

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

A STORY

BASED ON THE PLAY BY

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1

Long ago in the city of Athens, there was a cruel law that gave a father the power to choose his daughter's husband—and if the daughter refused, she could be put to death. This law was so cruel that no one could remember it ever being enforced. But one day, a cranky old man named Egeus came running to the court of the leader of Athens, Duke Theseus.

Egeus dragged behind him his daughter, Hermia. And closely behind followed two young men, Lysander and Demetrius. Both wanted to marry Hermia. Hermia, however, wanted to marry

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Lysander. But her father demanded that she marry Demetrius.

vexation:
the state of being
worried and annoyed

Bowing to Duke Theseus, old Egeus cried out, “Full of **vexation** come I, with complaint against my child, my daughter Hermia. I have chosen Demetrius to be Hermia’s husband. But Lysander has stolen her affection. If she will not obey me and marry Demetrius, then I claim the law of Athens against my daughter! She must go to Demetrius in marriage, or to her death!”

As Duke Theseus heard these angry claims, he pressed the hand of the tall woman standing by his side, the warrior queen Hippolyta. Theseus and Hippolyta were preparing to be married in a few days. The duke wished that Egeus would just go away, but he knew that he had to deal with the matter. And he also knew that he could not ignore the old law.

“What say you, Hermia?” asked Theseus. “Demetrius is a worthy gentleman.”

“So is Lysander,” replied Hermia.

Lysander cried out, “I am beloved of

beauteous Hermia. But Demetrius **pledged** his love to our friend, Helena. And she still **dotes upon** him.”

pledged: promised

dotes upon: adores; shows excessive affection and attention

“Your grace,” said Hermia to the duke, “what is the worst that will happen to me if I refuse to wed Demetrius?”

The duke sighed. “The law is the law, and I cannot change it,” he said. “You must either marry Demetrius or be put to death. Or,” the duke added, seeking some less terrible **option**, “you must live alone and apart, as a nun.”

option: choice

A short while later, when Hermia was alone with Lysander, she buried her head on his shoulder and cried, “**Alas**, I must choose love by another’s eyes!”

alas: an expression of sadness

Lysander stroked her hair and said, “The course of true love never did run smooth.” Then he smiled—he had thought of a plan! “Hear me, Hermia,” he said. “I have an aunt who lives miles away from Athens. If we go there, then the cruel law cannot reach us. Tomorrow night, sneak away from your father’s house and meet me in the wood

just outside the city.” From there, he explained, they would make their way to his aunt’s house and then get married.

“My good Lysander!” cried Hermia, wrapping her arms around him. “Tomorrow truly will I meet you in the wood, where I have sometimes walked among the flowers with my dear friend Helena.”

Just then, who should appear but Helena? She saw her friends with their arms around each other, and she sighed. Oh, she thought, if only Demetrius loved me as Lysander loves Hermia!

“Fair Helena!” cried Hermia and ran to her friend. Hermia quickly told Helena about Lysander’s plan to sneak away from Athens and get married. “And in the wood,” said Hermia, “where

you and I have rested on sweet **primrose beds**, Lysander and I will meet tomorrow night. **Farewell**, sweet playfellow. Pray thou for us.

primrose beds: beds of pale, yellow flowers

farewell: goodbye

grant thee: give you

And good luck **grant thee** thy Demetrius!”

As Helena waved farewell to her friends, who were walking away hand in hand, she began

to think. Her thoughts took a foolish and jealous turn. "Throughout Athens," she said to herself, "I am thought as fair as Hermia. But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so. He dotes on Hermia.

flight: running away

Though once, before he looked on her, he swore that he was only mine. I will go tell him of fair Hermia's **flight!**"

And so Helena rushed to tell Demetrius about Hermia and Lysander's secret plan to sneak away to get married. For this, she thought, Demetrius might love me again! And just as the **fickle** Demetrius was likely to go to the wood in search of Hermia, Helena was more than likely to follow him.

fickle: changeable in affection or interests

2

Elsewhere in Athens, a group of workmen gathered at the home of Peter Quince, a carpenter. They were planning to put on a play as part of the festivities to celebrate the wedding of Theseus to Hippolyta in a few days.

"Now," said Peter Quince to his fellow

workmen, “our play is called *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*.” Quince, who had taken on the duties of a director, then proceeded to name the parts each man would play.

To a weaver named Nick Bottom—who loved to act though he had little talent for it—Quince assigned the part of the romantic hero, Pyramus. To young Francis Flute, Quince gave the role of Thisbe.

“What is Thisbe?” asked Flute. “A wandering knight?”

“No,” said Quince. “Thisbe is the lady that Pyramus must love.”

“Nay!” cried Flute, as the other workmen laughed and hooted. “Let me not play a woman! I have a beard coming.”

Bottom leaped up and cried, “Let me play Thisbe too!”

“No,” replied Quince. “You must play Pyramus. And Flute, you Thisbe.”

As Bottom sat down with a disappointed sigh, Quince assigned the remaining parts. But when

lamentable: sorrowful

Pyramus and Thisbe:
the main characters in
a tragic love story from
ancient mythology

Quince gave the part of the lion to a carpenter named Snug, Bottom could not **restrain** himself. In great excitement he jumped up and cried, “Let me play the lion too! I will roar, that I will make the duke say, ‘Let him roar again. Let him roar again!’”

restrain: keep under control

“You can play no part but Pyramus!” snapped Quince.

Bottom turned away in a huff and stared at the wall. Quince could see that he would need to **coax** Bottom back into the play. “Of course you know,” said Quince to Bottom, “that Pyramus is a sweet-faced man, a most lovely gentleman-like man. Therefore you must play Pyramus.”

coax: to persuade through flattery

“Well,” said Bottom, pretending some hesitation—although in fact he was bursting with eagerness to begin—“I will undertake it!”

“Tomorrow night,” said Quince, “we will rehearse by moonlight. Let us meet in the wood, a mile without the town”—the very same wood, though the workmen did not know it, where Hermia and Lysander had agreed to meet.