

CHAPTER ONE

The Moneylenders

I have a story to tell. It is a story of love and hatred. A story of giving and taking. A story of laughter and tears. This story was told a long time ago. But it still has as much meaning today as it did then. It happened in a city called Venice in Italy. This beautiful city rests like a crown jewel on the Adriatic Sea.

There lived a moneylender named Shylock in Venice. He earned a lot by lending money to merchants. Many people hated Shylock. Some people hated him because he forced merchants to repay him in terrible ways. Others hated him simply because he was Jewish.

Of all the merchants who lived in Venice, one hated Shylock more than the others. His name was Antonio. Shylock hated Antonio as well. This was because Antonio was a very generous moneylender.

He lent money to people in trouble and often didn't charge them interest. Shylock

lost a lot of business because of Antonio's generosity.

More importantly, Shylock hated Antonio because he was a Christian. And Antonio hated Shylock because he was a Jew. In those days, Jews and Christians didn't like each other. They couldn't agree about anything. They couldn't understand each other's religion or culture.

Antonio and Shylock often ran into each other at the Rialto. The Rialto was the business center of Venice. When the two met, they would have arguments. Antonio would often yell at Shylock for the heartless way of doing business. Shylock often thought about ways to get even with Antonio.

Almost everyone in Venice really liked Antonio.

They felt that he was kind and honest. The merchants especially admired him. They knew that he would help them when they were in hard times.

Antonio's best friend was a young man named Bassanio. Bassanio's family was

very rich. His parents had given him money, but Bassanio had spent it all. He had wasted his mopey on wine and good food. He had traveled and he had had fun. And, of course, he ended up without any money. This was very common for young men during that time.

In the past, Antonio had helped him in many ways. In fact, he already owed Antonio lots of money. Antonio never said "no" to Bassanio. It seemed Antonio was happy to share his money with his friends.

One day, Bassanio came to Antonio for another loan.

"Antonio! I have great news! I've fallen in love with someone! Her name is Portia. She's the most beautiful woman in the world! And not only that, she's rich, too. Her father passed away recently, and she's going to inherit lots of money!"

"That's wonderful news, Bassanio," said Antonio. "It sounds like she is a wonderful woman, but does she love you as much as you love her?"

"Of course, she does. When she looks at me, her eyes are full of love and ~ ' respect. Listen. I want to buy some gifts for her. The only problem is that I don't have any money right now. I know I owe you a lot of money, but can I borrow a little more? I promise I'll pay you back."

"Bassanio! You know that my money is your money. I'd gladly lend it to you anytime. The only problem is that I don't have any money right now. I've spent all of my money on merchandise. I can't help you. I'm sorry."

"What should I do?" asked Bassanio. "She'll never marry me unless I give her some gifts."

"Don't worry," said Antonio. "I know what you can do. You can borrow money from a moneylender named Shylock. He always has money on hand. He'll certainly lend you money if I sign a loan agreement. And the ships will come in any day now. I'll make lots of money when my merchandise arrives. I'll pay him back then." "Thanks, Antonio. You really are a great friend!"

While Bassanio and Antonio were out to find Shylock, Portia was facing her own problems. Portia's father had arranged conditions of her marriage before he died.

He didn't trust Portia's judgment. He felt that she would choose an unsuitable person to marry. So, before he died, he had put three chests in a room. One chest was made of gold, one of silver and one of lead. In one of these chests was a small picture of Portia.

If a suitor chose the right box, he would find the picture. That meant that he could propose to Portia. Portia's father believed that the best husband would know which box to choose.

If he found the wrong box, he would have to leave the house right away. He wouldn't be allowed to marry Portia. In addition, he wouldn't be able to marry anyone or have a girlfriend for the rest of his life. Every suitor had to sign a contract agreeing to these conditions. It was a big risk for them. But Portia's father felt that his daughter was worth the risk.

Portia lived in a small town called "Belmont." She had many men visit her house. They all wanted to marry her because she was rich and beautiful. She was tired of having these strange men come to her house. She was also unhappy that her father didn't trust her judgment. Portia often talked to her servant, Nerissa, about her problems. Nerissa was more of a friend than a servant.

"Why couldn't my father just trust me?" she asked Nerissa one day.

"Your father was right," said Nerissa. "There are so many bad men out there. They just want to marry you for your money."

"But the men who come here are so boring. They have bad manners, and they are vain. Some of them drink too much wine. Some of them even smoke! Ah! I'm so sick of these guys!"

Portia was a very independent person. She was capable of making decisions for herself. She also believed that she was smarter than most men. Portia was sad. She

thought that she would have to marry a boring, stupid man with bad habits.

"Not one of these guys is decent. What should I do?"

"Do you remember the man from Venice?" asked Nerissa.

Portia's eyes sparkled. "Yes. I remember him. Bassanio. How could I forget? He was so much better than all of the other men who came here. He was handsome and gentle. He was charming, kind, and intelligent. But it's hopeless! He'll never sign my father's contract. I'm a woman who can't even choose her own husband. I'm so unlucky!"

Another servant then entered the room.

"Madam, a message has arrived from the Prince of Morocco. He will be arriving tomorrow."

"Great! Another unsuitable suitor! I wonder what problems this one will have."

CHAPTER TWO

The Loan

Meanwhile, in Venice, Antonio and Bassanio found Shylock. He was at the Rialto, as usual.

"Shylock, I have a request for you," said Antonio. "I'd like you to loan three thousand ducats to my best friend, Bassanio. I will sign the contract. I'll happily pay you back in a few days. I'll have plenty of money when my ships arrive."

"I have an idea," said Bassanio. "Why don't we go out to dinner? We can talk more about this loan.'

"I never eat with Christians," grumbled Shylock. "I may lend them money or do business with them. But I don't eat with them. Not ever!"

"Very well," said Bassanio. "Why don't you just lend me the money, then? You know that Antonio will pay you back."

As Shylock listened to Antonio and Bassanio, he became angrier and angrier. How foolish these two men were! They knew how much he hated them. And yet they were asking him for a loan! He was determined to make Antonio pay dearly.

"Shylock!" yelled Antonio. "Are you going to lend us the money or not? Answer me!"

Shylock answered him slowly. "Do you remember all of those times that you insulted me in a loud voice that everyone could hear? You once spat on me and called me a dog. And now you want to borrow money from me, a dog!" "Look! I'm not asking you a favor. You can charge me any interest you want. I don't mind. My ships will arrive any day now."

"Alright, Antonio. I'm willing to lend you the money. I won't even charge you any interest. Just pay me back the loan on time."

Antonio couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say?"

"I said you didn't know me. You always call me a cheapskate, but I am not. I will help you. I won't even charge you a single ducat. However, there's something I'm worried about. What if you don't pay me back?"

"Don't worry, Shylock. I'll pay you back."

"Well, I need some kind of a guarantee, don't I? Three thousand ducats is a lot of money. If you don't pay me back on time, I want a pound of flesh. I'll take a pound of flesh from any part of your body."

Antonio didn't like what Shylock proposed.

"No. I'd rather pay some interest if I'm late on the payment."

"I'm afraid that's no good," said Shylock as he laughed. "Do you think I'd take money from a fellow moneylender? Besides, this contract is only a joke! Do you think that any lawyer or judge would believe me? Would they really believe that I want a pound of your flesh? You don't have to

worry about anything! It's my way of saying the bad feelings of the past between us are finished."

Antonio pulled Bassanio aside and spoke to him secretly.

"I don't want to do business with this man. He's evil. And I know that he'd take the pound of flesh from me if he could. Let's see if somebody else will lend us the money."

But Bassanio had other ideas. "Who else in Venice can lend me this much money? Besides, this man is crazy. Don't worry about the guarantee. Nobody would make you pay a pound of flesh! Everyone will think he's nuts!"

So, Antonio agreed to the conditions of the loan. The three men went to a lawyer and signed an agreement.

A strange smile came over Shylock's face. In fact, Shylock wanted to take a pound of flesh from Antonio. He'd hated Antonio for so long. And he lost a lot of money because of this generous moneylender.

Bassanio took the money that Antonio had borrowed although he had a bad feeling about the loan contract. He bought many gifts and clothes that he needed to propose to Portia. He then loaded the gifts into a carriage. He and his servant, Gratiano, went to Portia's house with the carriage.

When Bassanio arrived, Portia was delighted. She had hoped that he would return for her. She was in love with him.

"Portia, I'm so happy to see you again," said Bassanio. "But I have something awful to tell you. I'm broke. I have no money."

"Bassanio! Don't worry about that! I have all of the money we need. Money means nothing to me. The only thing you have to worry about is choosing the right box. Then, we can live happily ever after."

Portia told Bassanio about her father's contract.

"Alright. I'll go choose the box now."

Portia started to worry. What if he chose the wrong box?

"Don't choose today. I have a bad feeling. I want you to wait."

"Wait! But the sooner I choose, the sooner I can marry you. I can't wait any longer."

"Then let me hire a musician. Maybe the music will help you think more clearly."

A little while later, a musician came. He began to play soothing music. Bassanio slowly walked over to the golden chest. He looked at it carefully.

"This can't be it," he said to himself. "It's too obvious. Everyone would choose the golden one first. I think Portia's father wanted to separate the wise men from the fools."

Then, he walked over to the silver chest. "If men didn't choose the golden chest, then

they would choose this one. That's obvious, as well."

Bassanio's eyes settled on the lead chest.

"This is the least obvious choice. I don't think anyone else would choose this one."

He opened the box. He gasped. He couldn't believe his eyes! In the box was a small picture of Portia. Bassanio could now marry her! He was so happy that he couldn't even speak.

Portia put her arms around him and said, "Oh, Bassanio! I'm the luckiest woman in the world. Yesterday, I was just a girl with a lot of money. Today, I'll be a wife. Please, take this ring and show me you will accept my proposal. Put it on and promise me that you'll never take it off."

"I am lucky, too," said Bassanio. "Yesterday, I was poor and lonely. Today, I will be married to the most beautiful woman in the world. I promise that

I'll wear this ring forever. Until I die! I swear!"

It was a very happy moment. Gratiano felt that it was a good time to ask Bassanio something.

"Since you're getting married, I'd like to get married, too."

"Well, that's wonderful," said Bassanio. "But who are you going to marry?"

"I want to marry Nerissa."

Bassanio and Portia were very surprised.

"I didn't know you wanted to get married, Nerissa," cried Portia. "This is a great day!"

That evening the couples got married. Bassanio and Gratiano wore golden rings that they promised never to take off. They were the happiest men in the world.

CHAPTER THREE

The Debt

A few days later, a messenger arrived at Portia and Bassanio's house. Bassanio received the letter and opened it. It read:

Dear Bassanio.

Mij ships have all sunk. I am in big trouble. Shy lock w ants to take a pound of flash from mo. Everyone has tried to talk him out of it. fven the Duke of Venice has tried. But no one has had any success.

I am going to die. Please come to my trial and execution. I want to see you once more. Come quickly. I don' l have much time.

Your friend.

Antonio

As Bassanio read the note, his face turned white. He had to sit down. His hands trembled.

Portia ran to him. "What is it? What's wrong? Please! Answer me!"

"Oh! My poor friend Antonio! He's going to die! Portia, listen to me carefully. I am not only a poor man. I am a debtor as well."

Bassanio told her all about the money and the pound of flesh.

A chill ran through Portia's body. She couldn't believe that a man wanted to cut a pound of flesh from someone.

"Bassanio, go to your friend right away," she said. "You are my husband now. My money is your money. You must pay back Antonio's debt. I'll give you two times the original loan. Go quickly before Antonio is killed."

Bassanio put a lot of money in a bag and left for Venice. He found Antonio in prison. When he saw his friend, Antonio ran to him and hugged him. Antonio looked small and weak.

"My dear friend," said Bassanio. "I'll go to Shylock today and pay back the money. I'm sure he'll take it and then you can go free. After all, he is very greedy. He won't say 'no' to money."

"Dear Bassanio," said Antonio. "You are too kind. But I think it's too late. Shylock wants a pound of flesh from me. According to the loan agreement, that's what I owe him. You won't be able to talk him out of it."

"He's never refused money before."

"This time it's different. He hates me so much that he wants to kill me. And to make matters worse, Jessica ran away from home."

"Jessica? Do you mean Shylock's daughter?"

"That's right. She married the young man who was living in your parents' house. The Christian boy. She is going to give up her religion and become a Christian. And when she ran away from home, she stole a gem from Shylock, too."

"Oh! That's terrible," said Bassanio.

"He probably thinks that I made her marry the Christian. But I have nothing to do with it. I swear! He's really mad! He cut Jessica out of his will. And, for the past few days, Shylock's been talking about me. He's told everyone that he's going to kill me."

"Don't worry about that," said Bassanio. "I'll talk to Shylock. I'll make him change his mind. I'll do whatever I need to."

Bassanio went out of the prison and found Shylock.

"Please, I beg you. Please spare Antonio's life. Please, please release him from prison. Here's six thousand ducats. That's twice the amount we borrowed in the first place." Bassanio begged on his hands and knees.

"No. I want a pound of flesh. He owes me that." "I'll give you nine thousand ducats. Just let him live!" "No."

"Name your price. I'll pay you anything." "I want a pound of flesh."

Bassanio realized that Shylock would not change his mind. There was only one thing that he could do. He had to go to court. At that time, everyone of Venice was talking about the problem. Everyone felt sorry for Antonio. He had only wanted to help a friend. And everyone hated Shylock. He was such an evil man. More than being evil, however, he was angry. He was angry

with Antonio. Antonio had always spoken roughly to him at the Rialto. He had cursed Shylock for being a Jew. He had yelled at him for being a mean and greedy businessman. Shylock was also very angry about his daughter. His whole world was a dark and nasty place. And he had nothing but hatred in his heart for these two Christians, Antonio and Bassanio.

A date was set for the trial. It was a very important trial. Even the Duke of Venice was involved. He would be the judge.

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia heard about the trial. She decided that she had to help poor Antonio. She could not rely on fate to change the course of events.

Portia wrote a letter to her cousin, Bellario. He was a well-known lawyer. She asked for his opinion about Antonio's case. She also asked him to lend her the clothes that he wore in court.

A few days later, a letter and a box arrived in Belmont. The letter had instructions for defending Antonio. In the

box were two sets of clothes that Bellario wore in court.

Portia dressed in one set. She made Nerissa wear the other set. Then they left for Venice.

Portia and Nerissa went to the Grand Courthouse of Venice. There, they waited for the trial to begin. On the day of trial, it seemed like every Venetian came to the court. Everyone wanted to know what would happen to Antonio.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Trial

When the trial began, Portia gave the Duke of Venice a letter. The letter was from Bellario. It said that he could not be Antonio's lawyer because he was sick. Bellario wrote that Balthasar would be Antonio's lawyer instead. Balthasar was actually Portia in disguise. The Duke didn't mind that Balthasar would represent Antonio. He did wonder, however, if Balthasar was experienced enough. "He" looked very young.

Portia looked around the huge courtroom. Shylock seemed to be enjoying his day in court. Antonio looked at her with begging eyes. Portia then looked over at her husband. Bassanio didn't realize that Balthasar was actually his wife, either.

As the trial began, the room grew quiet. Portia spoke to Shylock first.

"Sir. According to the agreement, you can take a pound of flesh from Antonio. There's no question about that. But I want to remind you of another choice. Of a more

noble choice. You could choose to be merciful. You may ask, 'What is mercy?' Well, I'll tell you. Mercy is like the gentle rain. It falls from heaven. It blesses everyone. It blesses the person who gives mercy and the person who takes it. Mercy makes you feel like a king. You have all of the power in the world. You have the power to give Antonio his life. It is only through mercy that you can do this."

All of the citizens in the courtroom agreed with Portia. Everyone except for Shylock. "I don't care about mercy! I only want justice!" he yelled.

"Well, why don't you just allow Antonio to pay you back?"

"It's too late for that now. I don't want money. I want my pound of flesh. Read the contract. It says that I can take the pound of flesh. And it says that I can take it from the place nearest to his heart."

"Antonio, you must get ready to die, then," said Portia. Everyone in the crowd gasped. They couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"Shylock," said Portia in a pleading voice, "please, take this money and let me tear up the loan contract."

Shylock said, "I will never change my mind. Not for any reason. "

He began sharpening his long knife. He couldn't wait to cut into Antonio.

Portia turned to Antonio. "Do you have anything to say before you die?"

"No," said Antonio. "I am ready to die."

Then he turned to Bassanio. "Goodbye, my friend. Don't blame yourself for my death."

Bassanio was crying. "Oh, Antonio. I would do anything to save your life. But there's nothing I can do. I'm so sorry. You are the best friend in the world."

"Enough of this," yelled Shylock. "Let's get on with it. I want my pound of flesh."

Portia asked the Duke, "Is the scale ready?" The Duke nodded. "Is the doctor here?"

"What doctor?" asked Shylock.

"There should be a doctor here. Antonio shouldn't bleed to death."

But, of course, Shylock wanted him to bleed to death.

"The contract says nothing about a doctor."

"But surely we need a doctor here. It's the only decent thing to do!"

"The contract says nothing about a doctor," Shylock repeated.

"Alright," said Portia. "A pound of flesh is yours. The law allows it. The court awards it."

Shylock was very happy that he could finally kill his enemy. He was very pleased with the young lawyer.

"You are such a good lawyer," he said. "You understand justice."

Shylock picked up his sharp knife. It was bright and shiny. The moneylender had an evil look in his eyes.

"Come here," he said to Antonio.

"Just a minute," said Portia. "There is another thing I need to tell you. This contract doesn't give you a drop of blood. If Antonio loses a drop of blood, you will break the law. The City of Venice will take all of your money and land. Do you understand?"

Shylock didn't know what to say. Everything had changed. He couldn't possibly get his revenge now. His face turned red with anger.

Everyone was very impressed with this young lawyer. "Balthasar" used the terms of the contract to save Antonio. There was no mention of blood in the contract. Shylock could not take any blood. Therefore, he couldn't take any flesh, either.

The people in the courtroom clapped their hands. "Hooray for Balthasar!"

Shylock slammed his fist against the table. "Well, where's my money, then? If I can't have my pound of flesh, I want my money."

"Here it is." Bassanio happily threw him a bag with three thousand ducats inside. Shylock began to walk away. "Not so fast."

said Portia. "You tried to murder someone. By law, you must give all of your money to the City of Venice. You could also be killed. You are at the mercy of the Duke of Venice. Get down on your hands and knees. Beg him for forgiveness." "No," said the Duke. "I don't think anyone should have to beg for their life. It isn't right. I must make an important decision, and I must think about it carefully. I want Shylock thrown in jail tonight. Tomorrow I will tell you what his punishment will be."

Everyone left the courthouse that afternoon. They walked through the streets talking about the trial. No one could remember a more unusual day.

The next morning was gray and rainy. Shylock felt that it was the last day of his life. The atmosphere of the courtroom was very gloomy. The crowd hated Shylock, but nobody wanted him to be killed.

When the Duke walked in, everyone became very quiet.

"Most people understand mercy," said the Duke, at last. "It seems that you.

Shylock, don't understand it. I am a human being. I understand mercy. And I understand the value of a human life. In the spirit of mercy, I forgive you. I will spare your life. I must punish you, though. If I don't, maybe other people will act like you. You must give half of your money to Antonio, and the other half to the City of Venice."

Antonio was always a generous man. Even after all that had happened, he didn't change. He knew that Shylock's daughter, Jessica, was poor.

"I have a request about the money," said Antonio.

"What is your request?" asked the Duke.

The court became quiet again. The crowd leaned forward to hear.

"I want to give Shylock's money to his daughter. And I want him to put Jessica back in his will."

"I think this is a fair request. Shylock, I order you to give half of your money to Jessica. And you must write her back into

your will. If you don't do this, I'll throw you in jail for the rest of your life."

Shylock felt sick. He had failed to get revenge on Antonio. He had lost his money. He hated everyone.

"Fine. I'll do what you want. Just let me go now. I am not feeling well."

Shylock was set free. He walked through the streets pulling out his hair. He couldn't believe his luck!

"Sir," said the Duke to Portia. "I have never seen such a clever lawyer in my life. I must admit that I was worried at first because you looked so young. If you're not too busy, please have dinner with me tonight. I'd love to talk about the law with you."

Portia wanted to get home before her husband. "I would love to, but I have another case that I must work on. I'm sorry. I'm just too busy to have dinner with you tonight." "Oh, well. Another time, then." The Duke turned to Antonio. "You should pay this lawyer well. You owe him an awful lot."

"Please," said Bassanio to Portia. "Take these

three thousand ducats. That's how much we borrowed from Shylock in the first place." "I don't want the money." "I'll give you three thousand more, then." "I don't want any money at all," said Portia. "Instead, I want your wedding ring."

"My wedding ring? I'm sorry. This is the one thing in the world that I can't give you. I promised my wife that I would never take it off. I will find you the most expensive ring in Venice. I will buy it for you now. But I can't give you this ring. No way!"

"I want your wedding ring, but I'm not going to beg. I see that you're too cheap to give it to me."

Portia left the courtroom. She seemed angry. Actually, she was happy.

"Please, Bassanio. Give him the ring," said Antonio. "I know your wife will be mad. But think about what this lawyer has done for us today. I owe him my life. Don't you think that's worth your wedding ring?"

Bassanio felt ashamed. Antonio was right. He took off his ring and gave it to Gratiano. "Go and find Balthasar. Give him this ring." When Gratiano found Portia, he gave her the ring. Nerissa, who was with her, said, "You! Gratiano! You give me your ring, too."

Gratiano knew that he couldn't say "no." He gave her his ring.

When Portia and Nerissa were alone, they had a good laugh. They decided to play a trick on their husbands.

Bassanio and Gratiano returned to Belmont that evening. They found their wives waiting for them. They kissed their wives. For a moment, everyone was very happy to be together again.

Then, the women started yelling at them. "Where's your wedding ring?" cried Portia. "You gave our wedding rings to other women," screamed Nerissa.

"Please believe us," said Bassanio. "We gave our rings to two young lawyers. The lawyers saved the life of my best friend. They said that they wanted our wedding rings as

payment. They wouldn't accept anything else. Please understand, darling. They saved Antonio's life!" Bassanio felt sad and guilty.

"I suppose that there is only one thing we can do," said Portia. Bassanio was afraid. Gratiano's knees were shaking.

"We must give you your rings back."

Portia opened her hand. Nerissa opened hers as well. Bassanio and Gratiano couldn't believe their eyes! They were holding their wedding rings!

Portia and Nerissa started to giggle. Then they laughed harder and harder. The men stood there with confused looks on their faces.

Finally, Portia began to tell their story. Bassanio was amazed. His wife was even more wonderful than he had thought. She was the cleverest woman in Italy. She saved his best friend's life. He was overcome with happiness.

As if this surprise weren't enough, a messenger soon arrived with another. The man brought news that Antonio's ships had not sunk. They had safely arrived in Venice.

The goods were ready for sale. They couldn't have been happier.

That night, they all celebrated under the beautiful Italian moon. They laughed thinking about the rings and the trick Portia and Nerissa had played on Bassanio and Gratiano.

Bassanio looked lovingly at his wife.

"What's the scariest thing in the world?" he asked her.

"Owing a pound of flesh to a money-lender?" asked Portia.

"Absolutely not! It's losing my wife's wedding ring."

Bassanio never took off his ring again.