Helena

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL ACT I. SC. I.

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love for the count; nor did the discovery displease her, for she loved Helena as a daughter, and was well pleased at the prospect of being her mother in reality.

At court Helena encountered no little difficulty in inducing the king to believe in the efficacy of her father's prescription; but won over by her beauty and her eloquence, as much as by her absolute conviction of the infallibility of her remedy, he consented to give it a trial, on her own condition: that if he should be cured, he would bestow upon her the husband of her choice—but if not, that she should die for her presumption.

Happily for Helena, the medicine wrought a miracle: the king was restored to health in a few days; and eager to discharge his debt of gratitude, he summoned the young nobles into his presence, that Helena might choose a husband from among them. Of course, she laid claim to Bertram, who—his ancestral pride outraged at the idea of marrying a "poor physician's daughter," his mother's humble dependant—protested against so arbitrary a disposal of his person and honorable name; but the king's word was given, and he commanded that the marriage should proceed.

Thus Helena was made Countess of Rousillon; but that same day her husband sent her home with a letter for his mother, informing her of his intention to leave the country unceremoniously, and protesting that until he had no wife he had nothing in France. He added a few cruel lines for Helena, in which he gave her the right to call him husband only when she could get possession of a certain ring that should never leave his finger, and show him a son of hers of which he should be the father. This unkindness so afflicted Helena—especially the thought that she had driven him from his home—that she stole away from her good mother-in-law, and set forth on a pilgrimage to St. Jaques.

At Florence she sought shelter and rest beneath the roof of a

poor widow, who was accustomed to entertain pilgrims on their way to the shrine. Here she learned that the widow's fair young daughter, Diana, was wooed by one Count Rousillon, a countryman of hers; but the fact of his extraordinary marriage being known, Diana, a discreet maiden, had virtuously repulsed his dishonorable advances. Helena, inspired by love, confided her story to the two women, and procured their co-operation in her plot, by money as well as by the persuasive eloquence of her sorrows.

Following her instructions, Diana made an appointment for Count Bertram to visit her bed-chamber by night, on which occasion Helena, personating Diana, gave him the ring the king had bestowed on her, and obtained from him in exchange his ring, "bequeathed down from many ancestors." With this trophy she returned to France, accompanied by Diana and her mother, who were necessary to the accomplishment of her design.

Helena had caused it to be reported that she was dead; whereupon Bertram hastened back to Paris, in the hope of procuring the king's pardon, and obtaining the hand of a lady at court; but his majesty discovered on the count's finger the ring that Helena had promised should never leave hers, except for some grave necessity; and suspecting that some foul wrong had been done her by her husband, he instituted inquiries which, somewhat circuitously, but not the less certainly, resulted in the happiness of this heroic lady and devoted wife, by securing to her the favor of her husband, Count Bertram of Rousillon.

In Helena we have the remarkable case of a very interesting female character, which is, nevertheless, deficient in one of the chief charms of womanhood; her virtue is above suspicion; her

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Helena was the daughter of Gerard de Narbon, a poor but famous physician, who, at his death, left her to the motherly care of the noble and wealthy Countess of Rousillon. This lady having lately lost her husband, who was in high favor with the king of France, his Majesty despatched one of his courtiers to the countess's palace, with commands for her son Bertram, that he should forthwith accompany the messenger to court; the young count obeyed with alacrity.

The good king was at this time suffering acutely, with a disease that baffled all the skill of his physicians. Helena—who was hopelessly in love with Bertram, and to whom any suggestion was welcome that afforded her an excuse for following him to Paris—was moved by the melancholy case of the king to try the virtues of a precious prescription left by her father, and which he had declared infallible in the very disease of which the French monarch languished.

So she besought permission of her generous mistress to go to Paris and tender her services to the king, which was readily granted. At the same time the shrewd countess took advantage of the occasion to extort from her gentlewoman a confession of her