



*Portia*

MERCHANT OF VENICE. ACT 5, SC. 1.

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PORTIA

mistress of "Belmont," her hereditary estate, was a heiress and an orphan, who, by her father's will, was to be married in marriage according to an odd conceit, by which, at death, she had vowed to abide. Three caskets—of gold, silver, and lead, respectively—were to be submitted to the choice of the suitors, and the heiress was to marry the one who should choose the right casket.

Among the suitors was Bassanio, a young Venetian, but fallen into poverty, for whom, in times past, Portia had a preference. In order to fit himself out for a suitor to so renowned a lady, he had been obliged to leave Antonio, a wealthy merchant of Venice, for his pawn and debts; and Antonio, in his turn, had been obliged to borrow the money from Shylock, a Jew, and a bitter enemy to the Christians. Antonio gave his hand to the loan, and Shylock, in return, gave him the right to take a pound of his flesh.





## PORTIA.

PORTIA, mistress of "Belmont," her hereditary estate, was a wealthy heiress and an orphan, who, by her father's will, was to be bestowed in marriage according to an odd conceit, by which, before his death, she had vowed to abide. Three caskets—of gold, silver, and lead, respectively—were to be submitted to the choice of the suitor, who must previously have sworn never to marry should he fail; and the selection of the one which contained a portrait of the lady would constitute him her husband. The wealthiest and most noble gentlemen of the land, and many from afar, hastened to woo the fair Portia, the fame of whose beauty, virtues, and rich inheritance had gone abroad.

Among these romantic competitors was Bassanio, a young Venetian of high rank but fallen fortunes, for whom, in times past, Portia had entertained a preference. In order to fit himself out for his journey as became a suitor to so renowned a lady, he had been beholden to his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant of Venice, for a loan of three thousand ducats; and Antonio, in his turn, had been compelled to borrow the money from Shylock, a Jew, and a notorious usurer. For this loan Antonio gave his bond, to the effect that, in case of his failing to pay back the money at the ap-



pointed time, he should forfeit a pound of his own flesh, to be cut from whichever part of his body Shylock should prefer—the money-lender having himself dictated this extraordinary stipulation, with a malignant motive.

Bassanio, having made himself acceptable to Portia, determined finally to decide his fate by the ordeal of the caskets; and, to their mutual joy, he chose the one which contained her picture. But, even as they were receiving the congratulations of their friends, a letter arrived from Antonio, announcing that his ships, on the safe return of which he had counted for the means of paying his debt to the Jew, had been wrecked, and that he was therefore about to submit to the cruel alternative prescribed in the bond. The high-spirited Portia, thus learning that a friend of her affianced husband was like to die for having assisted him, married Bassanio at once, to give him legal control over her possessions, and despatched him in all haste to pay the Jew and release Antonio.

No sooner, however, had Bassanio departed, than she sent a messenger to Bellario, her cousin and a counsellor, for advice, and his robes—on receiving which, she and her waiting-woman, Nerissa, disguised as a lawyer and his clerk, set out forthwith for Venice, where this extraordinary suit was already “all the talk.”

Portia arrived just in time for the trial; and having presented her credentials from Bellario, introducing to the duke the young Doctor Balthazar, she took her seat in court, as counsel for Antonio.

When it was her turn to speak, she began by offering Shylock the money, even thrice the sum; but he triumphantly refused. Then she appealed in eloquent terms to his mercy; and when that failed, she bade him help himself to his pound of flesh, but to take heed that he shed not a single drop of blood, for by so doing he would forfeit all his estates and goods to the State of Venice.

This timely hit of the young doctor was received with unanimous applause. Not only was Shylock thus baffled in his murderous plot for personal revenge, but for having conspired against the life of a citizen he was condemned to transfer half his possessions to Antonio, the other half to be confiscated to the State. But Antonio generously relinquished his share, on condition that Shylock, at his death, should bequeath it to his daughter Jessica, whom he had disinherited for having married Lorenzo, a Christian, and friend of Bassanio.

Portia returned home in time to welcome Bassanio and Antonio; there, in the midst of the general rejoicing, she confessed her part in the happy result, and there were no bounds to the “tender joy that filled the hearts of those who went to rest in Belmont!”

Portia is distinguished by a patrician elegance of person and presence, which is so innately her own that it depends but little for its effect on the aristocratic pretension of her surroundings. Although far from popular—her reputation for extraordinary mental endowments being sufficient to constitute a formidable obstacle to public favor—she is one of the most delightful of Shakspeare's women. Her intellectual quality is indeed marked; but that can never render a woman less lovable, when, as in Portia's case, it is subordinate to the affections. Schlegel, regarding her from a purely critical point of view, pronounces her “clever;” and although Mrs. Jameson protests against the application of so dubious an epithet to this “heavenly compound of talent, feeling, wisdom, beauty, and gentleness,” we must confess that to us it seems well chosen. “Clever” does not, indeed, imply the possession of illustrious powers; but it does signify that nice “dexterity in the