

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

William Shakespeare

SUMMARY

Helen heals the King of France, and the King grants her permission to marry Bertram, the man she loves. Bertram rejects her and leaves a list of tasks that she must do to have him acknowledge their marriage. She follows him to Italy, completes all the tasks, and Bertram accepts her as his wife.

ACT I

In the French province of Roussillon, the widowed Countess bids farewell to her son Bertram. Bertram is going to the court of the French King with his swaggering friend Paroles and the Lord Lafeu. Bertram leaves oblivious to the attentions of Helen, the orphan daughter of the Countess' celebrated physician. Helen has been brought up in his mother's household and has fallen in love with Bertram.

ACT II

The Countess allows Helen to go to court and try her hand at curing the King's illness. Where others have failed, she succeeds, and as a reward, the King asks her to choose a husband from among his wards. (Who else would she choose but Bertram?) Bertram sees the alliance as beneath him. After the marriage ceremony, he runs away and plans to join the wars in Italy with Paroles.

ACT III

He writes to Helen that he will not acknowledge their marriage until she can prove she wears his heirloom ring and carries his child. Helen returns home to Roussillon, but she does not give up. Instead, she soon leaves and, disguised as a pilgrim, follows Bertram to Florence. There, she befriends a widow and her daughter Diana. Meanwhile, Bertram has formed an obsession with Diana during his time in Italy. The soldiers jokingly trick Paroles into proving he is a coward, while Bertram makes intentions to sleep with Diana.

ACT IV

Diana plots to help Helen fulfil Bertram's impossible requests for marriage. Diana insists the meeting with Bertram must be in the dark, and a disguised Helen takes Diana's place. During the night, Bertram gives Helen his ring (thinking that she is Diana), and they conceive a child.

ACT V

Back at the French court, Helen is presumed dead in Roussillon due to her absence. Bertram returns to France, where his mother and Lafeu have arranged for Bertram to marry Lafeu's daughter. Bertram gives Lafeu, as a betrothal token, a ring that he had been given on his midnight meeting with Helen in Florence. The King and others recognize the ring to be one that the King had given to Helen on her marriage.

Before the situation can be resolved, Diana arrives at court with Bertram's ring and accuses him of seducing and then deserting her. Bertram denies her, but Lafeu withdraws his offer of his daughter, suspecting falsehood. The King orders Diana away to prison but stops when the widow brings in Helen to be a witness to Diana's story. The King and her friends recognize the pregnant Helen and welcome her. Diana acknowledges that the ring given to her by Bertram came from Helen. They also recognize that Helen is wearing Bertram's ring and carrying his child. She met both of his qualifications for accepting the marriage. Bertram asks pardon and accepts his wife. The King allows Diana, in recompense for her troubles, to choose a husband among his courtiers and promises her a dowry. The play ends as everyone goes in together to talk over their stories.