

3.6

The Merchant of Venice



Antonio was a merchant who lived in Venice, a prosperous city in Italy. In those days, that is, about five hundred years ago, sea voyages were dangerous. And yet, some adventurous merchants travelled across the seas. Some others spent a lot of money in sending ships to faraway countries. These ships brought back spices and other treasures from India and other countries. The merchants sold these things in Europe. They made a lot of profit in this business.

At the time when the story begins, Antonio was waiting for his ships to return with merchandise. He had put almost all his money in the ships.

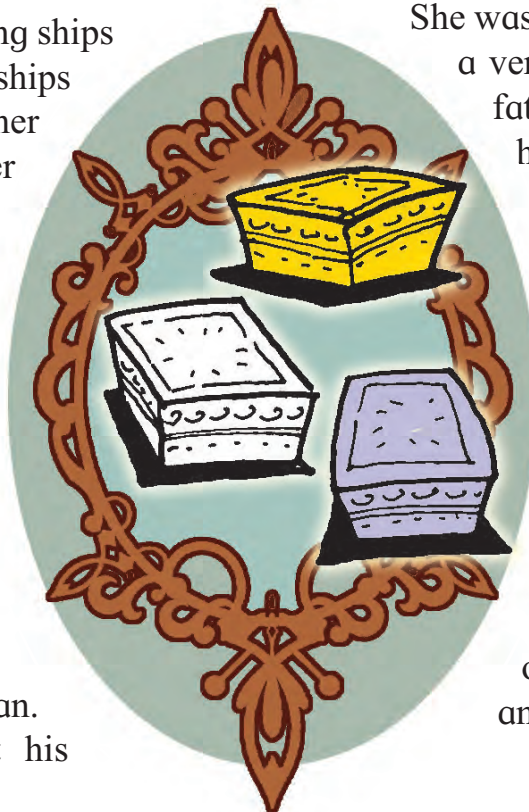
Antonio was a kind man. He had many friends, but his

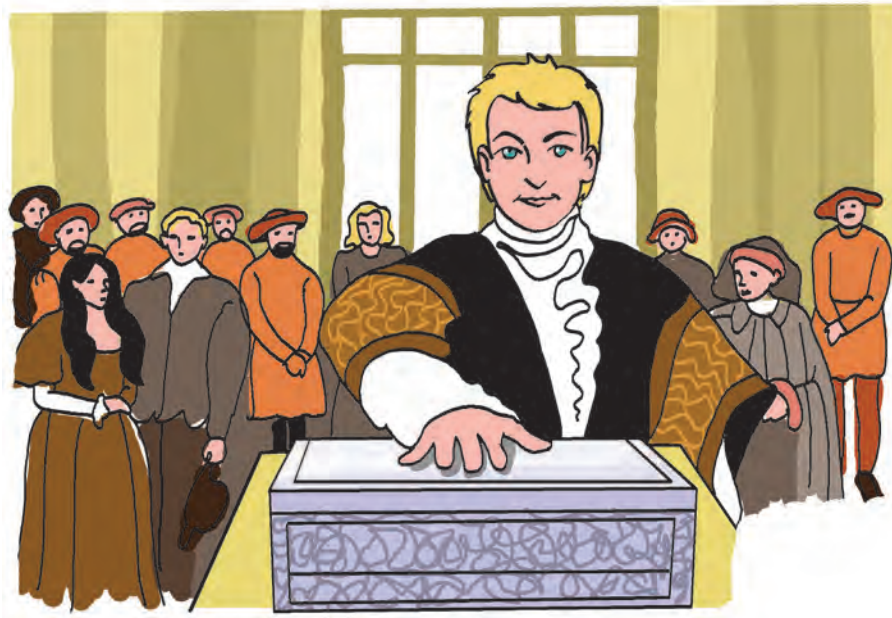
best friend was Bassanio. Bassanio was a young and handsome nobleman but unfortunately, he had no money.

Bassanio wanted to marry Portia. Portia was beautiful and intelligent.

She was the only daughter of a very wealthy man. Her father had died, leaving her a large estate.

In his will, Portia's father had written how Portia's husband should be selected. He had set a test for her suitors. They had to choose between three caskets – one of gold, one of silver and one of lead.





Each casket had something written on it. On the gold casket, it was written ‘Whoever chooses me shall gain what many men desire’; on the silver casket, ‘Whoever chooses me, shall get as much as he deserves’; on the casket of lead, ‘Whoever chooses me must give and hazard all he has’.

One of Portia’s suitors was the Prince of Morocco. He chose the gold casket. But when he opened the casket, the message inside said that it was not the right casket. ‘All that glitters is not gold!’

Another suitor, the Prince of Arragon, chose the silver casket. But that too was not the right casket.

Bassanio wanted to try his luck with the caskets. To do that, he had to travel to Belmont where Portia lived on her estate. He needed money for that. When Antonio came to know this, he wanted to help. He told Bassanio to borrow money in his (Antonio’s) name. They went to

Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, and asked him for the money.

Shylock had a lot of money, but he was not at all generous. Money was all that he cared for. He did not like Antonio, because Antonio sometimes lent people money without charging any interest for it.

So, Shylock decided to take advantage of this situation. He gave them the money on a strange condition. If Antonio failed to return the money within three months, Shylock would cut off a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Antonio agreed to this, and borrowed the money for Bassanio.

Bassanio went to Belmont. When he saw the caskets, he chose the lead one. That was the right casket, and Bassanio won Portia’s hand by choosing it. Portia, too, was glad to marry Bassanio.

In the meanwhile, Shylock heard that Antonio had lost his ships. He was very happy that Antonio would not be able to pay the money. He took Antonio



to court and demanded that he fulfil the strange and cruel condition. The Duke liked Antonio and was sorry for him. But what could he do? Antonio had written a bond to Shylock and according to the law, Shylock was right.

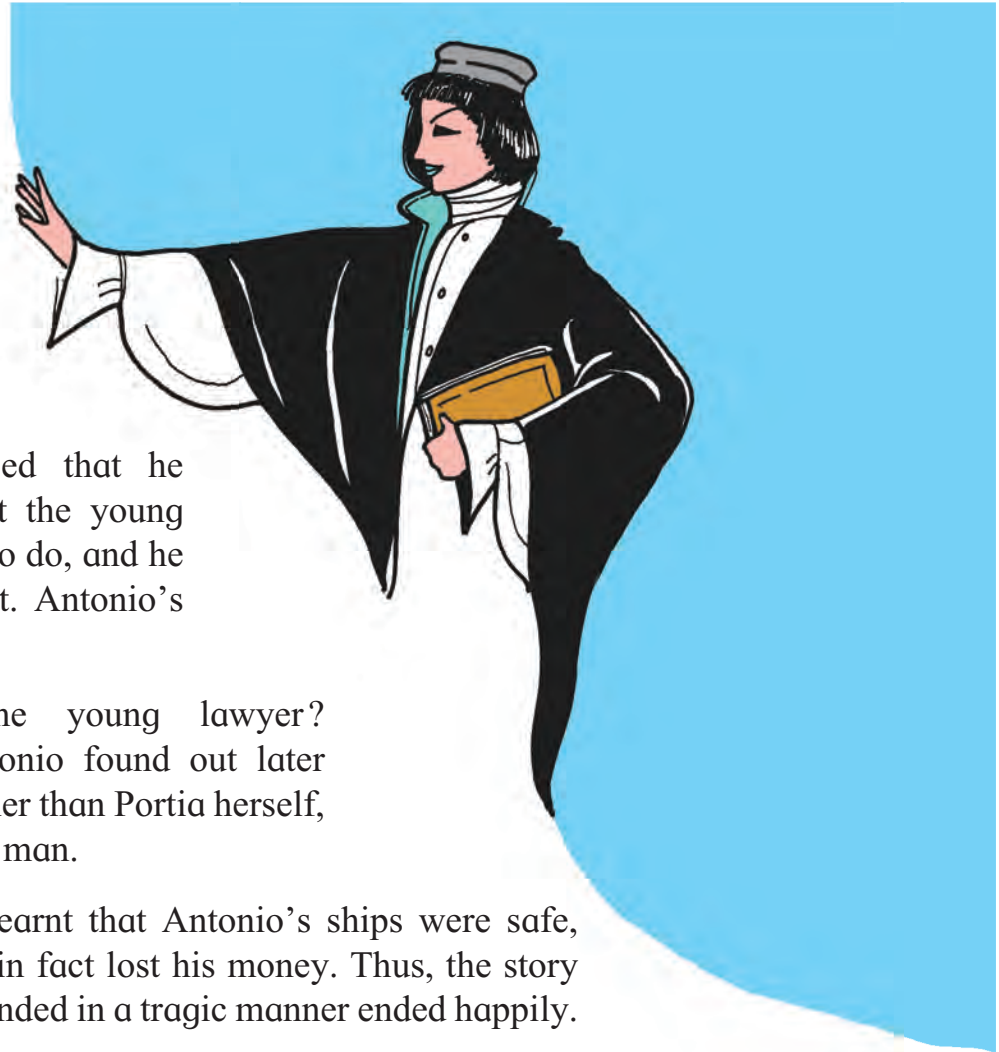
When Bassanio and Portia heard all this, they rushed back to Venice. Portia told Bassanio to pay Shylock twice the amount to save Antonio. But Shylock was adamant. He demanded only a pound of Antonio's flesh.

Everyone in the court, including the Duke, felt that Shylock's demand was inhuman. The Duke asked Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio but Shylock was not ready to do so. He felt that Antonio and others had treated him badly before, and he wanted revenge.

Just then, a young lawyer entered the court. He said that he would fight Antonio's case. He asked Antonio whether he had agreed to Shylock's condition. Antonio said that he had agreed.

Then the young lawyer requested Shylock to show mercy, though the law was on Shylock's side. The lawyer pleaded that mercy is a quality of God himself. When a person shows mercy to someone else, they are both blessed. Mercy was more valuable than a king's crown. But all this had no effect on Shylock.

The young lawyer then said that the law allowed Shylock to take a pound of flesh, and he could do that. At the same time, the lawyer warned that while cutting off the flesh, Shylock should not shed even one drop of Antonio's blood. Also, he should cut exactly one pound of flesh – nothing less, nothing more. That would not be allowed by the law.



Shylock realised that he could not do what the young lawyer asked him to do, and he accepted his defeat. Antonio's life was saved.

Who was the young lawyer? Bassanio and Antonio found out later that it was none other than Portia herself, dressed as a young man.

Later, it was learnt that Antonio's ships were safe, and so he had not in fact lost his money. Thus, the story which could have ended in a tragic manner ended happily.

POINTERS

1. Say whether the following statements are true or false.
 - (a) The merchant ships brought spices and other treasures from India and other countries to Italy.
 - (b) Antonio had gone on a long voyage.
 - (c) Bassanio was very rich.
 - (d) Portia had many brothers and sisters.
 - (e) Portia's suitors chose the gold and silver caskets.
 - (f) Bassanio borrowed money from Shylock in Antonio's name.
 - (g) Shylock was not at all generous.
 - (h) Shylock demanded a pound of Antonio's flesh.
 - (i) Portia saved Antonio in the court of law.
 - (j) Antonio's ships were lost at sea.

2. Write a few lines about each character.
3. Write the following in short :
 - (1) The story of the three caskets.
 - (2) What the young lawyer pleaded.
 - (3) The events at the court.
4. Write the conditions that Portia put down to warn Shylock.
5. Find four words ending with ‘-ous’ from the story.
Can you add three more words ending with ‘-ous’ to this list ?
6. Read the following words. Write the words that are combined to make these words.
 - faraway ● nobleman ● whoever ● moneylender ● sometimes

Add ten more words to the list on your own. Each of the component words must be meaningful.
7. Read the following chains of words :
 - fortune - fortunate - fortunately - unfortunately
 - know - knowing - knowingly - unknowingly
 - amaze - amazing - amazingly
 - possible - impossible - impossibly
8. A letter or group of letters added to the front of a word to change its meaning and make a new word is called a prefix.
Examples : fortunately - **un**fortunately, agree - **dis**agree, possible - **im**possible, human - **in**human, legal - **il**legal
Add proper prefixes to the following words to make new words.
 - kind ● intelligent ● advantage ● happy ● allow ● safe
9. Find at least three sentences in the story which have modal verbs.
10. Visit a library : Read other tales from Shakespeare, for example, Julius Caesar, As You Like It, Macbeth and The Tempest.
11. Hold a mock trial for any one of the following offences. There should be a complainant, a defendant and lawyers to argue the case on behalf of them. The whole class can vote to pass the judgement. On what occasions will you plead for justice ? What punishment will you suggest ? When will you plead for mercy ?
 - (a) A very poor and honest servant has broken a vase while cleaning it. The vase was valuable and the employer liked it very much.
 - (b) A poor man stole some ornaments from a rich girl.
 - (c) A young man was injured in a road accident due to another man’s careless driving.

