

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Her flattering broken speech—so plainly betraying her heart—
inflamed Bassanio. 'Let me choose, then,' he cried; 'for this
suspense is stretching me on the rack!'

'Go, then,' Portia commanded, hardening her courage: 'in
one of the caskets I am locked.' Then as, to the sound of music,
he turned to the shelf on which the three caskets stood, she pressed
a hand to her heart. 'More fearful it is,' she sighed, 'for me to
view the fray than for you to engage in it!'

Bassanio lifted the caskets, one by one, between his hands.
He pondered each, and the inscription on it. On the gold casket
was written—

Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire:

on the silver—

Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves:

while the lead bore this motto—

Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.

This casket made no promise: it merely challenged: nor might
any one warn Bassanio how the others by their promises had
deluded the Princes of Morocco and Arragon; of whom the first,
choosing the gold, had found within it a human skull, typifying
that to many sorrowful men in this world death is of all things
the most desirable; whilst Arragon, unlocking the silver, had read
the value of his deserts in a fool's cap-and-bells. But the blunt
challenge on the leaden casket spoke rather to Bassanio's
adventurous spirit. 'Gold,' he mused, 'is the outward show and
ornament of all corruption; silver the pale drudge in which men
are paid their wages. This lead, that threatens rather than
promises, stirs my spirit, daring it to the test: and here I choose.
May joy wait on my choice!'

Joy indeed—rapturous joy—had rushed already upon Portia
in a flood, as he laid his hand on the right casket. But he was
bending to unlock it, and did not perceive her agitation; and in
another moment he had joy enough of his own to occupy him