

THE POUND OF FLESH AND THE QUICK-WITTED LAWYER

A moneylender suing a man who was unable to repay him has had his case turned against him, and now faces jail himself.

Antonio had approached Shylock for a loan of \$300,000 on behalf of his best friend Bassanio, the court heard last week. A wealthy importer, Antonio would have been able to give Bassanio the money himself, had his cash not been tied up in several shipments.

So he turned to Shylock, who runs a private moneylending business here in Venice, for a loan. Shylock agreed, and even said he would not charge interest for the service.

This should have set off alarm bells, some say, because Shylock had been known to complain about Antonio lending money to other people without interest. His generosity hurt Shylock's business, because fewer people would go to the latter for loans, not wanting to pay his high rates of interest.

At the time, however, Shylock's offer to Antonio seemed like an act of kindness.

"I'm sure you'll be able to pay me back on time," the moneylender said. "If you don't, you can give me, oh, say, a pound of flesh?"

Antonio signed a contract agreeing to this, thinking: "It will never come to that. Once my ships get back, I'll be able to help Bassanio repay the loan."

Last week, however, rough seas in the Atlantic Ocean delayed the vessels' return. Suddenly, the moneylender decided he wanted his money back immediately. Of course, Antonio could not pay. So Shylock took him to court, demanding the pound of flesh promised.

Since then, the case has been on everyone's lips. Enterprising hawkers have even been selling "Save Antonio" T-shirts outside the courthouse.

The lawyer defending Antonio was Portia, Bassanio's clever fiancée and heiress to a million-dollar luncheon meat business.

In court, she begged Shylock for mercy. "Show kindness to others, because this is what we want others to show us," she said.

But he would not be moved. "Look at the contract. I want us to follow the letter of the law," he said repeatedly.

Portia said she would repay the loan herself, offering Shylock \$600,000 — twice the sum owed.

But he insisted on having what he was due under the contract, which stated that he could take a pound (about 450g) of Antonio's flesh from near the heart.

Things did not look good for Antonio. But then Portia had a brainwave. She told Shylock he could take the flesh, but asked if he had a doctor on hand to stop the bleeding when he cut Antonio. "The contract says you may have a pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood. If you spill any of his blood, you will be committing a crime," she said.

Backed into a corner, Shylock said he would accept the \$600,000 after all. But the offer was no longer on the table.

The defense now says it will launch its own lawsuit against Shylock for trying to kill Antonio, as cutting out the pound of flesh would almost certainly have done.

The case against Antonio has been dismissed, but as everyone left the courthouse yesterday, it was Shylock's turn to beg for mercy. "If I am sued, I will be ruined. Please don't do it. After all, I am just like all of you — I get angry, I get sick, I bleed like everyone else."

Antonio is reportedly considering letting Shylock off the hook.

If he does not, however, the hawkers have already printed up dozens of "Save Shylock" T-shirts for sale.

BACKGROUND

The Merchant Of Venice is another play by William Shakespeare. The story is set in 16th century Italy.

In it, Bassanio needs a lot of money so he can travel to see Portia and win her hand in marriage.

This he finally does after passing a test set by her wealthy father. All suitors have to choose from three boxes — one gold, one silver and one lead. Bassanio is the only one who picks the humble lead box, showing that he values more than just outward appearances.

Portia then rushes to help Antonio win his case against Shylock.

But because only men could be lawyers at the time, she disguises herself as a man so she can defend him in court — and no one is the wiser till the end. Sound familiar?

FAB VOCAB

SUING

Taking someone to court

IMPORTER

Someone who brings in goods from abroad for sale

INTEREST

The charge for borrowing money. For example, if you borrow \$10 from me and I charge you \$1 in interest, when you pay me back, you have to give me \$11

CONTRACT

A legal agreement

ENTERPRISING

Imaginative or willing to try new things

LETTER OF THE LAW

The exact wording of the law

BRAINWAVE

A sudden, clever idea

ON THE TABLE

Up for discussion

DISMISSED

When a case is removed from court

OFF THE HOOK

To let someone get away with something, or free them from responsibility for it

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