

## THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

wedding is held I may be married at the same time.' 'With all my heart,' laughed Bassanio, 'if you can first get a wife.' 'I thank you, but you have already won her for me: for whilst you were wooing the mistress I wooed the maid, and a hard wooing it was. But at length Nerissa, here, promised to wed me if fortune should give you the Lady Portia.' 'Is this true, Nerissa?' asked Portia. 'Madam, it is, so it please you.' 'Our feast,' said Bassanio, smiling, 'shall be honoured by your marriage.'

And now there happened an interruption which at first promised to be wholly pleasant, being no other than the arrival of the runaways, Lorenzo and Jessica, with Salanio, an old friend, from Venice. It seemed they had chanced to visit Belmont by the happiest of luck, for no wedding-guests could have been more welcome. But Salanio brought a letter which dealt a blow at all this happiness, and Bassanio grew pale and trembled as he read it. Portia noted this change of countenance, and stepped quickly to his side. 'Give me leave, Bassanio. I am half yourself, and must claim my share, good or ill, in whatever this letter brings you.' 'O sweet Portia,' he answered, 'here are a few of the unpleasantest words that ever blotted paper. Dearest lady, when I first told you of my love, I told you that I owned nothing but gentle birth. I should have told you that I was worth less than nothing, being a debtor and to a dear friend. This letter is from him—it might be his body, and every word a gaping wound dripping his life-blood. . . . But is it true?'—he turned to Salanio—'Have all his ventures mischanced? Man, they were scattered the world over—to Tripolis, Mexico, England—to Lisbon, Barbary, India! Are you telling me that not a single vessel has escaped?' Salanio shook his head sadly. 'Not one; and moreover it would seem that had he now the money to pay, the Jew would not take it. The creature is not human. His bond has run out, and albeit twenty merchants have joined their entreaties—ay, and the Doge himself, and our first magnificoes all—he cannot be persuaded from claiming the strict law and letter of his bond.' 'Do you say,' asked Portia, 'that it is a dear friend who is thus in trouble?' 'The dearest I have; the kindest,