



THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: All for a pound of flesh

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I am Tomas, a slave. People don't notice me - no more than a dog, or a goat. I may be just a slave boy, but I'm human: I see, hear, speak, touch, smell. And when I get together with other household slaves, I listen to their gossip.

For instance: Bassanio. He's in debt again. He's always in debt. And who does he come running to? My master, Signor Antonio: because not only is he wealthy, but Bassanio's a cousin. He's Antonio's best friend. Signor Antonio loves Bassanio and can never say no to him.

My master, Signor Antonio, is a merchant here in the city of Venice. He owns ships which go sailing all over the world to trade in jewellery, spices, silks and precious metals. We were walking along to the docks to see the latest ships coming in, when who should we meet? Bassanio! I groan...

My master, however, brightened. 'Bassanio! Tell me about this lady you love so much' he begged. 'I hear she is rich and beautiful, and lives in Belmont?'

'Her name is Portia,' sighed Bassanio. 'Gentlemen are queueing up to marry her.'

I'd heard of Lady Portia from Bassanio's slave, Leonardo. He told me that her father, who had recently died, had left her very wealthy but though Bassanio was desperate to marry her he felt too poor to have any chance.

'Oh, my friend, Antonio,' moaned Bassanio. 'If only I hadn't been so extravagant!'

Oh no! I knew what was coming.

'If only I had some money,' he continued. 'I know I'm already in debt to you, but...I wonder...perhaps, if...you could show faith...and maybe lend me some more so that I can...you know...woo this lady in style?'



'I have no money in my pockets till my ships come in,' replied Antonio, 'but my name is good in Venice. Borrow money under my name, and I'll guarantee you.'

Oh dear! The man Bassanio turned to for the loan was Shylock. He was a money-lender, who was bitter about the way he was treated just for being Jewish: often pushed around and insulted. This had made him mean and hard, and turned him into such a bully that he was loathed by everyone - even his own daughter, Jessica.

Bassanio took Antonio along to meet him - and of course I went too. What a bitter meeting it was. Antonio, in common with so many, loathed Jews, and Shylock loathed Christians! 'Aren't you the man who spits in my beard, and kicks me like a dog?' jeered Shylock when he met my master. 'Yet you come to me for money? What should I say to you? Hath a dog money?'

I thought such insults would be too much for my master, but he loved his Bassanio. And, though Antonio believed the rule 'neither a borrower nor a lender be' for Bassanio's sake, he said: 'I personally guarantee you will get your money back when my ships come in.'

'How much money do you want?' asked Shylock.

'Three thousand ducats,' said Bassanio.

'Very well,' said Shylock, 'but Antonio, either you repay the money, or I take a pound of flesh from whatever part of your body I wish!'

Every bone in my body screamed, no, no, no! Bassanio went pale. 'Antonio!' he cried, 'You can't agree to that!'

But Antonio laughed it off: 'When my ships return Shylock will get his money back threefold!'

A joyful Bassanio rushed off to order fresh clothes of velvet and lace so he could present himself to Portia as a future husband and I rushed off to Belmont with a note to say Bassanio intended to call.



Portia's maid, Nerissa made me wait in the kitchen, and I chatted to a slave girl, Latifa.

'We think we are slaves,' Latifa whispered, 'but here is my Lady Portia enslaved to her dead father's wishes, unable to choose her own husband.'

'How? Why?' I asked.

'Each suitor is led before three mysterious metal caskets of gold, silver and lead. Any man wishing to marry her must choose one of the caskets. The correct one contains a picture of her and my Lady Portia must marry whoever opens the right casket - even if he is the vilest creature on earth - otherwise she will lose everything.'

I was horrified! What kind of freedom was that? Poor lady; poor Bassanio. Even I felt sorry for this man who didn't realise his fate was to be determined by chance.

Then we heard the dogs barking.

'Who is it, Nerissa?' called the Lady Portia.

'Madam, it's him, you know...' she giggled. 'The young, handsome one.' Bassanio had turned up in style to woo Portia.

'Oh, the word choose!' Portia wailed. 'I can't choose who I want, nor refuse who I dislike.' How she loved Bassanio. She told him about the caskets. She dreaded him making the wrong choice. 'Wait awhile,' she begged him. But Bassanio was keen to get it over and done with, so Portia led him before the three boxes.

Like a fairytale, there were three caskets: gold, silver and lead. 'He must choose one,' whispered Latifa, 'and open it. The correct one has her portrait inside it.'

We peeped through the curtains, praying to all those Christian saints that he would pick the right one. Bassanio looked at the gold box, then the silver. Finally, he pointed at the lead one: the dullest, cheapest box. Latifa and I looked at each other, in disbelief. Surely not that one!

'Open this,' he said.



We heard his gasp of joy, and I nearly turned a cartwheel. It was the right one. The lead casket contained the lady's portrait. Lady Portia was overjoyed. We heard her words of love and commitment: that she, and everything she owned would now be his. To seal it, she gave Bassanio a ring saying 'If you part from, lose or give away this ring, it will mean our love is ruined.'

'My lord and lady!' cried Nerissa, 'it is now our time to cry good joy, good joy!' and I ran home like the wind to tell my master, Signor Antonio. But I arrived to find my master pounding his chambers in horror; a servant quaked at his feet. Terrible news! Antonio's ships were feared wrecked at sea.

'Tomas! Go back. Tell Bassanio.'

I ran. With horror, Bassanio wailed, 'We can't pay Shylock! That means he'll demand a pound of Antonio's flesh.'

When Portia heard the news she reassured him. 'Oh, that's nothing. You can have three thousand ducats, or thrice that.'

'Tomas! Return! Tell your master the good news,' ordered the happy Bassanio.

Back I ran, and saw my master's relief when I told him that the Lady Portia would pay the debt.

Exhausted, I at last lay down to sleep in the kitchen...but heard servants whispering: 'Shylock's daughter, Jessica, has run away with a Christian - taking her father's money. Half-demented, Shylock had howled, and thrown things around, 'Oh my daughter, oh my ducats, oh my daughter, fled with a Christian. Oh, my Christian ducats!'

I slept badly that night, full of foreboding. The next day, I accompanied my master, Signor Antonio and Bassanio to Shylock's house. They were jaunty and full of jokes. Surely nothing could go wrong? But the bitter Shylock refused the Lady Portia's money outright. 'I want Antonio's money or a pound of his flesh.'

Antonio went pale. He leaned on my shoulder. I felt his body shudder.



The day stretched out long and dreadful, as Bassanio turned now to the Duke of Venice for help.

The Duke pleaded with Shylock. But Shylock, as a revenge for all the insults he and his fellow Jews had suffered, demanded his rights. 'Either Antonio pays, or I have a pound of his flesh.'

'Let's hope the law can settle matters,' said the Duke.

We assembled before a court of judges. Once again they argued. Shylock insisted the deal was legal: Antonio had signed it - which was true. No court of law could deny it.

'Why, Shylock, why do you demand your pound of flesh?'

'Because it is mine,' he replied. 'You have slaves which you bought along with your dogs and asses.' My master glanced at me. 'If I asked you to set them free, wouldn't you answer no - they're yours? So I say, no, the bond is mine.'

Distraught, Bassanio embraced his friend. Antonio prepared himself for the knife.

Suddenly, the Duke announced the arrival of a lawyer from Padua, come to examine the agreement. With a flutter of hope, all eyes turned on the youthful lawyer who entered. Could this beardless youth, really see something none of the other experienced lawyers had seen?

'Yes,' he concluded. 'Shylock is perfectly within his rights to demand his pound of flesh. But, Shylock, why not be merciful?'

'Mercy? What's mercy? Be kind? Let him off?' sneered Shylock. 'Why should I?'

How quietly and reasonably the lawyer replied: 'Shylock! You can't put a value on mercy. It is good, gentle, like soft rain, blessing the person who gives mercy as well as the person who receives it.'

I looked at Shylock. His eyes were closed. Did I see his lip quiver?



Then his voice came out as if from the bottom of a swamp, 'I will have my pound of flesh!' And he sharpened his knife.

My master bared his chest. I ran over to him and crouched at his feet, weeping.

Suddenly a voice rang out. It was the young lawyer. 'But mind you Shylock, there is nothing to say that you can have *blood* as well. If you spill one single drop of blood, you will lose everything including your life. This is the law: no-one can set out to harm a citizen of Venice.'

Shylock's howls of defeat were like a wounded wolf and the joy of the courtroom was like Carnival Day. How Antonio hugged the lawyer and Bassanio shook his hand so fiercely I thought the young man would faint!

But this unusual lawyer would take no payment, even though they begged him to let them show their gratitude. Finally he said to Bassanio. 'Well, if you must, give me your gloves to keep me warm, and the ring from your finger.'

Bassanio turned ashen. He willingly handed over the gloves. But the ring? His body seemed to shrink as he removed his wife's ring from his finger. He remembered her words: 'If you should part from this ring, lose it or give it away, it will mean the ruin of our love.'

'Come! Let's get to Belmont and tell Portia the good news,' cried Antonio joyfully.

And yet, another deal had been broken.

'Bassanio, where's the ring I gave you which you swore you would never part with?' murmured Portia.

Mortified, Bassanio cried: 'Sweet Portia If you did know to whom I gave the ring... If you did know for whom I gave the ring... And would conceive for what I gave the ring... And how unwillingly I left the ring... You would understand!'

'He did it for me,' pleaded Antonio. 'I will give up my soul if Bassanio should ever again break his word.'

'Right, Antonio!' cried Portia, 'It's a deal!'



Not again! I looked desperately at my master.

‘Give this to Bassanio,’ said Portia handing my master a ring, ‘and bid him keep it better than the other.’

It was the same ring! Could it be? Was it true? The young lawyer from Padua had been the Lady Portia herself?

Magical Portia was the bringer of good fortune: she and Bassanio would live in happiness - though I still felt furious with Bassanio for nearly causing my master’s death. And what of my master, Antonio - the Merchant of Venice?

Portia handed him a letter. ‘Antonio, open it. It came to me by accident.’

He obeyed and read: three of his ships had come in safely. He was dumb-struck! I don’t think his joy could have been greater than mine. Though I hope he’ll never lend money to Bassanio again.

Later, I wondered...will Jew and Christian ever be friends? And would I - and slaves like me - ever be free?