



Isabella

MEASURE FOR MEASURE, ACT 3, SC. 1.

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Isabella, a novice of the Sisterhood of St. Clare,
 is betrothed to a young man under sentence of death
 who is betrothed to him in marriage.
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 her a novice of the Sisterhood of St. Clare,
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ISABELLA.

ISABELLA of Vienna, a novice of the Sisterhood of St. Clare, was the sister of Claudio, a young man under sentence of death for having seduced a lady betrothed to him in marriage.

Vicentio, the reigning Duke of Vienna, becoming conscious of an injudicious clemency in his administration of the laws, appointed Lord Angelo his deputy, and, pretending to set out, incognito, on a long journey, remained in his dukedom, disguised as a friar, to take personal note of the effect produced on his people by the severe discipline of an austere ruler.

Claudio chanced to be the first detected in the violation of a law which, from long neglect to enforce it, had become a dead letter; and to establish an example for the salutary contemplation of its many outragers, Angelo, without hesitation, condemned him to die.

Isabella, who was on the point of taking the veil in the convent where she had served her novitiate, being sent for by her brother, abandoned her strict seclusion, to implore his pardon at the feet of Angelo, who at first was inexorable; but, seeming-virtuous as he was, he finally became enamoured of the beautiful vestal, and offered her Claudio's life in exchange for her honor. His vile pro-

posal was indignantly rejected; and in recounting to her brother, in prison, the details of the insult, Isabella was overheard by the duke, who, as a friar, had visited Claudio to administer the consolations of religion, and to acquaint himself with the facts of the case. On parting from her brother, Isabella was accosted by the friar, who bade her seem to acquiesce in Angelo's proposition, and appoint him an assignation at night, taking every precaution, however, to insure strict secrecy; and he promised that he would procure a substitute for her, in the person of Mariana, a young lady to whom Angelo had been betrothed, who still loved him, whom he had deserted on some dishonorable pretext, but whom he would be compelled to marry after this visit—such being the friar's motive for interference.

Isabella consented to this subterfuge, the more readily that it was advised by a holy father; and it was accordingly executed as the duke had proposed. Angelo, however, with a treachery to be expected from his hypocritical sanctity, although he confidently believed that he had won the immaculate Isabella, resolved not to fulfil the terms of his own infamous bargain—he feared the vengeance of Claudio, the order for whose immediate execution was now set aside only through the intervention of the friar, who produced the duke's signet as evidence of his superior authority.

The return of Vicentio was then proclaimed throughout the city of Vienna; and all persons having grievances to complain of against the State were commanded to make public declaration of them before the duke.

Isabella, who believed that her brother had been executed, notwithstanding Angelo's promise to her, was the first to enter complaint against that corrupt judge; whereupon, after some intricate preliminaries, the lord deputy's wickedness was exposed, and he was forced to make restitution to the wronged but faithful

Mariana, by marrying her. Claudio, pardoned by the duke, was united to the victim of his selfish passion; and, finally, the spotless Isabella was created Duchess of Vienna by Vicentio, whose gracious preference she had won by her uncompromising virtue.

The character of Isabella presents a notable example of the inefficacy of a purely intellectual virtue to command our sympathy or admiration, or in any way to advance the cause of Religion.

In critical, as well as popular, appreciation, Isabella occupies a position of cool toleration—although in some opinions she has risen from that questionable status, to be denominated “an angel of light,” and by another order of minds has been assailed with vituperative violence, as a coarse, vixenish prude. The prudent preservation of a temperate course, between these two exaggerations, will perhaps be the shortest and the surest road to strict justice toward one who would, herself, desire no more.

Cold, faultless, severe in moral rectitude, not liable to the weaknesses which “make the whole world kin,” and utterly incapable of sympathy for them, this *religieuse* stands, in a manner, arrayed against her fellows: existing, not only physically, but morally, apart from them, permitting herself no tie of reciprocal feeling to keep her united with the human family—the type of a class of mistaken but sincere religionists of all sects, who, by their repulsive self-sufficiency, fatally subvert the very interests to which they have consecrated their lives.

Isabella is no hypocrite—that is, consciously; her flawless excellence commands our exalted respect, our honorable recognition, however it may repel any more enthusiastic admiration; to the impregnability of her chastity, the prominent feature of her

strongly marked individuality, full honor must be awarded; yet self-sacrifice, without a reservation, has become so inseparably associated with all that is most lovable in woman, that it would have been far easier to forgive the actual offence, than conscientiously to applaud her moral grandeur, remembering the beautiful details of her victory.

We do not "doubt the angelic purity of Isabella;" and, but for the instance of eccentric depravity furnished by her lover Angelo, we should believe only one event to be less possible than her "lapse from virtue"—that, notwithstanding her beauty, it should ever have sustained a temptation.

Isabella's complaints of the too lax discipline of her order are construed by her panegyrist, Mrs. Jameson, to signify that she desires a "more strict restraint," "from the consciousness of strong intellectual and imaginative power, and of *overflowing sensibility*," in herself, which require it. With all respect, we would suggest that this "very virtuous maid" is supplied with the latter qualities only from the abundant stores of the accomplished authoress herself. Isabella's strong intellectual power no one questions—it is conclusively established in her logical tilt of wits with the lord deputy; but of imagination, or sensibility, she is as destitute as an Audrey. Her appetite for severer penances and sharper mortifications is natural to the morbid devotee—and by no means peculiar to her, or of any special significance.

The austerity of Isabella's heart and soul, as well as of her outward life—her freedom from emotion, almost incredible in one so young—cannot be better illustrated than by the dialogue between her and Angelo, wherein she proves her dreadful insensibility to the peril of her brother's situation by the cool, self-possessed, equipped arguments with which she pleads for him. It is plain that her words are doing violence to her convictions, that in suing for

his pardon she is conscious of wronging her rigid conscientiousness; and she is quite willing to retire, on the slightest pretext, and leave justice triumphant over the mercy for which she argues—even over the life of her wretched brother:

Isab. I am a woeful suitor to your honor,
Please but your honor hear me.

Ang. Well; what's your suit?

Isab. There is a vice that most I do abhor,
And most desire should meet the blow of justice—
For which I would not plead, but that I must—
For which I must not plead, but that I am
At war 'twixt will, and will not.

Ang. Well; the matter?

Isab. I have a brother is condemn'd to die:
I do beseech you, let it be his fault,
And not my brother.

Ang. Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it!
Why, every fault's condemn'd ere it be done:
Mine were the very cipher of a function,
To find the faults whose fine stands in record,
And let go by the actor.

Isab. O just, but severe law!
I had a brother then.—Heaven keep your honor!

[Retiring.]

Lucio. [To *ISAB.*] Give't not o'er so; to him again,
entreat him;
Kneel down before him, hang upon his gown;
You are too cold: if you should need a pin,
You could not with more tame a tongue desire it.
To him, I say!

Isab. Must he needs die?

Ang. Maiden, no remedy.

Isab. Yes; I do think that you might pardon him,
And neither heaven nor man grieve at the mercy.

* * * * *
Ang. He's sentenc'd; 'tis too late.

Isab. Too late? why, no; I that do speak a word
May call it back again: Well, believe this:

No ceremony that to great ones 'longs,
Not the king's crown, nor the deputed sword,
The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
Become them with one half so good a grace
As mercy does.

* * * * *
* * * O, it is excellent

To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.

Her interview with her brother in prison is even more characteristic: her first speech to him, when, agonized with suspense, he awaits the issue of her prayers to the lord deputy, is almost inconceivably harsh and unwomanly; Isabella tricks out the fatal intelligence in a sustained figure, substitutes rhetoric for the consoling tenderness of a sister, and a sister of charity:

Claud. Now, sister, what's the comfort?

Isab. Why, as all comforts are—most good indeed.
Lord Angelo, having affairs to heaven,
Intends you for his swift ambassador,
Where you shall be an everlasting lieger:
Therefore your best appointment make with speed—
To-morrow you set on.

Claud. Is there no remedy?

Isab. None, but such remedy as, to save a head,
To cleave a heart in twain.

Claud. But is there any?

Isab. Yes, brother, you may live;
There is a devilish mercy in the judge,
If you'll implore it, that will free your life,
But fetter you till death.

* * * * *

Claud. Thou shalt not do 't.

Isab. O, were it but my life,
I'd throw it down for your deliverance
As frankly as a pin.

Claud. Thanks, dear Isabel.

Isab. Be ready, Claudio, for your death to-morrow.

Claud. Yes.—Has he affections in him,
That thus can make him bite the law by the nose,
When he would force it? Sure it is no sin;
Or of the deadly seven it is the least.

Isab. Which is the least?

Claud. If it were damnable, he being so wise,
Why would he for the momentary trick
Be perdurably fin'd?—O Isabel!

Isab. What says my brother?

Claud. Death is a fearful thing—

Isab. And shamed life a hateful.

* * * * *

Claud. Sweet sister, let me live:
What sin you do to save a brother's life,
Nature dispenses with the deed so far
That it becomes a virtue.

Isab. O you beast!

O faithless coward! O dishonest wretch!

Wilt thou be made a man out of my vice?

* * * * *

* * * Take my defiance.

Die, perish! might but my bending down

Reprive thee from thy fate, it should proceed:

I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,

No word to save thee.