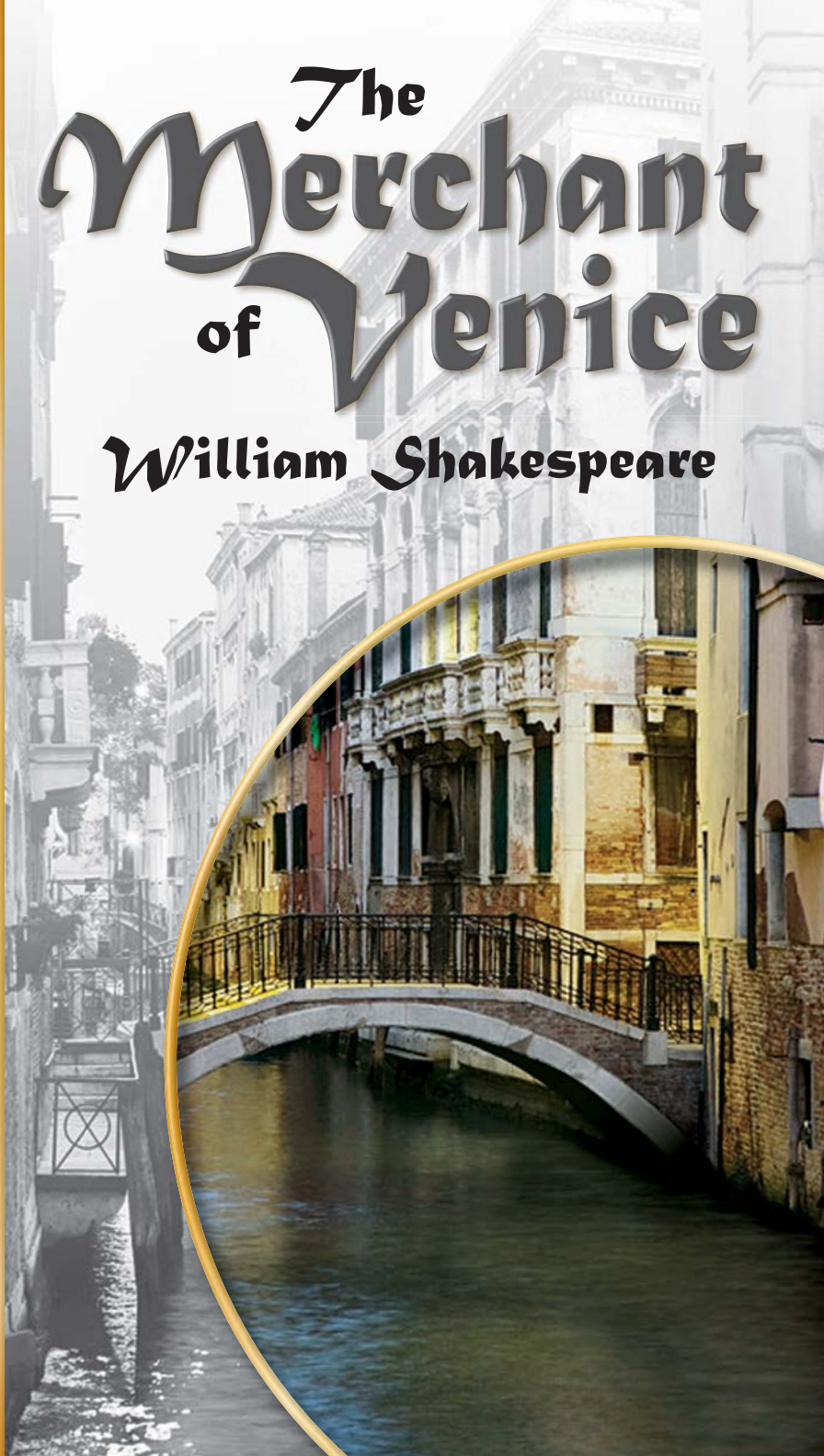


The Merchant of Venice

William Shakespeare

TIMELESS SHAKESPEARE



ACT 1

| Scene 1 |

A wharf in Venice, Italy, in the sixteenth century. Antonio is talking to his friends Salerio and Solanio.

ANTONIO (*sighing*): I don't know why
I'm so sad. This mood wearies me.
You say it wearies you, too.
But just how I caught it, found it,
or came by it,
I do not know. I feel so sad,
I hardly even know myself.

SALERIO: Your mind is tossing on the ocean.
(*pointing toward the sea*) It's out there,
Where your ships with their billowing sails
Lord it over the common working boats.

SOLANIO: Believe me, if I had taken the risks
That you have, I would be worried, too.
Anything that put my investments at risk
Would make me sad.

SALERIO: As I blew on my hot soup to cool it,
I'd catch a chill when I thought
What harm a strong wind might do at sea.
As I looked at the sand in an hourglass,
I'd think of shallow waters and sandbanks
And see one of my ships stuck in the sand.

Every time I went to church, the holy stones
Would make me think of dangerous rocks.
They'd only have to touch my delicate ship
To scatter all her spices into the sea
And clothe the wild waters with my silks!
One moment I'd be rich—
And the next I'd be worth nothing.
How miserable I would be
If such a thing happened!
You can't fool me. I know Antonio must
Be worrying about his merchandise.

ANTONIO: Believe me, that's not it. I'm lucky.
My investments are not all in one ship
Or all in one place. Nor is all my money
At risk at this time. So my merchandise
Is not what is making me sad.

SOLANIO (*teasing*): Why, then, you must
Be in love!

ANTONIO (*protesting*): Not at all!

SOLANIO: Not in love, either? Then let us say
You are sad because you are not merry.
And, if you wanted to, you could laugh.

(*Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano enter.*)

Here comes Bassanio, your noble kinsman.
Gratiano and Lorenzo are with him.
(*seeing his chance to leave*) Farewell!
We'll leave you now with better company.

SALERIO (*also seeing his chance*):

I would have stayed to cheer you up
If worthier friends had not stopped me.

ANTONIO: That's good of you, but I take it

Your own business calls you.

This gives you the chance to leave.

SALERIO (*to the newcomers*): Good morning!

BASSANIO (*warmly*): Gentlemen both!

When shall we have a laugh together, eh?

You're almost strangers! Must it be so?

SALERIO (*eager to get away*): Yes, yes. We'll get

together one of these days.

(*Salerio and Solanio exit.*)

LORENZO: Bassanio, now that you have

Found Antonio, we will leave you.

Remember that we're meeting for dinner.

BASSANIO: I'll be there!

GRATIANO: You don't look well, Antonio.

You let things get you down.

Don't worry so much. Believe me,

You don't seem like yourself lately.

ANTONIO: I take the world as it is, Gratiano,

A stage, where every man must play a part,

And mine a sad one.

GRATIANO: Let me play the fool, then.

Let mirth and laughter give me wrinkles,

And let my emotions get heated with wine

Rather than let my heart cool with sighs.
Why should a warmblooded man
Act like a stone-cold statue of his
grandfather?

I tell you what, Antonio—
And I speak out of friendship—
Some men have faces that never change.
They stay still, hoping to be thought of as
Wise, serious, and important. Antonio, I
know men whose reputation
For being wise is based on saying nothing.
I am very sure that, if they would speak,
They would prove themselves fools.
I'll tell you more about this another time.
But don't go fishing for this fake reputation
With melancholy as your bait, Lorenzo.

(to Antonio): Farewell for now.

I'll end my speech after dinner.

LORENZO: Yes, we'll see you at dinnertime.
I must be one of those silent wise men,
For Gratiano never lets me speak.

GRATIANO: Be my friend two more years—
You'll forget the sound of your own voice!

ANTONIO *(to Gratiano):* I guess I'd better start
talking, then.

GRATIANO: If you like. Silence is only good
In dried ox tongues and young maids!

(Gratiano and Lorenzo exit.)

ANTONIO: What do you think of that?

BASSANIO (*laughing*): He talks more trash
Than any man in Venice! Any truth
Gratiano speaks is like two grains of wheat
Hidden in two bushels.
Look all day, and when you find them,
They are not worth the search!

ANTONIO: Well, tell me now,
What lady takes your fancy?
You promised to tell me about her today.

BASSANIO (*serious now*): Antonio, you know
Only too well that I've been spending
My inheritance by living beyond my means.
I'm not angry about having to cut back—
But my main goal is to pay the great debts
that my extravagant living has cost me.
I owe the most to you, Antonio, in money
And in friendship. Because we are friends,
I dare to speak freely about my plans to
Get clear of all the debts I owe.

ANTONIO: Bassanio, tell me everything.
If your plan is honorable—as you are—
Be assured that my purse, my person, and
All my resources are open to you.

BASSANIO: In my schooldays,
If I lost one arrow,
I shot another in the same way. I watched
Its flight carefully to see where the first fell.

By risking both, I often found both.

I tell this childhood story
Because my new plan is very similar.
I owe you much and—blame my youth—
What I owe is lost.

But if you would shoot another arrow
The same way you shot the first,
I'll either find both or bring the second one
Back to you again. Then I'll gratefully
Stand by the first debt I owed you.

ANTONIO: You know me well enough.

By doubting that I'd help you, you hurt me
More than if you had wasted all I have.
Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it!

BASSANIO: There is a rich heiress

In Belmont. She is beautiful and virtuous.
Sometimes I have received silent messages
From her eyes. Her name is Portia.
The world is not ignorant of her worth,
For the four winds blow in famous suitors
From every coast. Antonio, if only I had
The money to compete with these suitors,
I'm convinced I could win her hand.

ANTONIO: You know that my wealth is tied up
In cargoes at sea. I do not have the cash,
Nor do I have anything to sell right now.
So go to Venice. See what my credit can do.
Stretch it to the limit to finance your trip
To Belmont and the fair Portia. Go right

now

And ask around, and so will I. See
 where money is to be had.
 Borrow it on my credit or good name.
 Either way, it comes out the same.

(Bassanio and Antonio exit.)

| Scene 2 |

The hall at Portia's house at Belmont. Portia is talking with her maid, Nerissa.

PORTIA: Honestly, Nerissa, my little body is weary of this great world.

NERISSA: You would be better off, dear lady, if you had as much misery as you have good fortune. As I see it, those who have too much are as miserable as those who have too little. Excess gives you white hair and makes you old before your time! Moderation leads to a longer life.

PORTIA: Good sentences, and well-said.

NERISSA: They'd be better if well-followed.

PORTIA: If doing were as easy as knowing what to do, poor men's cottages would be palaces. It is a good preacher who follows his own instructions. I'd rather teach twenty how to act than be one of

the twenty to follow my own teaching!
The brain might try to control the
emotions, but a hot temper leaps over
a cold rule. Youth ignores good advice
because it's a handicap. But all this
reasoning won't help me choose a
husband. Oh, dear! (*sighing*) That word
"choose"! I may neither choose whom
I like, nor refuse whom I dislike.
So the will of a living daughter is
curbed by the will of a dead father.
Isn't it unfair, Nerissa, that I can
neither choose nor refuse?

NERISSA: Your father was very virtuous, and
good men are often inspired on their
deathbeds. The lottery he set up is a
worthy idea. Given a choice of gold,
silver, or lead—with you as the prize
for the correct choice—only the right
man will choose correctly. How do you
feel about the princely suitors who have
already come to seek your hand?

PORTIA: Please name them. And as you do so,
I will describe them for you. Then you
can guess by my descriptions how I feel
about each of them.

NERISSA: First there is the prince from Naples.

PORTIA: Oh, yes, that colt! He does nothing

but talk about his horse. He brags that he can shoe the beast himself. I suspect that his mother once had an affair with a blacksmith!

NERISSA: Then there is the Count Palatine.

PORTIA: He does nothing but frown, as if to say, “If you won’t marry me, choose someone else!” He listens to jokes and never smiles. I’m sure he’ll be the weeping prophet when he grows old, being so full of sadness in his youth. I would rather be married to a skull than to either of these!

NERISSA: What do you say about the French lord, Monsieur Le Bon?

PORTIA: Honestly, I know it’s a sin to be a mocker—but him! I would be happy if he hated me, for I could never return his love.

NERISSA: And the young English baron?

PORTIA: You know I never speak to him. He doesn’t understand me, and I don’t understand him. He speaks neither Latin, French, nor Italian. And you know that my English is not good. He looks manly enough—but who could converse with a dummy? And how oddly he dresses! I think he bought his vest in Italy, his