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978-1-108-00126-7 - The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines: In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 1

Mary Cowden Clarke

Excerpt

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## TALE I.

## PORTIA; THE HEIRESS OF BELMONT.

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“If two gods should play some heavenly match,  
 And on the wager lay two earthly women,  
 And Portia one, there must be something else  
 Pawn'd with the other; for the poor world  
 Hath not her fellow.”

*Merchant of Venice.*

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IN the University of Padua, were, once upon a time, two fellow-students, who entertained for each other a more than usually lively regard. This regard seemed to grow out of a peculiar sympathy of feeling, which sometimes exists between two lads of like age, though of dissimilar conditions; for one of these students was lively, ardent, and prosperous, while the other was calm, reserved, and very poor. But though Guido di Belmonte revelled in every good gift of fortune,—was the son of a rich Italian Count, and the indulged heir of a fond father, yet his prosperity, instead of injuring his nature and rendering him imperious and selfish, did but make him frank and generous, with a strong capability of enjoyment; while Bellario, the other student, the less favored of fortune,—being the child of a retired officer, possessed of little but his honorably-acquired wounds and an unblemished name,—found cheerfulness in a sedate reflective habit of mind, hope in the thought of achieving renown in the future employment of his talents, and enjoyment in the present epoch of study and intellectual culture. Thus it came that these two young men, each earnest in his enjoyment of student-life, found sympathy exist between them, attachment arise and strengthen, and a warmth of friendship ensue, which burnt with a steady and kindly glow while life endured.

During this youthful period of his life, there was one point on which Bellario's well-ordered mind and careful study did not lead him to a true wisdom. They might have taught him that poverty was no shame, that the

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practice of frugality and self-denial was a virtue rather than a blemish in a young man's conduct, and that it was due to the nobility of friendship to have no reserves upon such matters ; but the sensitive pride of the young collegian shrank from the avowal of his slender means, and the secrets of his penurious dwelling were coyly guarded from all eyes.

His friend Guido, in the plenitude of his own resources, had no suspicion of the real motive that held his fellow-student silent upon all that referred to home topics, and domestic relations ; and it was rather from a desire to enjoy Bellario's society during the pleasant season of holiday and relaxation, that he always invited him to spend the vacations at his father's seat of Belmont, than from any idea that he was thus procuring his friend an indulgence in luxury and refined entertainment, which he could never otherwise have an opportunity of enjoying. Delightful were the intervals thus spent together by the two young men. The sense of entire leisure, rendered doubly grateful by previous labour ; the freedom of action and open-air sports, after a long course of sedentary pursuits ; the repose of mind in contrast with its late strained exertion,—all these enjoyed amidst a scene of rural beauty, voluptuous retirement, and tasteful magnificence, pervading the domain and household of a wealthy nobleman, conspired to make these vacations seasons of unalloyed gratification to our two students. Arm-in-arm they would saunter up and down the avenue of lordly Belmont, willing many an hour in eager converse. Here, beneath the cool umbrage of those thick-spreading trees, secure from the noontide blaze of even an Italian sun, they would discourse pleasantly of their books, their courses of study past and to come, their treasured lore, their increasing thirst for knowledge with every freshly-acquired draught, their present zest in seeking, their future hope of profit. Here, too, in the scarce less radiant splendour of an Italian moonlight, would they speak confidently of heart-aspirations, of high-reaching schemes for distinguished manhood, virtuous life, rational happiness, and trusted immortality. The young Count, Guido, would dilate, in all the gay tenderness of an uncorrupted heart, upon the pure joys he proposed to himself, when he should at some future day bring a fair bride to share with him the beauties of this broad domain ; when he should dwell in loving communion with a womanly heart ; when he should

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emulate her in fostering kindness to the neighbouring poor ; when they should partake in the gentle duties of tending the helpless infancy, and implanting goodly principles in the youthful breasts of their offspring ; and when together they should live and die in sweet mutual help.

And in his turn, Bellario would playfully declare that he would live and die a bachelor, wooing and wedding no other bride than Justice, who was his professed mistress. That he meant to win honour and renown at the bar, and that he intended to make his name famous among the lawyers of his time. That such a celebrity as he aimed at, was only to be attained by the devotion of a life-long assiduity to his task, and that he therefore must early resolve upon excluding all claims of love upon his thoughts, dedicating them wholly and undividedly to ambition.

Time wore on ; the old Count of Belmont died, and young Guido inherited the paternal estate. Yet still he lingered at the University, unwilling to quit the sweets of study, and the associations of boyhood, or to curtail the season of youth by assuming the prerogatives of manhood. In the academic shades of learned Padua he still tarried, well pleased to remain constantly with his friend Bellario, who studied unremittingly to qualify himself for his intended profession.

Shortly after the time when Guido di Belmonte wore mourning for his father, Bellario's suit bore sable marks that he also had to deplore the loss of some relation ; but as he alluded in no way to the nature of his bereavement, so no allusion to the subject was ever made by his fellow-students ; not even by his friend, who was accustomed to observe silence on those points on which Bellario did not speak first. There was frank communion between the young men upon most themes of pleasant converse ; but, as before remarked, personal concerns and home relations were never referred to by the young law-student, being matter of his most scrupulous and proud reserve.

At length a season of vacation occurred, when, upon the young Count's usual invitation to Bellario, that he should accompany him to Belmont, the friend refused ; without, however, alleging any reason for this refusal beyond the bare fact of its being out of his power to indulge himself with the pleasure of going, on this occasion.

- " But why not, caro mio ?" urged Guido ; " you have surely no engage-

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ment so imperative as to interfere with the one so long understood between us,—that you should spend every vacation at Belmont, beautiful Belmont ; now all my own, but which will scarce seem so, without my friend to share its beauties with me.”

Bellarion wrung his hand gratefully, for all reply, merely repeating—“ I cannot ; do not urge me.”

“ But I must ; I will. How is it, that I, the lord of Belmont, am to be thwarted in my dearest wish ? Come, good Signor Avvocato, give me an infinity of reasons *why* you ‘ cannot.’ Let us have some of your special pleading here, to satisfy me. I know not *why* I should be contented with your sovereign ‘ cannot’ without farther explanation, any more than *why* you are prevented from coming to Belmont when we both wish it. Or do we indeed both wish it ?” added he, smiling in his friend’s face ; “ are you tired of Belmont ? Confess, if you are ; and we will exchange the shady avenue and solitary terrace of our country life, for the gay revelry of Venice—her masques, her feastings, her torch-light merry-making.”

Bellarion met his friend’s look with one as frank as his own :—“ Belmont is to me, as it has ever been—the scene of my best enjoyment. The disappointment is as great to me—nay, far greater—than it can be to you, my generous friend ; be assured, I need no urging, when my own desire to be with you pleads so powerfully ; but in this case, you yourself would be the first to ——” then checking himself, he briefly added, “ once more, I repeat ; believe me, I cannot.”

“ In *this* case ?” quickly repeated Guido ; in his eagerness forgetting how nearly he was transgressing the bounds of discretion in thus catechising his friend beyond what even such friendship as theirs might warrant :—“ In *this* case ? It is a point of honour, then ! A quarrel ? A duel ?” But seeing Bellarion shake his head, with a smile at his ardent questioning, he ran on with :—“ No, no, of course not ; had it been so, you would have had me for your second—but how then ? No friend has so good a right as myself to engross your company, and to no friend will I yield you—mind, to no —— But stay ;” added he, interrupting himself, as a sudden thought struck him ; “ though to no friend, no man, can I give you up, yet it may be, that ——”

He stopped ; and laying his hand on his friend’s sleeve, laughed out :—

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“ Ah ah ! Signor Avvocato, fairly caught ! So then, the stern anchorite, the bachelor student, the devoted bridegroom of the law, the destined spouse of justice, is actually the thrall of some fair lady ; and it is a mortal woman, after all, who has these claims upon your time, and prevents your going with me to Belmont. I cry you mercy, caro mio !”

Bellarion's face flushed crimson to his very brow. He no longer met his friend's look as before, yet he still smiled, though gravely ; and he grasped Guido's hand in a firm conclusive manner, as if he would close all further discussion. “ Be satisfied, dear friend ; it may not be.”

Guido di Belmonte warmly returned the pressure ; and his generous frank nature permitted no wounded feeling at his friend's reserve, to mingle with the regret with which he now withdrew his suit, and bade him adieu until they should meet again next college term. But on the following morning, while pursuing his solitary way towards Belmont, accompanied solely by a faithful attendant, who followed him on horseback, he could not help giving way to a feeling of mortification akin to anger, at being deprived of the company of his beloved friend Bellario on a journey, which had heretofore been so fruitful a source of delight to them both.

“ It is some whim, some fancied necessity, that thus detains him,” murmured the young Count to himself, as he rode onward ; “ Bellario is so scrupulous when he conceives some point of right to be in question, that he is ever ready to sacrifice inclination to duty. I know his unselfish heart, and I'll be bound it is some vexatious claim or other upon his time and aid, which is thus permitted to interfere with our pleasant holiday ! For after all, though he did change colour at my words, I do not believe it was a woman that he stays for. Had he yielded his thoughts to love, and forsworn law, he would not have kept so great a revolution in his heart a secret from his friend Guido. No, he is still constant to his old adoration for musty precedents, yellow shrivelled parchments, and time-honoured precepts of legislation, over which he will sit wrapt in enamoured contemplation, hour by hour, forgetful of all this bright world contains. I'll wager now, that it is in order to waste no hour apart from the prosecution of this bewitching pursuit, that he has thought it right to deny himself and me this holiday. He dropt some words, not long since, to the effect that his pro-

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gress did not keep pace with his desires. How came I to forget this, when I besought him yesterday? I did not urge him with sufficient warmth. I have a great mind to turn back, and see if I cannot plead with better effect. He must not, ought not to shut himself up during this charming time. He will be ill, or moped to death, with his absurd scruples and notions. Duty, indeed! It is his duty to enjoy his holiday—to come and pay seasonable homage to all-bounteous nature, to revel in her beauteous gifts, to inhale the pure free air, to bask in the glorious sunshine, to ride forth joyously—to come with me to Belmont, in short!—I will return, and entreat him once more, to do himself and me that right!”

As he concluded his reverie, Guido turned his horse's head in the direction whence he had just come; but he now proceeded at a very different pace from the one which he had previously allowed the steed to take. Then it had been slow, and accordant with the rider's mind, all unwilling to pursue his solitary journey; now it was alert, eager, and bounding forwards on the way to Padua,—to his friend Bellario.

On reaching the University, he hastily dismounted, throwing the rein to his attendant, bidding him wait, while he went to seek one of the heads of the college, who might inform him where to seek his fellow-student, who by this time he knew would have returned home. The professor mused a moment, when the young nobleman made the enquiry; but presently said:—“Bellario has always made a secret of his abode, praying me not to let it be generally known; but this prohibition could not be meant to extend to you, Count Guido, who are, I know, his bosom-friend. It is in the Strada del Popolo,” added he, indicating a mean suburban street, leading out of the city, and describing accurately the house where Bellario dwelt. The young man paid little heed to the former portion of the professor's speech, in his eagerness to learn the main point, the direction of his friend's dwelling-place; having obtained which, he took a hasty leave, and set forth on his search, bidding his attendant, Balthazar, saddle another horse, and bring it round with his own, to a certain spot where he would meet him, and proceed thence to Belmont once more, in company with his friend, whose acquiescence in the plan, he now felt confident he should gain. So sanguine is youth; so ardent in affection was Guido di Belmonte.

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He readily found his way to the Strada del Popolo, and as readily distinguished the house indicated to him by the professor. He was slightly struck by its lowly appearance, but no otherwise than as unworthy to contain so noble a being as his friend, and merely as an additional reason for inducing him to exchange its unattractive precincts for a more congenial sojourn with himself at Belmont. He stepped forward to put aside the dark heavy curtain, which hung in the doorway, according to Italian custom, to exclude the noontide heat; but he paused on the threshold, struck with what he beheld. He saw his friend seated at a table strewn with books and papers, one of which he held in his hand, while over the back of his chair, leaned a young girl of exquisite beauty; who, with one arm around Bellario's neck, in the other hand held a pen, with the feather of which she traced the lines on the paper he held, while her cheek closely touched that of the young law-student, as they together scanned the document. So engrossed were they with its perusal, that no idea of Guido's presence reached them; and so absorbed was he in the contemplation of this unexpected vision, that he allowed some minutes to elapse, ere he became conscious of his intrusion, or made any movement to announce his being there. Many conflicting feelings rushed through his heart as he stood gazing; the paramount one of which, was admiration for the surpassing loveliness of the young girl whom he found in such close companionship with his friend. The arm which lay across Bellario's shoulders, was white and polished, with a rounded grace of outline that would have charmed a sculptor; the slender waist and bended figure were so harmoniously proportioned, that the garment of humblest stuff which she wore, could nowise conceal their native elegance of beauty; the head was classically shaped, and compactly braided with smooth raven tresses, surmounting a brow lustrous with simple purity and intellectual dignity; while the face that so lovingly neighboured that of Bellario, could boast not only delicately-formed features, but an expression radiant with gentle goodness.

Amid the confusion of thoughts which held the young Count motionless, was one which prompted him to wonder how those downcast eyes,—now veiled with their rich lashes as they remained bent upon the paper,—would look when they were raised; and to speculate upon the appeal those lips

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would make when parted in speech, even now so eloquent in their rosy silence.

He was startled from his contemplation, by the fulfilment of his wish. The eyes were suddenly raised ; but he scarcely beheld their soft beauty, ere the look of surprise they wore, recalled him to a sense of his embarrassing position as an unwarranted intruder.

The slight ejaculation of amazement that escaped her lips as she beheld the stranger, caused Bellario to look up also, and in another instant the fellow-students stood confronting each other with mutual confusion and embarrassment.

Bellario's cheek glowed partly from surprise, partly from the stings of his old proud sensitiveness on the score of his poverty, now so completely and unexpectedly betrayed to the eyes of his friend, and he stood without power to utter a word ; while Guido, in the perplexity of contending emotions, muttered a few half-articulate expressions of having returned to ask for some book he had forgotten, a few more of apology for having unwittingly infringed their privacy, and then hastily withdrew.

He hurried to the spot where he had appointed Balthazar to meet him ; and flinging himself on horseback, he pursued his way to Belmont in a perturbation of mind, he had rarely before experienced.

His ardent nature suffered much beneath the check its affections had received. His generosity would not suffer him to reflect upon his friend for having withheld this secret from him ; but a sense of disappointment and chilled hope keenly beset him, and a painful surmise of his own unworthiness to inspire Bellario with as strong an attachment as his own, agitated his mind, and took the place of the blessed unmistrustful serenity of friendship which had till now formed his chief happiness.

“He is so infinitely my superior,” thought Guido, in the more than candour of a generous heart, ever ready to exalt the beloved object even at the expense of self-humiliation and blame, “that it is perhaps presumptuous to hope he could share his every thought with me, as I would with him. Entire confidence subsists between congenial minds—and I know well how unequal ours are in native power and intellectual wealth. But a loving appreciation of his high qualities might have substituted my own deficiency



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in the like endowments ; and my zeal should have supplied my lack of merit. Had he but frankly told me that he was married ! That he could not leave his new-made wife to come with me to Belmont ! How readily would my sympathy for him have admitted the plea ! How ungrudgingly should I then have yielded his society ! How my interest in his happiness would have prompted me to rejoice in this addition to his felicity—to congratulate him on this new joy ! Had he but told me that he was married !”

This last aspiration was still the burthen of his thought. It haunted him with its perpetual recurrence, as he wandered alone beneath the trees of that avenue where he had spent so many happy hours with his friend. Until at length the oft-recurring idea was followed by another—a question—that smote upon his heart strangely. “Had he indeed told me that he was married to that fair creature !—How then ? Would this intelligence have really given me content ? Could I have yielded my friend joyfully to her—she to him ? Did not rather the few moments in which I beheld her, serve but to fill me with unwonted emotion, to the nigh forgetfulness of my friend, and my errand to him ? Might not the too frequent contemplation of her beauty, and a nearer acquaintance with the gentle qualities that doubtless consort with such outward perfection, end by inspiring me with feelings no less treacherous to friendship than destructive to my own peace ? Perhaps after all I should rejoice rather than regret that Bellario did not impart to me the existence of this tie, or own that wedded love had had power to win him from his old vows of lawyerly celibacy and devoted friendship. So that his happiness is secured, why should I repine ?”

In such unselfish thoughts as these, did Guido di Belmonte seek to console himself for the interruption his course of friendship had sustained ; and it is not to be doubted but that he derived better comfort from such a train of reflection, than he could have done from an indulgence in resentment or unworthy suspicion. A noble heart finds no relief in reproach ; no solace in distrust or injurious belief of those it loves. And thus the impulses of a generous mind act in liberal reversion ; like the earth's moisture distilled by genial warmth, they redescend in wholesome showers, invigorating and refreshing the soil whence they originally emanate.

Not many hours had elapsed since the young Count's arrival at Belmont ;

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and he was still lingering in the avenue, wooing a sense of returning calm, that was beginning to steal over him, in place of his late agitation, when he was awakened from his reverie by a hasty footstep, and in a few moments more he found himself clasped in the arms of his friend.

“Bellario !” he exclaimed in amazement.

“Yes, Bellario ;” returned the young law-student, “Bellario, your unworthy friend, come to avow his error, and to solicit indulgence.”

He then made confession of his weakness. He owned how he had always shrunk from a betrayal of his poverty ; the foolish pride this had engendered ; the habit of reserve it had induced, so unjust to warmth of friendship such as theirs ; and the apparent unkindness it had beguiled him into, by the late refusal to accompany his friend to Belmont during the vacation.

“Any other but yourself, my dear Guido, might have taken offence at so pertinacious a refusal from so unexplained a cause. But knowing your generosity of character, I was sure that you yourself would be the first to yield the pleasure of our proposed holiday together, if you were aware that I gave up the indulgence, in order not to leave Portia in solitude. I overlooked the circumstance, that the total ignorance of my home interests in which my own habitual reserve had suffered you to remain, did not admit of your sympathising with the desire I have felt, ever since my father's death, of spending as much time as possible with her. It is lonely enough, poor thing, when I am at college ; but my first vacation, since his loss, I resolved should be devoted to her.”

“You shall return to her at once ! A horse shall be saddled, to take you back to Padua immediately ! I will not keep you another hour, my friend ;” said the impetuous Guido.

“I knew this would be your feeling,” replied Bellario ; “and yet my own folly might have occasioned me to lose the pleasure of hearing you express it. However, it is to Portia herself that I owe the present happiness of explanation. Her surprise this morning at your sudden appearance on our poor threshold, drew from me immediately after your as abrupt departure, a full account of yourself, of the friendship that subsists between us, and of the probable cause of your seeking me there. Her interest in the relation,