The Merchant of Venice

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
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Stage 5 (1800 headwords)

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PEOPLE IN THIS STORY

In Venice

Antonio  a merchant of Venice
Salarino, Solanio, and Gratiano  friends of Antonio and Bassanio
Bassanio  Antonio’s friend
Lorenzo  a friend of Bassanio and Antonio, in love with Jessica
Shylock  a rich money-lender
Tubal  Shylock’s friend
Lancelot Gobbo  Shylock’s (later Bassanio’s) servant
Jessica  Shylock’s daughter
The Duke of Venice  the most important person in Venice

In Belmont

Portia  a young lady
Nerissa  Portia’s maid
The Prince of Morocco  two of Portia’s suitors
The Prince of Aragon
Stephano  Portia’s servant
CHAPTER 1

On the Streets of Venice

My purse, my person, my extremest means,
Lie all unlocked to your occasions.

It was a grey afternoon, and soft rain was falling on the streets and waterways of Venice as three friends made their way slowly towards the Piazza San Marco. The tallest of the three, Antonio, hung his head sadly as they walked, and his two companions watched him with worried expressions on their faces.

‘My dear friends,’ Antonio said, stopping for a moment to look at both of them, ‘I’m very grateful for your concern, I really am. I have no idea why I’m so sad at the moment.’

His friend Salarino put a hand on Antonio’s shoulder, and said kindly, ‘A merchant’s life is full of worry; we all understand that. You have ships out on the oceans, carrying your goods through dangerous waters. It’s only natural for your mind to be far away. After all, if your ships went down, all your goods would be lost!’

The other man, Solanio, nodded his head. ‘Believe me, Antonio,’ he said, ‘if so much of my wealth was at sea, I’d spend all my time worrying about it. I’d watch the way the wind blows every day, and try to think of safe harbours for my ships in a storm. Any little thing that reminded me of the danger to my ships would make me miserable, I’m sure of it.’

‘Exactly!’ cried Salarino, eager to add his support. ‘If I breathed on my soup to cool it, I’d imagine what harm a strong wind might do at sea. If I saw a stone building, I’d immediately
think of the dangerous rocks that might break my ships to pieces. I understand what the problem is, Antonio. You’re worried about the goods your ships are carrying.’

‘Believe me, no, that’s not it,’ replied Antonio.

Salarino and Solanio looked at each other in surprise.

‘Why, then you’re in love!’ burst out Solanio, laughing.

‘No, Solanio, I’m not in love!’ Antonio said with a smile.

Solanio frowned, and paused to think for a moment. ‘Not in love?’ he said. ‘Well then, let’s just say the reason you’re sad is that you’re not happy, and leave it at that!’

‘Thank you, my dear friends, for trying to make me feel more cheerful,’ replied Antonio.

Just then, they caught sight of three well-dressed gentlemen coming purposefully down the street towards them. ‘Look, Antonio,’ said Solanio, ‘here comes your great friend Bassanio, with Gratiano and Lorenzo.’

For a few moments, all six men stood on the pavement, greeting each other warmly. Then Salarino and Solanio said goodbye and walked away down the street in the light rain. Gratiano and Lorenzo did not stay long either.

‘We’ll leave you two together,’ Lorenzo said to Bassanio and Antonio. ‘I know Bassanio wants to talk to you about something, Antonio.’

But as he was turning to walk away, Gratiano said, ‘You don’t look well, Antonio. You’re one of my greatest friends, so I must say this to you. Don’t be one of those men who never smile because they want to be seen as wise and deep. It’s much better to play the fool and have a face lined from laughter than to let your heart turn cold from sadness—’ He stopped speaking suddenly, realizing that Lorenzo had a hand on his arm and was trying to pull him away. ‘Ah, I think it’s time for
us to leave! Well, more of that later, Antonio, when we see you for the party! Goodbye!’

They hurried away down the narrow street. Antonio watched them until they were out of sight, then turned and said to Bassanio with a smile, ‘What was that all about?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about Gratiano!’ replied Bassanio lightly. ‘You know him. He talks a lot of nonsense. You could spend all day and all night trying to understand what he’s talking about and still not make any sense of it! Don’t give him another thought.’

The two friends walked on together, and entered the Piazza San Marco. Putting his own worries to one side for a moment, Antonio remembered that Bassanio wanted to talk to him about something. As usual, the square was crowded with people, but they were busy with their own conversations, and Antonio thought it was a good place for a private talk. ‘Well then, my friend,’ he said, smiling, ‘let’s talk about you. Lorenzo said that there was something you wanted to discuss?’

Bassanio’s eyes brightened, and his words came out in a rush. ‘Well, I’ll have to start at the beginning. Antonio, you know only too well how much money I’ve spent in recent years – far more than I can afford. How foolish I’ve been! I can’t blame anyone but myself for this. But now my main concern is to pay back everything I’ve borrowed. I owe the most to you, Antonio, and because we’re such good friends, I feel I must explain to you exactly how I hope to get clear of all my debts.’

Antonio stopped walking and turned to look at his friend. ‘Go on, my dear Bassanio,’ he said encouragingly. ‘And if your plan is honourable, as I know you yourself are, then you can be sure I’ll help you in every possible way. Just tell me what you need.’
Bassanio smiled gratefully at Antonio. ‘You’re very kind, but I must tell you the worst at once. You see, I’m completely unable to repay what I owe you now. And, well…’ He hesitated. ‘This seems an awful lot to ask, but if you would trust me, and lend me even more, I think I could manage to pay you back, and pay the previous debt, too.’
Antonio put a hand on Bassanio’s shoulder, and frowned at him, pretending to be angry. ‘But why are you explaining all this to me? You know me well enough to be sure that I’ll help you. Just say what you want me to do, and I’ll do it!’

Bassanio took a deep breath, and a soft, dreamy expression came into his eyes as he spoke. ‘Very well, then. In Belmont, not far from Venice, there’s a lady whose name is Portia. She has a large fortune, and she’s beautiful, very beautiful. But more importantly, she has every excellent quality known to man. When I met her, she looked at me in a way that gave me hope. But, you see, the whole world has heard of her, and rich and noble men from every country come to ask for her hand in marriage.’ He turned to Antonio, and added with feeling, ‘If I had the money to compete with them, I feel sure I could win her love!’

Antonio looked at Bassanio thoughtfully for a moment. ‘You know that I have spent all my money on goods that are now at sea, so I have nothing to give you at present. But go and see how much you can borrow from one of the money-lenders. Tell them that I sent you – they know that I’ll be able to pay them back. I’ll go, too, and I’m sure one of us will find someone who can lend us what we need. I’ll pay whatever is necessary, so that you can go to Belmont and try your luck with the beautiful Portia.’

Bassanio took Antonio’s hand and shook it. ‘I can never thank you enough,’ he said warmly.

Antonio smiled and waved away his friend’s thanks. Then, after saying goodbye to each other, the two men left the crowds in the Piazza San Marco, and set out in different directions through the streets of Venice.
In a richly furnished room in a large house in Belmont, a lady of great beauty was lying on a seat. ‘I tell you, Nerissa,’ Lady Portia said with a deep sigh, ‘I have to confess, I sometimes feel quite tired of life.’

She was speaking to her pretty maid, who was sitting at her feet. Nerissa was extremely fond of her mistress and understood her feelings very well. But she was a cheerful person herself, with plenty of common sense, and sometimes the lords and ladies she served made her just a little impatient.

‘Sweet madam,’ she replied as gently as she could, ‘you’d certainly be tired of life if you had as much misery as you have good fortune. But I sometimes think people who are too wealthy become as miserable as those who have nothing. So the happiest people must be the ones in the middle, like me – neither rich nor poor.’

Portia smiled at her bright-eyed servant. She always felt better when she talked to Nerissa. ‘Sensible thoughts, and well expressed,’ she said.

‘Well, advice is only any good if it’s taken, madam,’ said Nerissa.

Privately she was imagining how happy she would be if she had only half of Portia’s beauty and wealth. ‘I certainly wouldn’t ever get tired or depressed!’ she thought. ‘And if my
lady has any sense, she’ll realize how lucky she is!’

But Portia had started speaking again. ‘Well, it’s easy to know the right thing to do; it’s much harder to actually do it. If it was always easy to do the right thing, then the world would be a much better place. Oh, Nerissa!’ She put her pale hands to her head, suddenly remembering the reason for her unhappiness.

‘What, my lady?’ said Nerissa kindly.

‘Thinking like this doesn’t help me to choose a husband,’ she said, adding with a bitter laugh, ‘What a word – “choose”! I’m not allowed to choose a man I like, nor refuse one I dislike. The wishes of a living daughter are not as important as the will of a dead father. Don’t you think it’s hard, Nerissa, that I can neither choose nor refuse a husband?’

Nerissa smiled sympathetically at her mistress. Portia’s father had arranged a contest in his will, so that her suitors had to choose from three caskets – gold, silver, and lead – each with a different message on it. Only the suitor who chose the correct casket could marry Portia. ‘Your father was a good man, my lady,’ Nerissa said, ‘and when good men are close to death, they often have good ideas. It’s an unusual contest, certainly, but I’m sure the person who chooses correctly will be someone that you can love.’

As she spoke, she was thinking, ‘Well, that’s what we have to believe. Personally, I know I wouldn’t be too pleased if I had to find a husband through a contest like that!’ However, she did not give any clue to her thoughts, and simply added, ‘But, my lady, how do you feel about any of the lords and princes who have come here so far?’

This question had an excellent effect on Portia, as Nerissa had hoped it would. The lady sat up on her seat and made
herself comfortable, saying quite cheerfully, ‘Just run through their names, dear Nerissa, and I’ll tell you.’

‘Well, first there’s the Prince of Naples,’ said Nerissa, beginning to number Portia’s suitors on her fingers.

Her mistress laughed. ‘He does nothing but talk of his horse, and he’s very proud of being able to put new shoes on it himself!’

Nerissa nodded in smiling agreement. ‘Then there’s the Count Palatine. How about him?’
Lady Portia’s Suitors

Portia waved away the mention of his name. ‘Oh, he does nothing but frown all the time. Even the most amusing stories and the funniest jokes never make him smile. Just imagine how miserable he’ll be when he’s old, if he’s so cross when he’s young! Don’t let me marry either of these two men!’

Nerissa took her mistress’s hand for a moment, to show her support. ‘Well,’ she continued, ‘what do you think of the French lord, Monsieur Le Bon?’

Portia rolled her eyes upwards to the ceiling. ‘He’s so worried about trying to be better than everyone else that I have no idea who he actually is! He says he has a better horse than the Prince of Naples, and he frowns more often than the Count Palatine. I’ve even seen him fight his own shadow! However deeply he loved me, I could never, never love him.’

Nerissa laughed. How right Portia was! But there were still two more names on the list. ‘Then what do you say to Falconbridge, the young English lord?’

Portia put her head in her hands. ‘You know I can’t say anything to him at all, because he doesn’t understand me, and I don’t understand him! He can’t speak Latin, French, or Italian, and I must confess my English is poor. He’s the perfect picture of a handsome man, I give you that, but who can make conversation with a picture?’

‘How about the Scottish lord, his neighbour?’

‘He seems very forgiving. He let the Englishman hit him on the ear, and said only that he would hit him back later. I hope to avoid marrying him.’

‘You needn’t fear, madam,’ said Nerissa. Now was the moment to give her mistress some good news. ‘All these lords have told me that they’re not going to trouble you any more, and are going to return to their countries. They understand
the rules of the contest: they know that if they fail, they must swear to leave here at once and never ask another woman to marry them. And they have decided not to take that risk. They all plan to leave, unless your hand in marriage can be won in some other way.’

Portia clapped her hands delightedly, and lay back in her seat, looking calmer. ‘I shall only give my hand to the man who wins my father’s contest, Nerissa. I’m glad these lords are all so reasonable – because the only thing I love about them is their absence! Let’s hope they have safe and pleasant journeys home!’

There was a moment’s silence.

‘Do you remember, my lady,’ Nerissa said hesitantly, ‘when your father was alive, a young man from Venice came here? He was a man of learning and a soldier.’

The colour rose in Portia’s face. ‘Yes, yes,’ she replied. ‘Now, what was his name… Bassanio, wasn’t it?’

Nerissa knew her mistress much too well to believe that she was really unsure of the man’s name, but she just smiled and nodded. ‘Yes, madam, that was the name. I think that, of all the men I’ve ever seen, he was the one who would most deserve a fine and beautiful lady like you.’

There was a soft expression in Portia’s eyes. ‘I remember him well,’ she confessed. ‘And I remember that your good opinion of him is correct.’

A door opened, and a servant entered.

‘The five suitors are waiting to say goodbye to you, my lady,’ he said. ‘And a messenger from the Prince of Morocco says he will be here tonight to enter the contest.’

Portia sighed. ‘I wish I could greet the sixth as warmly as I say goodbye to the other five! Come, Nerissa.’
Activity 1

Match the words below to the definitions.

casket contest debt justice merchant pound

1. a small box for holding jewels, etc.
2. money that you must pay back to someone
3. a person whose job is to buy and sell goods
4. a game or competition that people try to win
5. a measure of weight
6. being fair to people

Activity 2

What do you know about William Shakespeare and the plays he wrote? Are these sentences true or false?

William Shakespeare...

1. lived most of his life in Scotland.
2. was an actor and a writer.
3. travelled widely in Europe.
4. wrote Hamlet and Othello.
5. wrote Everyman and My Fair Lady.

Activity 3

Look at the front and back cover, and the chapter titles. Choose the correct word or phrase to complete the sentences.

The story...

1. takes place in the 15th / 16th century.
2. is set in the beautiful city of Paris / Venice.
3. is about a lady / gentleman who owes money.
4. includes several characters at war / in love.
5. provides a happy / sad ending for most characters.
While Reading Activities

Chapter 1 Activity.

Match the quotes to the people who say them in the story.

Antonio  Bassanio  Gratiano  Salarino  Solanio

1. ‘A merchant's life is full of worry; we all understand that.’
2. ‘Well then, let’s just say the reason you’re sad is that you’re not happy, and leave it at that!’
3. ‘It’s much better to play the fool and have a face lined from laughter than to let your heart turn cold from sadness.’
4. ‘If I had the money to compete with them, I feel sure I could win her love!’
5. ‘Just say what you want me to do and I'll do it!’

Chapter 2 Activity.

Match the sentence halves.

1. In order to find the best husband for Portia, ...
2. There are three caskets...
3. If a suitor fails to choose correctly, ...
4. Portia does not like any of the gentlemen...
5. Nerissa cheers Portia up...

a. he has to leave Belmont at once.
b. her father created a contest.
c. by telling her the five noblemen are leaving.
d. which Portia’s suitors must choose from.
e. who have asked for her hand in marriage.
Before Reading Activities

Activity 1
1. casket
2. debt
3. merchant
4. contest
5. pound
6. justice

Activity 2
1. false
2. true
3. false
4. true
5. false

Activity 3
1. 16th
2. Venice
3. gentleman
4. in love
5. happy

While Reading Activities

Chapter 1 Activity
1. Salarino
2. Solanio
3. Gratiano
4. Bassanio
5. Antonio

Chapter 2 Activity
1. b
2. d
3. a
4. e
5. c
In sixteenth-century Venice – a city of wealthy merchants and bankers – money is all-important. Bassanio is penniless, but his great friend Antonio offers to help him by borrowing the money that he needs. To do this, though, Antonio must make an arrangement with an old enemy that puts his life in danger...

The Merchant of Venice is one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays, and it has been performed all over the world. It is retold in this Bookworm not as a play, but as a story.  (Word count 18,470)