

THE STORY

wrongly, he would never again speak of marriage to any woman ; and this condition when it came to the proof, the most of them had feared to face. A Prince of Naples, a Count of the Palatinate, with several Lords of France, England, Scotland, Saxony, had in turn kissed hands regretfully and bade farewell to the lady, so desirable in every way but so formidably protected. Two suitors only had put their fate to the test—the Princes of Morocco and Arragon, the one a swarthy Moor, the other a proud Spaniard. Each had chosen amiss, and each had taken defeat and dismissal with proud resignation. It was now Bassanio's turn, since he insisted on standing the test. Portia—whose heart had at once gone out to him—was cruelly distraught. Unless he happened to choose aright she could never be his ; therefore she longed for him to choose. But if he chose wrong he was lost to her for ever ; therefore she could not persuade him to the ordeal from which her fears recoiled. These dreadful pros and cons she discussed with her waiting-maid Nerissa, who herself was in little better plight, having a fancy of her own for the gay Gratiano, the young suitor's companion. Had it been left to them these ladies would have lived in the present, inventing fresh excuses for delay. ' I pray you, tarry,' pleaded Portia with Bassanio. ' Pause, though it be for a day or two only : since, if you choose wrong, I shall lose your company. Something tells me—but it is not love—that I shall be sorry to lose you. You must not think it is love ; and yet it cannot be dislike : dislike would not counsel so. Lest you should not understand me—and yet a maiden has no tongue but only her thoughts—I say, I would keep you here a month, two months longer before you make venture for me. I could teach you, indeed, *how* to choose, but that would be dishonourable. That I will never be . . . and yet, without it, you may miss me ! Alas ! your looks have so managed to divide me that one half of me is yours—yes, and the other half yours.—Mine, I should have said ; but mine is yours when—if—I belong to you. Forgive this word-splitting. I am talking, still talking, to weigh and eke out the time.'