

Act 1, Scene 1

[Venice, Italy. Antonio and his friends Salerio and Solanio are talking together]

Antonio: *[Sighing¹⁰]* I do not know why I am so sad. I am tired of feeling like this, and you say you are tired of it too. I don't know where this sadness came from, or what it is about. But it makes me go out of my mind, and I find it difficult to know what I want.

Salerio: Your mind is being thrown about on the seas. Your thoughts are out there with your merchant ships¹¹ as they sail like great men of the sea past the little boats that are thrown around in the water behind them.

Solanio: *[Nodding¹² in agreement]* Believe me, Antonio, if I had sent merchant ships carrying all my wealth off to sea, my thoughts would all be with them. I would pick grass all the time to see which way the wind was blowing. I would spend my hours looking at maps, trying to find safe places for my ships to go to. And anything that made me think of the dangers the ships were facing would make me feel miserable¹³.

Salerio: *[Interrupting¹⁴]* Each time I blew on my soup to cool it down, I would think about the damage a great wind can do at sea. If I saw sand, I would think of shallow¹⁵ waters, and imagine my ship lying on its side. And when I went to church, the stone walls would make me think of the dangerous rocks which might rip open the side of my ship, throwing its expensive cargo¹⁶ into the water. That cargo can be worth so much one moment, and worth nothing the next. I know the truth, Antonio: you are worried about your ships and the cargo they are carrying.

Antonio: *[Shaking his head]* Believe me, no. I am very lucky. My cargo is not all in one ship, or in one place. And my wealth does not depend totally on the success of this year's business. So that is not what makes me feel miserable.

Solanio: [*Laughing*] Then you must be in love.

Antonio: What nonsense!

Solanio: Not in love either? Well, then, let's say that you are sad because you are not happy. You could just as easily laugh and dance around, and say that you are happy because you are not sad. People are strange: some laugh like fools¹⁷ at things that are not funny at all, and others won't even smile at the funniest joke.

[*Enter Bassanio, Lorenzo, and Gratiano*]

Here come Bassanio, Gratiano, and Lorenzo. [*Taking Antonio's hand*] Goodbye, Antonio. We will leave you with better people than ourselves.

Salerio: [*Turning to go, with Solanio*] I would have stayed until I had cheered you up, if these friends had not arrived. But they will be more help to you.

Antonio: [*Kindly*] I think of you as great friends. I am sure that you need to go – I expect you have many things to do.

Salerio: [*Leaving*] Good day, my good lords¹⁸.

Bassanio: [*to Salerio and Solanio*] My good friends, when shall we get together for an evening of laughter? I haven't seen you for so long.

Salerio: Just tell us when, and we shall be there.

[*Exit Salerio and Solanio*]

Lorenzo: My lord Bassanio, you have found Antonio now, so Gratiano and I will leave you. But let's meet up at dinner time again.

Bassanio: I will not forget.

[*Lorenzo turns to go, but Gratiano is not ready to leave*]

Gratiano: You do not look well, lord Antonio. You worry about the world too much.

Antonio: I only think of the world as what it is, Gratiano: a stage¹⁹ where every man must play his part. And my part is a sad one.

Gratiano: Well, I shall play the fool. Happiness and laughter will cover my face with the lines of old age. I would rather have a stomach warmed with wine than a heart cooled by sorrow²⁰. Antonio, you are warm-blooded²¹ – you are not a statue made of stone. You shouldn't get up just to spend the day sleeping. You shouldn't turn yellow-skinned worrying about things that are not important. I love you, Antonio, and because of that I shall tell you something: Some men say nothing because they think that if they are silent, people will believe that they are wise²² and serious. But if you heard them speak, they would sound like fools. I'll tell you more about this another time. But don't use sadness to make foolish people think that you are wise. Come on, good Lorenzo. *[to Antonio]* Goodbye for now. I'll finish telling you about this after dinner.

Lorenzo: *[to Antonio and Bassanio]* We will see you at dinner time, then. I think I must be one of these silent wise men Gratiano talks about, because he never gives me a chance to speak!

Gratiano: *[Laughing]* Go around with me for another two years, and you will start to forget the sound of your own voice!

Antonio: Goodbye, Gratiano – I'll try and do more talking for you.

Gratiano: Thank you: old, unmarried women are the only people who should stay silent!

[Exit Gratiano and Lorenzo]

Antonio: *[Watching them leave]* It is nice to have silence now, though!

Bassanio: *[Laughing]* Gratiano talks more nonsense than any man in Venice. Don't try and understand what he's talking about!

Antonio: *[Taking Bassanio's arm]* Now tell me about this lady you are interested in. You promised that you would tell me today.

Bassanio: Antonio, you know that I have used up the money that came to me from my family by living in a way that I could not really afford. I need to live more carefully now – and I do not have any problem with that. My main worry is that I want to pay back the debts²³ I made as a young man. You have given me the most, Antonio, in money and in love. Because of your great friendship I feel that I can tell you that what I am hoping to do. I wish to pay back all my debts.

Antonio: Good Bassanio, tell me about your plans. If they are as honourable²⁴ as you always are, then believe me – you shall have my money, myself, or anything I can give to help you.

Bassanio: [*Rather embarrassed*] When I was a young boy, I often used to shoot one of my toy arrows²⁵ too far, and lose it. So, to find it, I used to shoot another arrow the same way, watching more carefully this time. And by risking²⁶ them both, I often found them both. This is just a childish story to try to explain what I am about to say. I have borrowed a lot of money from you, and because I was a careless young man, that money is now lost. But if you can shoot another arrow the same way you shot the first, I will watch things carefully this time. And I feel sure that I will either find both of them or at least get the last one back, and then still be in debt to you for the first.

Antonio: You know me well, and you do not need to spend a lot of time making this long argument. You know that I would do anything I can for you. The fact that you question this hurts me more than if you lost everything I have. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I am ready.

Bassanio: In Belmont there is a lady whose father died, leaving her very rich. She is fair²⁷, and, better still, has many wonderful qualities²⁸. And when I met her, I believe from the way she looked at me that she liked me. Her name is Portia. Everyone knows what a fine woman she is: great men are travelling from all around the world to ask to marry her. Oh, Antonio, if only

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I had enough money to go and ask her to marry me! I have a strong feeling that I would be successful.

Antonio: You know that all my money is tied up in my ships at the moment. I do not have money I can give you now, or anything that I can sell. So go and see if you can borrow some money in my name in Venice. Borrow as much as you need to take you to Belmont to fair Portia. Go now, and ask who can give you some money. And I will do the same.

[Exit Bassanio and Antonio]