the street. Gratiano who was light-hearted and very talkative began to make fun of him. He remarked that Antonio was too much absorbed in worldly affairs. He said that those who thought too much of the world lost it. At this Antonio said, 'I hold the world as the world, a stage where every man plays a part, and mine is a sad one.' Gratiano, however preferred to play the role of a fool. In his opinion some people were reputed to be wise because they said nothing. If they opened their mouths, their fully would be revealed. Lorenzo and Gratiano departed promising to meet their friends for dinner.

In Bassanio's opinion Gratiano talked more nonsense than any man in Venice. Antonio asked Bassanio about the lady to whom he intended to make a secret journey, Bassanio said that he was in financial difficulties. He had crippled his fortunes by his extravagant habits. He was worried how to repay his debts. He owed much to Antonio in money. Antonio asked him his plans and promised to do his best for his friend.

Bassanio said that in Belmont there lived a rich, fair virtuous lady called Portia. She was known for her wealth and worth. Suitors from every land visited her. Her sunny locks were like the golden fleece and many Jasons came in quest of her. Bassanio hoped his suit might be crowned with success.

Antonio said that all his fortunes were on the sea. He had no ready money with him. Antonio asked Bassanio to find out what his credit could do in Venice. He himself promised to try and to make available to him the money that he needed for his journey to fair Portia at Belmont.

Portia's father had made a will. According to it all suitors for Portia's hand were compelled to guess in which of the three caskets, one gold, one silver, one lead, her portrait was hidden. The first who guessed right was to marry her. But each, before he was allowed to choose, must swear that, if he chose wrong he would never thereafter propose marriage to any woman. Some found this condition hard and went away without trying their luck. Others chose but failed to discover the portrait. Portia herself and those who failed promised not to divulge which casket had been chosen.

Bassanio loved Portia and believed she too loved him. He was eager to appear at Belmont as a gentleman of high birth and standing. He needed three thousand ducats for his expenses.

Shylock was a Jew and banker. He did not like Antonio. Antonio had often helped the Christian debtors to escape from Shylock's clutches by lending them money without interest. He had often abused the Jew in public. At first Shylock raised difficulties. He knew Antonio's money was all invested in goods on board the ships bound for distant lands. He wanted to talk to Antonio before lending the money.

Bassanio invited Shylock to dinner. The Jew said to himself, "No, I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you." In the meanwhile Antonio was seen coming along the street. Shylock hated him not only because he was a Christian, but because he lent money free of interest and thus brought down the rate of interest in Venice. He wanted an opportunity to satisfy the old grudge that he bore him. He hated Antonio for looking down upon his nation and his bargain.

Antonio came up and said to the Jew, "Shylock, although I neither lend nor borrow at interest, yet to supply the need of a friend I'll break my custom. We want three thousand ducats for three months : will you become my creditor?"

Shylock reminded Antonio how he abused him and hated him. Very tauntingly Shylock asked how could he lend him money when he had on numerous occasions called him a dog. Antonio replied, "I am likely to call you dog again. But lend me this money not as to a friend, but as to an enemy of whom you may exact penalties if he breaks his bond. The Jew promised to be friendly with Antonio and to supply his wants without charging any interest. He only asked him in sport to give him his bond to forfeit a pound of flesh to be cut off his body wheresoever he pleased, if he failed to repay him the sum lent, in three month's time. Antonio promised to do that remarking that it was very kind of the Jew to help him in that way.

Bassanio requested Antonio not to sign such a bond. Antonio, however, felt sure that he would soon get payments worth three times the amount involved in the bond. Antonio promised to seal the bond in the presence of a notary.

Bassanio got ready to sail for Belmont that night. Gratiano desired to accompany him. Bassanio agreed to take him on condition that he would behave at Belmont with modesty and civility. Launcelot, a servant in Shylock's household, had grown weary of serving the Jew. He engaged himself to Bassanio and was also to attend on him on the journey.

Shylock's daughter, Jessica was grieved at parting with Launcelot. Through him she sent a love letter to Lorenzo whom he was to meet at supper with his new master. Jessica considered it a heinous sin to be ashamed of her father. She did not share his nature. If only Lorenzo kept his promise, she would end that strife between love and duty by becoming his wife and a Christian.

Antonio, Lorenzo and other friends were to supper with Bassanio and bid him

farewell before he sailed. Even Shylock, in spite of his earlier refusal, had agreed to join the supper. Thus Lorenzo, who had long loved Jessica, gained the opportunity to carry her off and marry her. She had got a page boy's clothes as a disguise. In the letter carried by Launcelot, she told Lorenzo of her plan. After Shylock's departure, she put on her disguise and waited for Lorenzo. In her lover's company, she escaped carrying a Casket of Jewels and a bag of ducats. The lovers had gone out of Venice before Shylock discovered her flight. In his utter disappointment the Jew cried "My daughter! O my ducats, O my daughter? fled with a Christian! Justice? the law! find the girl! she has the jewels and the ducats upon her." No trace of Jessica could be found. It was presumed she had sailed with Lorenzo on board Bassanio's ship. Antonio, however, certified the Duke of Venice that it was not a fact.

Bassanio and Gratiano spent their time happily at Belmont. Bassanio was happy in the company of his beloved Portia, Gratiano courted her mistress Nerissa. Portia fearing lest Bassanio should choose the wrong casket put off the day as long as possible. She could teach him to choose the right casket but it meant breaking her oath which she was not prepared to do. Earlier the prince of Morocco had chosen the golden casket and found a horrible skull with a written scroll in its empty, and the Prince of Aragon had opened the silver casket containing the portrait of a blinking idiot, presenting him a schedule.

At the end of the three months Bassanio however, insisted on opening the casket of his choice. Portia told him that here he would choose the right one. Bassanio examined the three caskets and thought "The outward show may be no guide to what is written : the world is ever deceived with ornament." Therefore I will have none of the gaudy gold, hard food for Midas : nor of the silver, which serves for common trade between man and man; the paleness of the mean lead moves me more than eloquence. This is my choice, and my happiness be the consequence.

Then he opened the leaden casket. He was beside with joy to find Portia's portrait inside. Portia proudly confessed her love for him. She said she was not ambitious for herself but for his sake she wished she were a thousand times more fair and rich. She called herself an untaught girl. She sought his guidance. She offered him her ring saying, "when you part from it or lose or to reproach you." She placed the ring on his finger and he promised, "Not while I live shall this ring be parted from my finger."

Gratiano and Nerissa wished them joy and desired to be married along with them. Nerissa had promised her lover Gratiano to marry him only if Bassanio choose the right casket and won the hand of her mistress.

Their hour of joy was, however, darkened by sorrow. Salario, a friend of Antonio, brought a letter for Bassanio. He also brought with him Lorenzo and Jessica whom he had met on the way. Portia welcomed the lovers, Bassanio turned pale on reading the letter. Portia wished to know what news could disturb him so much. He told her how in order to get money for his needs he became indebted to a dear friend and he gave a bond to his bitterest enemy. The letter informed Bassanio that his friend had forfeited the bond.

Antonio's ships had all miscarried. His creditors had grown cruel. His bond to the Jew was forfeited. He hoped to see his friend Bassanio at his death. If his beloved did not allow him to some, he might not. Salario said that none of Antonio's ventures had succeeded. Shylock was no longer prepared to take back his money. He wanted the penalty mentioned in the bond. He wanted strict justice. The Duke and many others had failed to make the Jew change his mind. Jessica interrupted saying that she had heard her father swear to his countrymen that he would have rather Antonio's flesh than twenty times his debt. When Portia learned the term of the agreement which Antonio had signed for Bassanio's sake, she said, "Pay the debt twelve fold rather than let a friend of this description lose a hair through your fault. First go with me to church and call me your wife, then away to Venice. You shall have gold to pay the debt twenty times over. When it is paid bring your true friend to Belmont.

Thus Portia married Bassanio's and Nerissa married Gratiano. Nerissa, too, presented her husband a ring which he swore to keep for ever.

After Bassanio's and Gratiano's departure for Venice, Portia pretending that she wanted to spend the time of her husband's absence from home in prayer at a nearby convent, left Jessica and Lorenzo in charge of her household and herself accompanied with Nerissa left for Venice. She sent her servant Balthazar to her cousin Bellario, a learned lawyer at Padua asking his advice on Antonio's case and requesting him for the loan of the dresses of a lawyer and a lawyer's clerk. She had decided to disguise herself as a doctor of law and her maid as a clerk. She wanted to plead Antonio's case before the Duke according to the instructions of her cousin Bellario. Balthazar was to meet her on a fixed point on the road to Venice so that she might not be delayed.

On the day of the trial the Duke urged Shylock to take pity on Antonio in view of the heavy losses and to cancel the bond. The Jew was obstinate. He admitted that he hated Antonio and offered Shylock twice the amount of the loan, but the Jew rejected it contemptuously. The Duke asked the Jew, how shall you hope for mercy if you render none? The Jew replied, "What judgement need I dread, if I do not wrong? The Jew said that the pound of flesh that he demanded was dearly bought by him at a price of 3000 ducats. He demanded only justice. The Duke thought of dismissing the court unless Bellario happened to come that day.

At this juncture Nerissa, dressed as a lawyer's clerk, entered the court. She presented the Duke a letter from Bellario, in which letter had expressed his inability to attend the court because of his illness. As a substitute he recommended a learned young doctor who was supplied with his opinion. The Duke allowed the doctor to attend the court. Portia soon entered in the guise of a doctor. She was welcome by the Duke. Antonio and Shylock were asked to stand forth.

Portia told the Jew that he was prosecuting a strange suit. She asked Antonio if he admitted the bond to which Antonio replied he did. She asked the Jew to be merciful. Portia replied that mercy was not got by compulsion. It was a gift from heaven like the gentle rain. It blessed both, the person who gave it and he attribute of God. She further

said, "remember, Jew, in the course of justice none of us should escape punishment. We pray to heaven for mercy and we should show mercy." The Jew demanded the law and claimed the penalty under his bond Bassanio offered to pay twice or ten times the sum. He requested the doctor to strain the law in Antonio's favour. Portia refused to do so. No power in Venice could alter the law's decree. It could be recorded as a precedent. Sharpening his knife on the sole of his shoe, Shylock exclaimed, "A Daniel come to judgement! O wise young judge!"

After studying the bond carefully. Portia declared, "The Jew by this may lawfully claim a pound of flesh to be cut by hum of mearest the merchant's heart. Be merciful, Shylock; take thrice your money and let me tear up the bond. Antonio was sick of suspense. He also prayed that judgement must be pronounced. Portia asked Antonio to prepare his bosom for the knife. She asked the Jew if he had a balance to weigh the flesh. The Jew had the scale ready. She further asked him if he had a surgeon too at hand to stop wound lest Antonio be bled to death. The Jew said that it was not in the bond. Antonio prepared his bosom for the knife and blade and affectionate farewell to Bassanio. Antonio said, "Give me your hand Bassanio. Grieve not that I am brought to this for you. Commend me to your wife; say how I died and tell her how I loved you.

Bassanio replied, "Antonio, I am married to a wife who is as dear to me as life itself. But my life, my wife and all the world would I sacrifice to this devil here to deliver you."

"Your wife would give you little thanks for that", Portia remarked, "if she heard you make the offer "Following Bassanio's example Gratiano said, "I have a wife whom I swear I love. I wish she were in heaven that she might entreat some power to soften the heart of this currish Jew." Nerissa said if his wife knew the offer that he was making, she would create trouble in his home.

Pronouncing the judgement Portia said to the Jew; "By law you may cut a pound of the merchant's flesh from off his breast." At this the Jew praised Portia for the judgement. Buy Portia added, "Tarry a little, there is something further". The bond expressly says "a pound of flesh ; but if cutting it you shed one drop of Christian slood, your lands and goods are by law confiscated to the state."

Now Gratiano very ironically remarked, "Mark Jew! O learned judge?"

Portia told the Jew that as he demanded justice he would have more than what he desired. The Jew was thus humbled. He was ready to accept three times the amount of the debt. Bassanio held out the money to the Jew. Portia however, intervened saying that the Jew would have nothing but the penalty. He could get exactly a pound of flesh, neither more nor less, without shedding a drop of blood otherwise he would lose his goods and his life. The Jew now wanted only the payment of his principal. Bassanio offered him three thousand ducats but Portia prevented him. As the Jew had refused the money in open court, he could get merely the penalty mentioned in the bond. The Jew said he waived his claim and got ready to leave the court.

Portia asked the Jew to wait. In her opinion the law had another hold on the Jew.

According to the laws of Venice if an alien who sought, either directly or indirectly, the life of any citizen, he would forfeit one half of his goods to the state and the other half of him against whom he plotted and his life would be at the mercy of the Duke. Therefore she asked Shylock to kneel and beg mercy of Duke.

The Duke granted him his life before he asked for it. The half of his wealth went to Antonio and the other half of his wealth went to state. But if the Jew showed humility, the state might reduce its claim to a fine.

Shylock preferred to lose his rather than his money. Antonio made a generous offer. If the state waived its claim to half of the Jew's wealth, he would gladly pay his share at the Jew's death to Lorenzo who had eloped with Jessica but on two conditions : first, that Shylock should become a Christian; second, that he should make a deed of gift to Lorenzo and Jessica of all he left at his death.

The Duke said the Jew would do that otherwise he would revoke the pardon that he had just given. Shylock had no choice but to accept these terms. He desired to go home as he was not well. He said he would sign the deed as soon as it was sent to him. The Duke permitted the Jew to go home.

Portia wanted to reach Belmont before Bassanio and Gratiano. She, therefore, declined the Duke's invitation to dinner. Bassanio pressed her to accept 3000 ducats as fee. Antonio said he would always remain grateful to her. Portia replied, "He is well paid that is well satisfied." Bassanio then pressed her to take something as a token of remembrance. pretending to yield to their request, Portia wanted Antonio's gloves and Bassanio's ring. Remembering his promise Bassanio draw back his hand, but Portia insisted on getting his ring and nothing else. Bassanio offered to purchase for her the costliest ring in Venice and wanted to be deeply hurt. She said, "I see, sir, you are liberal in your offers. You taught me first to beg and now you teach me how heggaras should be answered. "Bassanio said that he had got that ring from his wife and I had sworn never to part with it. Portia turned it down as an excuse and left the court. Antonio persuade Bassanio to part with the ring and risk his wife's displeasure. Bassanio sent Gratiano after Portia with the ring. Portia thankfully accepted the ring and asked Gratiano to show Nerissa the way to the Jew's house in order to deliver the deeds which the Jew had to sign, Gratiano agreed to do that. Nerissa also managed to get the ring which she had previously given to Gratiano. In high spirits Portia and Nerissa set out on their journey to Belmont.

Lorenzo and Jessica were walking in the moon-light at Belmont when a servant sent on ahead, informed them that Portia would arrive at day-break. Another messenger brought the news that Bassanio would be returning in the morning. Lorenzo arranged music for the return of Portia.

Portia was pleased to be at home again. She was satisfied with the success of her adventure. Lorenzo and Jessica welcomed Portia and Nerissa home. Portia instructed the inmates of her house not to mention her absence to Bassanio and Gratiano. Soon after they arrived accompanied with Antonio. In the meanwhile Gratiano and Nerissa

were found quarrelling over the ring which Gratiano had given away to the lawyer's clerk. Portia asked what the matter was. Gratiano said that the quarrel was about a paltry ring with an inscription like the cutler's poetry on a knife : "Love me and leave me not." Nerissa that Gratiano had given her ring to a woman. She said that no beard would ever grow on the face on the clerk that had her ring. Gratiano repeated that he had given the ring to a frating youth who demanded it as a fee and he did not have the heart to deny him. Portia too held Gratiano guilty to parting with his wife's first gift. She said she was sure her husband Bassanio would not take her ring from his finger for all the wealth in the world. Gratiano said that his lord Bassanio had given his ring to the learned doctor who asked for it and indeed well earned it. Later on his young clerk demanded his ring. Bassanio confirmed the truth of Gratiano's statement. Portia too pretended to suspect that her husband had passed on the ring to some woman. Bassanio asserted that he had first refused to give the ring but had later on sent it to the doctor because he was ashamed to appear ungrateful to the man who had saved the life of his dear friend. Antonio lamented that he was the unhappy cause of these quarrels. Bassanio sought Portia's pardon and swore never again to break an oath to her. Antonio also assured Portia that Bassanio will never again break his faith with her. Then Portia gave Bassanio her second ring Bassanio exclaimed "By heaven, it is the same I gave to the doctor."

At this point Portia produced a letter from Bellario proving that Portia was the doctor and Nerissa was her clerk. She welcomed Antonio and gave him news of safe return of his three ships. A letter meant for Antonio had by chance fallen into her hands. Antonio thanked Portia for giving him his life and living. Nerissa gave Lorenzo the gift deed from the rich Jew of all the would die possessed of . Lorenzo said "Fair ladies, you drop manna in the way of starving people."

Thus is the end, all is happiness. Lorenzo and Jessica join the other two couples. Portia gives Antonio a last surprise—The news that three of his ships "Are richly come to harbour suddenly. " There can no reaction from the audience other than Antonio's "I am dumb," and final applause for Shakespeare. He has taken three main stands—(1) The casket story (2) The bond story, and (3) The ring story, and woven them into a single plot, which brings all three stories to a successful conclusion and ensures that all the characters with, one exception—"live happily ever after, just as fairy-tale characters ought to do.

