Two Gentlemen Of Verona

Edith Nesbit (Story from Shakespeare)

Only one of them was really a gentleman, as you will discover later. Their names were Valentine and Proteus. They were friends, and lived at Verona, a town in northern Italy. Valentine was happy in his name because it was that of the patron saint of lovers; it is hard for a Valentine to be fickle or mean. Proteus was unhappy in his name, because it was that of a famous shape-changer, and therefore it encouraged him to be a lover at one time and a traitor at another.

One day, Valentine told his friend that he was going to Milan. "I'm not in love like you," said he, "and therefore I don't want to stay at home."

Proteus was in love with a beautiful yellow-haired girl called Julia, who was rich, and had no one to order her about. He was, however, sorry to part from Valentine, and he said, "If ever you are in danger tell me, and I will pray for you." Valentine then went to Milan with a servant called Speed, and at Milan he fell in love with the Duke of Milan's daughter, Silvia.

When Proteus and Valentine parted Julia had not acknowledged that she loved Proteus. Indeed, she had actually torn up one of his letters in the presence of her maid, Lucetta. Lucetta, however, was no simpleton, for when she saw the pieces she said to herself, "All she wants is to be annoyed by another letter." Indeed, no sooner had Lucetta left her alone than Julia repented of her tearing, and placed between her dress and her heart the torn piece of paper on which Proteus had signed his name. So by tearing a letter written by Proteus she discovered that she loved him. Then, like a brave, sweet girl, she wrote to Proteus, "Be patient, and you shall marry me."

Delighted with these words Proteus walked about, flourishing Julia's letter and talking to himself.

"What have you got there?" asked his father, Antonio.

"A letter from Valentine," fibbed Proteus.

"Let me read it," said Antonio.

"There is no news," said deceitful Proteus; "he only says that he is very happy, and the Duke of Milan is kind to him, and that he wishes I were with him."

This fib had the effect of making Antonio think that his son should go to Milan and enjoy the favors in which Valentine basked. "You must go to-morrow," he decreed. Proteus was dismayed. "Give me time to get my outfit ready." He was met with the promise, "What you need shall be sent after you."

It grieved Julia to part from her lover before their engagement was two days' old. She gave him a ring, and said, "Keep this for my sake," and he gave her a ring, and they kissed like two who intend to be true till death. Then Proteus departed for Milan.

Meanwhile Valentine was amusing Silvia, whose grey eyes, laughing at him under auburn hair, had drowned him in love. One day she told him that she wanted to write a pretty letter to a gentleman whom she thought well of, but had no time: would he write it? Very much did Valentine dislike writing that letter, but he did write it, and gave it to her coldly. "Take it back," she said; "you did it unwillingly."

"Madam," he said, "it was difficult to write such a letter for you."

"Take it back," she commanded; "you did not write tenderly enough."

Valentine was left with the letter, and condemned to write another; but his servant Speed saw that, in effect, the Lady Silvia had allowed Valentine to write for her a love-letter to Valentine's own self. "The joke," he said, "is as invisible as a weather-cock on a steeple." He meant that it was very plain; and he went on to say exactly what it was: "If master will write her love-letters, he must answer them."

On the arrival of Proteus, he was introduced by Valentine to Silvia and afterwards, when they were alone, Valentine asked Proteus how his love for Julia was prospering.

"Why," said Proteus, "you used to get wearied when I spoke of her."

"Aye," confessed Valentine, "but it's different now. I can eat and drink all day with nothing but love on my plate and love in my cup."

"You idolize Silvia," said Proteus.

"She is divine," said Valentine.

"Come, come!" remonstrated Proteus.

"Well, if she's not divine," said Valentine, "she is the queen of all women on earth."

"Except Julia," said Proteus.

"Dear boy," said Valentine, "Julia is not excepted; but I will grant that she alone is worthy to bear my lady's train."

"Your bragging astounds me," said Proteus.

But he had seen Silvia, and he felt suddenly that the yellow-haired Julia was black in comparison. He became in thought a villain without delay, and said to himself what he had never said before--"I to myself am dearer than my friend."

It would have been convenient for Valentine if Proteus had changed, by the power of the god whose name he bore, the shape of his body at the evil moment when he despised Julia in admiring Silvia. But his body did not change; his smile was still affectionate, and Valentine confided to him the great secret that Silvia had now promised to run away with him. "In the pocket of this cloak," said Valentine, "I have a silken rope ladder, with hooks which will clasp the window-bar of her room."

Proteus knew the reason why Silvia and her lover were bent on flight. The Duke intended her to wed Sir Thurio, a gentlemanly noodle for whom she did not care a straw.

Proteus thought that if he could get rid of Valentine he might make Silvia fond of him, especially if the Duke insisted on her enduring Sir Thurio's tiresome chatter. He therefore went to the Duke, and said, "Duty before friendship! It grieves me to thwart my friend Valentine, but your Grace should know that he intends to-night to elope with your Grace's daughter." He begged the Duke not to tell Valentine the giver of this information, and the Duke assured him that his name would not be divulged.

Early that evening the Duke summoned Valentine, who came to him wearing a large cloak with a bulging pocket.

"You know," said the Duke, "my desire to marry my daughter to Sir Thurio?"

"I do," replied Valentine. "He is virtuous and generous, as befits a man so honored in your Grace's thoughts."

"Nevertheless she dislikes him," said the Duke. "She is a peevish, proud, disobedient girl, and I should be sorry to leave her a penny. I intend, therefore, to marry again."

Valentine bowed.

"I hardly know how the young people of to-day make love," continued the Duke, "and I thought that you would be just the man to teach me how to win the lady of my choice."

"Jewels have been known to plead rather well," said Valentine.

"I have tried them," said the Duke.

"The habit of liking the giver may grow if your Grace gives her some more."

"The chief difficulty," pursued the Duke, "is this. The lady is promised to a young gentleman, and it is hard to have a word with her. She is, in fact, locked up."

"Then your Grace should propose an elopement," said Valentine. "Try a rope ladder."

"But how should I carry it?" asked the Duke.

"A rope ladder is light," said Valentine; "You can carry it in a cloak."

"Like yours?"

"Yes, your Grace."

"Then yours will do. Kindly lend it to me."

Valentine had talked himself into a trap. He could not refuse to lend his cloak, and when the Duke had donned it, his Grace drew from the pocket a sealed missive addressed to Silvia. He coolly opened it, and read these words: "Silvia, you shall be free to-night."

"Indeed," he said, "and here's the rope ladder. Prettily contrived, but not perfectly. I give you, sir, a day to leave my dominions. If you are in Milan by this time to-morrow, you die."

Poor Valentine was saddened to the core. "Unless I look on Silvia in the day," he said, "there is no day for me to look upon."

Before he went he took farewell of Proteus, who proved a hypocrite of the first order. "Hope is a lover's staff," said Valentine's betrayer; "walk hence with that."

After leaving Milan, Valentine and his servant wandered into a forest near Mantua where the great poet Virgil lived. In the forest, however, the poets (if any) were brigands, who bade the travelers stand. They obeyed, and Valentine made so good an impression upon his captors that they offered him his life on condition that he became their captain.

"I accept," said Valentine, "provided you release my servant, and are not violent to women or the poor."

The reply was worthy of Virgil, and Valentine became a brigand chief.

We return now to Julia, who found Verona too dull to live in since Proteus had gone. She begged her maid Lucetta to devise a way by which she could see him. "Better wait for him to return," said Lucetta, and she talked so sensibly that Julia saw it was idle to hope that Lucetta would bear the blame of any rash and interesting adventure. Julia therefore said that she intended to go to Milan and dressed like a page.

"You must cut off your hair then," said Lucetta, who thought that at this announcement Julia would immediately abandon her scheme.

"I shall knot it up," was the disappointing rejoinder.

Lucetta then tried to make the scheme seem foolish to Julia, but Julia had made up her mind and was not to be put off by ridicule; and when her toilet was completed, she looked as comely a page as one could wish to see.

Julia assumed the male name Sebastian, and arrived in Milan in time to hear music being performed outside the Duke's palace.

"They are serenading the Lady Silvia," said a man to her.

Suddenly she heard a voice lifted in song, and she knew that voice. It was the voice of Proteus. But what was he singing?

"Who is Silvia? what is she,

That all our swains commend her?

Holy, fair, and wise is she;

The heaven such grace did lend her

That she might admired be."

Julia tried not to hear the rest, but these two lines somehow thundered into her mind--

"Then to Silvia let us sing;

She excels each mortal thing."

Then Proteus thought Silvia excelled Julia; and, since he sang so beautifully for all the world to hear, it seemed that he was not only false to Julia, but had forgotten her. Yet Julia still loved him. She even went to him, and asked to be his page, and Proteus engaged her.

One day, he handed to her the ring which she had given him, and said, "Sebastian, take that to the Lady Silvia, and say that I should like the picture of her she promised me."

Silvia had promised the picture, but she disliked Proteus. She was obliged to talk to him because he was high in the favor of her father, who thought he pleaded with her on behalf of Sir Thurio. Silvia had learned from Valentine that Proteus was pledged to a sweetheart in Verona; and when he said tender things to her, she felt that he was disloyal in friendship as well as love.

Julia bore the ring to Silvia, but Silvia said, "I will not wrong the woman who gave it him by wearing it."

"She thanks you," said Julia.

"You know her, then?" said Silvia, and Julia spoke so tenderly of herself that Silvia wished that Sebastian would marry Julia.

Silvia gave Julia her portrait for Proteus, who would have received it the worse for extra touches on the nose and eyes if Julia had not made up her mind that she was as pretty as Silvia.

Soon there was an uproar in the palace. Silvia had fled.

The Duke was certain that her intention was to join the exiled Valentine, and he was not wrong.

Without delay he started in pursuit, with Sir Thurio, Proteus, and some servants.

The members of the pursuing party got separated, and Proteus and Julia (in her page's dress) were by themselves when they saw Silvia, who had been taken prisoner by outlaws and was now being led to their Captain. Proteus rescued her, and then said, "I have saved you from death; give me one kind look."

"O misery, to be helped by you!" cried Silvia. "I would rather be a lion's breakfast."

Julia was silent, but cheerful. Proteus was so much annoyed with Silvia that he threatened her, and seized her by the waist.

"O heaven!" cried Silvia.

At that instant there was a noise of crackling branches. Valentine came crashing through the Mantuan forest to the rescue of his beloved. Julia feared he would slay Proteus, and hurried to help her false lover. But he struck no blow, he only said, "Proteus, I am sorry I must never trust you more."

Thereat Proteus felt his guilt, and fell on his knees, saying, "Forgive me! I grieve! I suffer!"

"Then you are my friend once more," said the generous Valentine. "If Silvia, that is lost to me, will look on you with favor, I promise that I will stand aside and bless you both."

These words were terrible to Julia, and she swooned. Valentine revived her, and said, "What was the matter, boy?"

"I remembered," fibbed Julia, "that I was charged to give a ring to the Lady Silvia, and that I did not."

"Well, give it to me," said Proteus.

She handed him a ring, but it was the ring that Proteus gave to Julia before he left Verona.

Proteus looked at her hand, and crimsoned to the roots of his hair.

"I changed my shape when you changed your mind," said she.

"But I love you again," said he.

Just then outlaws entered, bringing two prizes--the Duke and Sir Thurio.

"Forbear!" cried Valentine, sternly. "The Duke is sacred."

Sir Thurio exclaimed, "There's Silvia; she's mine!"

"Touch her, and you die!" said Valentine.

"I should be a fool to risk anything for her," said Sir Thurio.

"Then you are base," said the Duke. "Valentine, you are a brave man. Your banishment is over. I recall you. You may marry Silvia. You deserve her."

"I thank your Grace," said Valentine, deeply moved, "and yet must ask you one more boon."

"I grant it," said the Duke.

"Pardon these men, your Grace, and give them employment. They are better than their calling."

"I pardon them and you," said the Duke. "Their work henceforth shall be for wages."

"What think you of this page, your Grace?" asked Valentine, indicating Julia.

The Duke glanced at her, and said, "I think the boy has grace in him."

"More grace than boy, say I," laughed Valentine, and the only punishment which Proteus had to bear for his treacheries against love and friendship was the recital in his presence of the adventures of Julia-Sebastian of Verona.