THE MERCHANT OF VENICE
A STUDY

J. MACMILLAN BROWN, M.A.

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A STUDY

J. MACMILLAN BROWN, M.A.
(Professor of English Literature, Canterbury College).

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J. MACMILLAN BROWN.
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THE PLACE OF

"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"

AMONGST THE COMEDIES.
EVERY great literary production takes its atmosphere from the period that it belongs to. The author has his mind open to the play of larger circumstance. His book is great first because his soul has risen to its climax of greatness, but almost as much because he has drawn from his age all that is greatly distinctive of it in addition to what will appeal to all ages. That which has no power of touching the wide heart of humanity must die with its time. But none the less must a great book have its local and temporal elements, its power of addressing the men and women amongst whom it is written; for it must have concrete form, as being the product of imagination, and into imagination the individual life and feelings pass; no more can there be a human being all spirit, without flesh and bones and tissue, than an imaginative book without the features of its time to give it form. But a great book has a soul that is kin with all times; it has drawn from its age the elements that are the noblest and most universal in their affinities. Its author has stood on an eminence and watched the passions of his fellowmen come and go, rage or die out as but a part of the vast scene of life; he has known them and taken his share in them, and he still feels them move in his own veins; but he has seen their relation to the everlasting spirit that stirs the heart of humanity, he has seen their place in the scheme of existence and felt their comparative insignificance. Thus he can use them without letting them master his mind or purpose, without making him their partisan.
The Iliad and Odyssey of Homer tingle with the life that was just vanishing when they were written, and yet they give us so much of the human nature all men have that their interest never passes away. The tragedies of Æschylus were part of the history of their time; but they have the thews and limbs of the giant spirit of man in them; only a tragic struggle could have produced them; but the struggle represented that which must recur as long as the human race is human. The Divine Comedy of Dante is full of the petty strifes and jealousies and hatreds of his day; but round them floats a mist of human tears and a sound as of the sorrows of the whole world; his age had in it much of what the future was to be, most of the enduring elements of human tragedy and joy. The "Gargantua" of Rabelais teems with ephemeral jests that are long dead and gone: but there are in it both mockery and serious thought that will live till man is perfect. The "Paradise Lost" is saturated with the spirit of Puritanism; but it is Puritanism risen to its noblest when it feels it must pass away as a political and social power and retire into the hearts and lives of men; it contains the sublimer elements of the unending struggle between evil and good. The "Faust" of Goethe expresses the sceptical superiority to common beliefs and partialities that marked his own life and time in Germany; but it also embodies the everlasting problem of desire and its nemesis and the passionate detachment from creed that belongs to all revolutionary times; it gathers up the universal lessons of the French Revolution and writes them in letters of fire upon the records of human history. All the long-lived books of imagination have thus their roots down through the strata of their own age into those that rest upon the foundations of the world.

And the greater number of Shakespeare's plays are of this kind. Even his comedies, embodying though they do but the lighter phases of his life and spirit, have this quality of universality, whilst at the same time fitting the atmosphere of the period. For they were written when Elizabethan England had risen to its greatest and most successful effort. The earlier years of the reign were lowered in tone by the persecutions that had preceded and by the rancour that was sure to spring from the reaction against them. By the
middle of it Englishmen had begun to feel courageous and
proud of their little land. For from the coast towns the
"seadogs" were venturing out like their Scandinavian and
Saxon forefathers into foreign seas in quest of adventure
and wealth, while inland peace and protection had begun
to let men settle and prosper in their pursuits. "Merry
England," the myth of ages past, was coming nearer to
realisation than ever? She stood erect and bold, ready for
all fortunes that came, full of the daring blood we attribute
to youth and early manhood, masterful if not wise, passionate
if not completely at ease, bright and hopeful if not yet
happy. But she rose to her greatest in the effort to repel
the Spanish Armada. For many years she had heard of
the threat and the preparation; echoes had reached her
from Spain of the mustering of troops and the clink of
armour and the building of ships. It seemed as if the
little nation in the seagirt land were about to be
annihilated by this mighty crusade. But she did not lose
heart; all along the coast she kept training and exercising
her powers for the contest. And at last in 1588 the mighty
bolt of war that had been forging for so many years was
hurled at her shores and was marred only by the skill and
energy of the "seadogs" and crushed upon her rocks.

It was in the joy of that victory that Shakespeare began
to write; for ten years the jubilation echoed and re-echoed
through the land, and never stood England more erect or
confident of her powers, never more joyous or manly. And
London had grown the heart of her, and through it all her
blood coursed in wild reaction. Never was a city more full
of the sense of life and its pleasures, more ready for all that
expressed the delights of existence. It is little wonder that
Shakespeare spent the first period of his authorship on
English history and comedy; the patriotism of the period
incited him to the one, its joyousness to the other. His
own transition from youth into full manhood, containing as
it did both youthful hope and manly confidence, corres-
ponded with the climax of the Elizabethan period. There
is not in this the wisdom or tolerance that manifests itself
in every line of his tragedies and romances. Youth has
difficulty in appreciating the truth that half of life is gloom
and sorrow or in allowing for the merits or weaknesses of
others. And early manhood that succeeds has a brusque and unfeeling way of assuming that all the world has to yield to it or even worship it. Joy too has something intolerant in its nature; it cannot bear to see beyond its own little circle of passion. But Shakespeare happily began with what is held by many to be the greatest misfortune that can occur to youth—social outlawry; he escaped from his native town in disgrace and joined a calling that was classed with vagabondage by all the laws of the time. He could not have started with more lowly ambitions, and the effect on his nature was to engrain into it modesty and tolerance, two of the first ingredients of wisdom and success; he would not be stirred to enter into the jousts of personal controversy and professional malice; he held his peace when attacked, knowing that even a fool gets tired of tilting at his own shadow.

There is thus comparatively large wisdom mingling in his comedies with the evidences of youthful narrowness of view and lack of tolerance. With all his great powers he was content to be apprentice and journeyman before he became master of his art. He was willing to work at the plays of others before he attempted any for himself. And when he launched out into original work he did not scorn the aid that he could find in plays already staged. Had he been a young university man like Greene and Marlowe and Peele he would have plumed himself upon his learning and his talents and spurned all help or tutoring. Devoid as he was of scholarly acquirements and social distinction, he felt it no indignity to follow the guidance of others, to make slow upward progress to the fame which others had reached at a bound. Youth, especially youth with some consciousness of talent, is eager to make a rapid display of all that is in it, before it is fully matured, to throw off discipleship as a slavery long before it has gained all it can from the discipline, to be the master before it has been the man. And therein it shows its emptiness and false standard and lack of self-restraint, and prophesies its speedy undoing. It is one of the most striking proofs of the superiority of Shakespeare's genius that he made no haste towards masterhood or width of reputation. He followed his profession, despised as it was, without being dragged into
the life of the court or that of adventure—the only two that were recognised as the easiest roads to wealth and fame, and he made steadily for a competence in it without using the common means of self-advertisement that most ambitious men seize eagerly; he did not trouble to have his plays printed in his lifetime. Here and there we have a reference to show that a few felt the greatness of his powers; but the public in general only saw that he was a hard and successful worker, whose plays went well upon the stage; whilst some of his fellow-dramatists grew more and more embittered at his patient advance in their own vaunted art. Had he taken the common ways in all literary ages of joining a mutual admiration society or keeping a clique of journalistic parasites in his retinue, or attaching a trumpeter or Boswell to his life, we should have had more than the few meagre facts that exist concerning his personality. The almost complete absence of biography of so great a genius shows how far from wide or high, how far from what is called fame, his reputation was during his lifetime.

It is natural then to look even in the earliest works of so self-controlling a genius for the marks of wisdom and insight into life. And even in "Love's Labour's Lost" we find a more serious and far-reaching view of humanity than is commonly found in youths of twenty-seven. He attacks with sweet-blooded humour the predominant affectations of his age, the affectations that come upon a courtly society in its excess of jubilation. As soon as a social circle gains supremacy in a locality it adopts a shibboleth, a form of language which the outside world is supposed to be incapable of learning, a mannerism in speech or a set of words or phrases. The form adopted by the Elizabethan court was euphuism, a straining after new metaphors in fire-new words. To a man like Shakespeare who stood off in unconcerned bohemianism, the spectacle must have been supremely absurd, and to mock his patrons who sat on the stage and criticised, he invented his Don Adriano de Armado, his Holofernes and his Sir Nathaniel, burlesques of them somewhat farcical and young-mannish, and yet easily recognisable. So the pedantry into which the new learning had developed, and the affectation of Spanish braggartry after the defeat of the Armada, are similarly caricatured in these characters.
But there is a much more penetrative satire in the play. We can see there was growing up an appearance of reaction against court life; the courtiers taking their cue from the antagonism of the Queen to marriage pretended to look upon a secular conventualism as the ideal of life; none of them carried it out, but many spoke of it as their ultimate aim. Shakespeare, youth though he was, saw the unreality of it and set himself to laugh them out of it. Thus he makes the King of Navarre and three courtiers retire into a royal park, determined to live a monastic life of fasting and study for three years, taking the vows of religious solitaries. But almost before they have congratulated themselves on the delights of their scheme, the world, the flesh and the devil break into their solitude in the persons of the Princess of France and three of her ladies, demanding a conference on business of state. The result is exactly what Biron the jester and philosopher of the lay monks anticipated from this rude extrusion of nature; the passion most hedged out rushed back amongst them with redoubled force. What we drift into is our natural bent; what we force ourselves to cannot become our nature by a mere resolve or hedging ourselves round against temptation; the very elaborateness of our precautions shows the inherent weakness of our natures in that direction. It is only hardship or misfortune and a patient preparation to meet it and its results that can root out an old habit or establish a new one. The isolation of these Navarrese courtiers from ladies without any tragic occasion or long-grown hatred to account for it, implies a certain amorous weakness and a fear of the weakness; and to dam up the passion thus was only to raise its force to tenfold power at the first opportunity and to leave them at the mercy of the first comers of the other sex. They fall in love each with one of the four ladies, and are ashamed of it till the common-sense jester, who represents the poet, breaks in and forces the hands of all. But death breaks in after him and postpones their matrimonial projects for a year, the humorist to spend it in a hospital jesting "in the throat of death;" the sudden flame of love may as suddenly die down.

In spite of this clear insight into the subtleties of amorous problems and monastic vows, there is still something very
youthlike in the mechanical solutions he gives them. Exactly four young men retire; exactly four ladies present themselves at the right time and they are of their own rank; and the passion of each of the lay monks fixes itself on a separate object. This mechanical symmetry attaches to all of his next four or five comedies. It is the nature of a young man’s fancy to run in forced and even lines and analogies, and this rises to its climax in Shakespeare in his “Comedy of Errors.” Occasionally nature goes out of her course and follows these inflexible parallelisms of youthful fancy in producing twins so much alike that the common human eye fails to detect the difference. It is such an eccentricity the poet took advantage of in this play to work out an artificial farce. And here he did not hesitate to use the material other hands had prepared for him. Some preceding playwright had translated or adapted one of Plautus (the Menaechmi), and the poet evidently developed this, adding a second improbability to the first by giving to the twin Antipholuses servants as like to each other, and both called Dromio. Thus he raises nature’s exceptions to farcical pitch and shows complete consciousness of the artificiality of his expedients; he means them to overleap nature and reach the region of farce and unreality. And hence there is no study of character in this play and no wisdom; the only approach to it being in the picture of Adriana’s jealousy and of the old father’s grief at his son’s rejection of him. It is the expression of the pure joy of living, taking shape in farcical incident that is not far removed from buffoonery.

The same type of rigid imagination and artificial merriment is to be found in a play that is put by many commentators much later,—“The Taming of the Shrew;” and those commentators suppose that he only helped to finish up an old play “The Taming of a Shew” published in 1594, because the style is so bald and un-Shakespearian. But the same argument would reject much of his earlier plays such as “The Comedy of Errors.” It is undoubtedly a youthful comedy, and probably the “Love’s Labour’s Won” mentioned amongst Shakespeare’s plays by Francis Meres; whilst “The Taming of a Shrew” is probably a version of its first form pirated by a shorthand writer and done up by some hack playwright.
For in it there is the romance of a young man's fancy concerning love, its rigid solutions of problems, and its indentification of humour with boisterous laughter. It approaches closely to farce, not only in its Induction where they attempt to delude the drunken Sly into the belief that he is a lord, or in the scenes of Kate's taming by Petruchio, but even in the love episodes; the rivalry for Bianca's love and the methods the lovers adopt in wooing her are tinged with no delicate humour. And though there is strong individuality in both the tamer and the tamed, the knowledge of character is shallow and crude; to have a woman of spirit and temper like Kate change her whole nature in a few hours or days from boisterous dominance and wilfulness into meek obedience and tractability, approaches almost to a miracle; and to have it done by such transparent though good-natured ruses as those of Petruchio is as little like nature as the twin masters with twin servants of "The Comedy of Errors," and as primitive in its ideas of married love as Adriana's attempts to recover the affections of her husband by means of a sorcerer.

There is a much more elevated view of love and art and character in "The Two Gentlemen of Verona," which was probably written when he was about thirty years of age. He had begun to see that there could be depth in passion, beyond the possibility of sudden change. The love of Julia here for her fickle Proteus is so intense and tender that she risks all danger of forest and highway to see him again; she dons the dress of a page, and as many ladies in the poet's day must have done, ventured away from home into the wooded country, the haunt of outlaws and robbers. So Valentine shows more depth and constancy of love for Silvia than is to be found in the heart of any of the men of Shakespeare's previous comedies. And the insight into human character shown in the creation of these two is more subtle and mature.

Yet there hangs about the art of this play much of the inexperience of youth. Though it is an evidence of a more earnest view of human nature to make Julia endure so much for the sake of the man she loves, it is carrying the endurance beyond the point of naturalness to make her submit to the indignity of serving (even in disguise) his new
caprice for her rival Silvia; this reveals a shallowness in the poet's view of love. So though the friendship of Valentine for Proteus tells how much nobler is the conception of life, it is elevating the self-sacrifice of friendship into the sphere of Quixotism to make him willing to resign his own love Silvia to the whim of his friend. This over-drawing of a touch of nature proves better than anything the immaturity of the dramatist's wisdom. In the same direction points the sudden and capricious way in which the erring lovers return to their first loves at the close of the play, Proteus to his Julia and Silvia to her Valentine; and yet there is evidence of growing knowledge of character in pairing the lovers by the rule of contraries; the ardent and steadfast Julia is paired with the changeable Proteus, and the light-hearted Silvia with the serious and self-sacrificing Valentine. For nature thus provides a check upon the overgrowth of passions and habits through the generations by making the heart yearn for one who embodies the qualities complementary or antithetic to its own.

It is this touch of nature he carries to a fantastic extent in his next comedy "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Here the fairy queen Titania, the creature of gossamer and air, of fragile beauty and nimble wit, falls in love with Bottom, the incarnation of all that is heavy and earthly and asinine. The poet had begun to feel conscious of the artificiality of his comedies of love with their pairs of lovers shifting in their fancies as the wind; for he made Launce the clown in "The Two Gentlemen" burlesque the passion of his master in his devotion to Crab his dog. And here he throws off all pretence of the reality of such sudden transformations of love and puts them into the form of a dream, and brings them about by means of fairies and their marvellous distillations from plants. Amorous caprice rises into revel. The pairs of lovers, Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena, change and interchange their fancies with all the bewilderment of a dream; there is now no pretence of naturalness in it. And to make sure that even as a dream it should not be taken too seriously, he throws it on a background of village craftsmen and their histrionic ambitions, and these in their acting of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe burlesque the passions of the
serious characters. This fantastic play is the natural close of his purely youthful period of comedy, and the confession of the unreality of its knowledge of human nature.

For several years he abandoned comedy, feeling that his experience and his art needed deepening and sobering. He attempted the tragedy of love in "Romeo and Juliet;" but there was not substance enough in his wisdom to make the tragic element real; and for three years he gave himself up to the study of English history, producing as the result "Richard III.," "Richard II," and "King John."

When these were finished his view of life had sobered in the shadow of wars and tumults and tyrannies into wisdom fit for the deeper kind of comedy, that which has a touch of tragedy in it. His "Merchant of Venice" written at this juncture is the beginning of a new series of comedies that whilst still dealing with laughter come close also to the spring of tears. He has come into his heritage of sorrow which sooner or later falls to all but lifelong fools. His discipline has begun, his journeymanship of trial and sympathy with woe. He now looks round the world and sees it troubled to its depths with strange dark problems and conflicts that often disappear beneath the surface, only to gather more bitterness and force. He had just been studying the lives of those that of all mortals seem most to have the making of their own fates; he had looked closely into the careers of kings and he had found them the very footballs of destiny, even where, as in Richard the Third, masterly and unflinching wickedness was their guide. But still more had he come to pity nations driven from woe to woe, as they were, to gratify the ambitious and evil desires of tyrants like John, or weak sentimentalists like Richard the Second.

And this study of history had led him to see that there were other and more tragic conflicts that never break out into open battle, to see that nations and races might be tyrants as well as kings, that race hated race and trampled on race through long generations till the hatred had become instinctive. He had also come to see that there were great economical and social forces racking the heart of this Titan man, quite outside of the sphere of government; and that which appears comedy to one section of the human race is
tragedy to another. Out of this wider study of mankind grew the "Merchant of Venice," which doubtless to the audiences of the poet's day with their habit of flouting and laughing at the Jews, seemed wholly comedy, but to the outcast and down-trodden was almost wholly tragedy; to the poet it is the comedy of the person Shylock, the tragedy of his race. Driven by their persecution into the despised trade of money-lending, they oftentimes had to suffer the agonies of the miser in his passion for money and the Inferno-like tortures of the revengeful in their murderous schemes against their enemies. That it is the comedy of Shylock is shown in his utter defeat and the laughter at his expense when he leaves the court; his own worship of legality and money and revenge, transcending far the natural feelings of love for race and kin and child, defeats itself and turns his whole life into a mockery. Love and friendship win the day against blood-relationship and race.

But there is still an element of youthful unwisdom and mechanicalness about both the emotion and the art. He has abandoned the parallelism of characters that marred his former comedies and works out the career and fate of each on different lines. But there is an artificiality about his view of love and even of friendship. Portia, strong and flexible though her genius, womanly though all her emotions, is willing to accept the decision of the caskets as to the choice of a husband. Jessica too has a singular view of the prudences of love; she abandons all the associations of her childhood and all her kin and race and religion for one who is practically a stranger, and at the same time she gives her own father the deepest wound she knows she can inflict, by robbing him of his jewels and his ducats. So Bassanio lets his dearest friend endanger his life for the sake of his matrimonial venture.

Another excursion into English history was needed to deepen his knowledge of human nature and give him more serious hold on the substance of the deeper comedy. Once more he ventured into the region that borders on farce in the "Merry Wives of Windsor" at the bidding of the Queen, yet laughing in his sleeve at the courtiers and their frivolities. Still he kept his joyous heart of youth down to the close of the century, in spite of the gathering gloom
round the throne and in his own life. He still played with the passions, though he was gaining insight into their depths. "Much Ado about Nothing" showed how he felt the atmosphere of treachery and intrigue that ever envelops men and threatens their love and happiness. "As You Like It" expresses the longing that underlies the most artificial of social lives to leave the falsity and injustices of city and court and seek the simplicity of primitive forest life. "Twelfth Night" deals again with the happier side of existence and the disguises and intricacies of love. And then the sadness and the knowledge of the depths of sin and sorrow begin to predominate over the comedy; and as we go on through "All's Well," and "Measure for Measure" to "Troilus and Cressida," we feel that the partition between comedy and tragedy has grown thin. He almost ceases to believe in goodness and truth, especially in the domain of love. The amorous seems to be the very froth of life, and fades into insignificance in the wild surge and tempest of other passions and the lapse of belief.

For a period of eight years he could see nothing in existence but what was tragic and sorrowful. How weak and frivolous seemed the past with its sunny weather, its youthful mirages, its secondhand wisdom! It is difficult to find the same Shakespeare in the two periods of his life, the bright, unclouded hope, and the darkly tragic manhood. It is difficult to recognise the same England in the Armada buoyancy and in the gloom and treachery and suspicion of the first years of the seventeenth century. But this change from summer radiance to winter tempest is but the course of nature with every man and every age of character and power. The ingrained folly of human youth and success demands it. And that is no favoured child of fortune who misses all through his life the sore chastisement of fate. Weak and invertebrate he will remain till death claims him for his own. It is not given to mortal to be happy and wise together all his life long. Winter and storm are as essential to growth and fertility as summer and sunshine. And unvarying success or even hope brings out the inherent arrogance and thoughtlessness of men. We shudder as we see the clouds of misfortune approach and we shrink from the blows of destiny; but children we are and children we
AMONGST THE COMEDIES

remain with all our folly and caprice till the end of our days, if she do spare her rod. Unfeeling, intolerant, aggressive, are the favourites of fortune.

It was this the soul of Shakespeare was learning in these early years of the seventeenth century. For almost forty years of his life he had found the world move to his desires or ambitions or at least seem still a world of hope. He had known grief and disappointment and failure; but it had been only for a moment; the energies of life swept them again into oblivion; the nepenthe of exhilarative hope dulled all the pain and agony of collapse. But now the outlook was dark and life all futile. Whither were the passions of man bearing him? Was he not drifting back again into the chaos whence he came? Devils in human form there were in every circle sowing dissension and slander. Half the world was trying to dupe or wrong the other half. Even the innocents were driven to wear a mask of hypocrisy in self-defence. The dearest friends were torn apart by the whisper of malice, by the venomous tongue of lying rumour. And those he loved and trusted turned traitor or ingrate. Love—what was it but another name for selfishness and intrigue? Religion—what cruelties and falsities took refuge under its mask? Truth—where was it to be found amid the phantoms and shadows of human things, amid the lies and hypocrisies of social life? Loyalty, friendship, worship, had grown but pretexts for treachery and hatred and superstition.

Was there any refuge for the pure of heart and intention amongst men and their institutions? Was there any shelter from the driving storm of doubt and dark thought? What a mockery seemed that happy past of youth with its jests and hopes and bright companionships? Out on the shelterless heath he fled with his Lear and appealed to the elements against the ingratitude of man. But that way madness lay. Better to die with his Othello and bury in the grave the anguish of love's wrongs and the agony of feeling benetted by a human devil. And yet the work of manhood lay before him, the long struggle with life that would strain every nerve and muscle. He would flee with his Timon from the sight of men and live with nature and her more pitying and truthful heart. In solitude would he
find his better self again, out of the echo of the cruel world of man. Alone with the wild things of the forest and shore, he would forget that there was treachery or malice upon the earth. But alas! as he followed his Timon into outlawry, he found the memory of man's ingratitude grow more vivid and torturing; alone he was not with nature, but with his own thoughts, at the mercy of his cruel anger and indignation, cursing his fellows more fiercely than in the first dread revelation of man's baseness. More cruel and unjust, more unlike life was existence such as this than in the most demonic of wicked human society. Nature had the wild passion for wrong in her too; and alone with her the human heart would die out, and the human desires and appetites raven like the brutes.

He had reached the final term of isolation and repellent anger. And the pleading voices of his children drew him back. The injustice and malice and treachery of men were great; but there still remained a noble side to human nature, a side in which love and forgiveness and self-sacrifice were strong. There still lived in the world the possibility of its regeneration; there were the helpless to be relieved, the innocent to be sheltered from wrong and vice, the gentle to make strong; and melting charity softened his heart and recreated his youthful world again; not in the bright colours of hope, but in the sober light of steadfast purpose and cheerful toil and resolve to see and do the right. The fantasies of comedy had faded away, and in their place had come wise dreams of all that man should be, touched by the spirit of forgiveness, and remoulded by the hand of love. He would live apart from the turmoil of human ambition, still toiling for the soul that is to be; he would build a world of romance for himself and his fellows and use for it the noblest wisdom he could find; he would fill it with forgiving Prosperos and forgiven Antonios, with innocent loving Mirandas and loved Ferdinands, and he would enslave and hide from sight the Caliban elements of it. Thus did the world of his youthful comedies come back to him.
THE PHILOSOPHY OF

"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"
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"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE."

THERE are few periods of life after childhood that are not haunted at intervals by dim, unsatisfied questionings of the unknown. Even the most frivolous in their hours of solitude stand appalled before the dumb oracles of fate; they feel the years drift on, and know that in the future somewhere near a finger will be laid upon the chords of their life and make them cease to vibrate. What they will be thereafter makes even the most religiously confident pause.

But youth, if full of vigour and hope, is little oppressed with the sense of death. It is too buoyant, the years seem too long, to make it an actual question pressing for solution. If it comes upon it, it is only as a distant possibility to be met in a world it has not yet to face. Nor even, though it has to endure much pain and curtailment of its desires, is it anxious to know the reason why; it is satisfied that only the wills of its immediate rivals and trainers are curbing its will, that only temporary and immediate obstacles are baulking it of its due tale of pleasure, and that as soon as it throws off the trammels that confine it, it will shape its life and have its fill of enjoyment. It listens to any deeper reason in a distant way; the statement that this imprisonment of will and desire and appetite lies in the very framework of life, in the system of things, sounds unreal and dreamlike, little pertinent to its particular life and surroundings.

It is only when a man has passed from sphere to sphere and still felt the same galling fetters of circumstance and competing wills around his actions and desires that he begins to know life itself to be the fetters. He sees the laws of the universe close in upon him and narrow him into a
little track that has but a six foot ditch for habitation as its close. He still has his fellow-travellers elbowing him off it and it often becomes a life-and-death struggle; for in terror of their own shadows men huddle together to drive away the sense of awe and solitude. Manhood should bring a pity for human suffering mingled with its cheerful and often thoughtless exercise of will, its eager efforts to struggle towards the light. For its thought and wider view should lead the mind beyond the mere selfishness of life and teach the lesson of sorrow and disappointment.

And yet there is a brusquerie and self-confidence in healthy manhood that makes it move unfeelingly amongst the difficulties and wearinesses of our fellows. We brush aside their griefs and hardships as but cobwebs their brain weaves across our path as we break through the morning forest. We do our tasks and feel the exhilaration of success day after day, lapsing into the gulf of sleep each night, grieved that the energies need such renewal. We would climb on untired that soon the height we long for may be reached. But the torrent of the years rushes past, our sun westers, and we catch no glimpse of the divine peak that will feast our eyes with the sight of our promised land. The shadows lengthen and we see that the sorrows of our neighbours are not mere idle dreams of theirs; the same weariness comes upon our limbs, the same tedium of life seizes our heart and we know how short and futile are our pacings and how narrow a grave and how deep an oblivion awaits us. Then comes the deeper sympathy of life that irradiates the sufferings of mankind and makes the heart tender and forgiving to mortal faults. It is but a narrow-visioned wisdom we reach before we have bowed our necks to the yoke of sorrow, and felt the agony of shipwreck of our dearest wishes.

Not yet had Shakespeare known the keener anguish of life when he wrote "The Merchant of Venice." He was but leaving behind the more dream-like hopes of youth that count the future as an infinity to draw on for the pictures of what it is to be. He had begun to see that life was not a mere love bower, made for nothing but lovers' quarrels and lovers' redintegrations of love, chorussed perhaps with sly or boisterous laughter under the moon. That stage he had
passed through when he wrote his "Midsummer Night's Dream" and his "Romeo and Juliet." And he had come to the stage of prosaic tasks and the straining of every muscle to cope with the practical difficulties that met him. He had come to realise that the existence of evil in the world is a gross and harassing fact, not the mere melancholy fancy of a love-struck youth in his despair. In the actions of his fellow-men he found evidence of malicious intent and deliberate conspiracy. As he struggled to find his footing in life, after so many failures, he felt that he was hustled and driven aside from his purpose not merely by competing ambition, but by envy and jealousy and the love of slander and evil-speaking. He saw intolerance breathe through every interest, every relationship of human life; every self was fighting with every other self, often in death grips; every nation and race and social circle was doing its best to trample down the rest that touched it or came within its power. And he knew that man must find some mode of living amidst these cross currents and entanglements. How he was to reach his own purpose and keep these fierce antagonisms from rising into greater fierceness against him was the problem before him.

Hence one of the main lessons of this new comedy of his is on the relationships of race to race, religion to religion, and calling to calling. He had seen the fierce spirit that the Reformation had brought into English homes and circles, the bitter persecution that each sect thought it its right and duty to practise on the others. He had heard of the Marian persecutions by his father's fireside and he had known how bitter the retaliation. Protestant hated Catholic, and Catholic Protestant, with a deadly hatred, each thinking it was only right and proper, if he had the power, to drive the other into his fold or out of life. He had heard on all sides the cruellest of utterances against the lives and creeds of men whom he knew to be good. He had seen his friends hunted for their lives; he had talked with the poor fugitives in their hiding places and found them as true to the love of their kin, as loyal to all that is good in humanity, as the most earnest of their persecutors. The same bitterness persisted between Englishman and Spaniard, partly for religious reasons, still more for commercial, and because the
feud was daily kept alive by personal encounter, it had become a conflict of races. And around him in London, the poet must have felt it seethe in all its wild patriotism and irrationality. But still more personally must have come home to him the social persecution of class by class and occupation by occupation. The profession he had himself entered was branded as outcast and vagabond, and it was only individual worth and force of character that raised the actor above his natural status. Vulgar ignorance or stupid pride and vanity and exclusiveness must ever have been uttering or looking its scorn of him and his work even in his presence. For years if not for life he must have felt himself socially exiled and trampled underfoot by those who most frequented his stage and by those Puritan citizens who shrank back from the drama like leprosy.

It is little wonder then that, when manhood swept out the gossamer hopes of youth and he faced life in its realities, he saw with ease the whole history and attitude of the exile living amongst his tormentors and foes and persecuted by them. He had already shewn that, born and brought up as a Protestant though he was, he could treat the adherents and priests of the older religion with an impartiality that is striking in his age; in Romeo and Juliet his friars are dealt with in the most kindly spirit; they are sincerely religious, and what is more, self-sacrificing and humane; they do their best first to check the young lovers in their mad career and next to save them from its consequences. To them Juliet flees in all her troubles as her best advisers and protectors. And now he sets himself to realize the same religious antagonisms but in a sphere that was more removed from excited and personal feeling. There were no Jews in England except the one or two that like Dr. Lopez were introduced by the Queen as physicians, and he might without any risk of stirring up his audience to fierce persecution of any body of outcasts, represent the religious feuds of Jew and Christian upon the stage. The burning hatred that divided Catholic and Protestant he never once referred to throughout his many plays, let alone brought it on the stage. But by a picture of the other great persecution he might shew his countrymen the inhuman chaos into which their intolerance was drifting and the necessity of finding
some common meeting-ground of creeds whereon men might live and believe and still refrain from scorning or attacking those who differed from them in details.

How Antonio and the other Christians, even down to Lancelot the servant, add insult and contumely to the wrongs which the Christian laws impose upon the Jew! With what bitter hatred and scorn and yearning for revenge the Jew retaliates! The noblest and kindliest of the persecuting creed becomes almost loathsome in his treatment of the heretic, spitting upon his Jewish gabardine and driving him with scorn and threat to inhuman extremities. And the keenest-minded, most subtle of the persecuted creed becomes under the treatment but a wolf in human form, spurning and suspecting all offer of friendly relations, forgetful of all duties in life for the thought of stripping his enemy of fortune and even of existence. Intermingled with the religious hatred of the two is antagonism of race, of occupation and of social standing. The last two the poet himself had keenly felt and it is these he paints most vividly and lays most stress upon in the relations of Antonio and Shylock. Perhaps he might bring home to the courtiers and citizens of London the cruel wrong they were doing to humanity in casting out and spurning the profession of the stage; he would show them how this scorn and persecution made base the humanity of both persecutor and persecuted, driving out all noble and kindly relations and thoughts; he would teach the world the lesson of tolerance, that the interchange of wrong and revenge was an unending process tying down to a base task the thoughts that might reach to infinity and spend themselves on what is noble. At the close the sweet spirit of forgiveness comes over Antonio, and though he cannot efface from Shylock's soul the long persecution and its dehumanising effect, his own spirit will recover under the influence of this new feeling from its debasing contempt for men, and its intolerance. Nothing in the whole play is so near tragedy as the embodiment of this lesson that "it is a sin to be a mocker," that all scorn of what is not evil reacts like sin upon the soul of the scouter and disintegrates its nobler instincts and beliefs. Without this lesson forced in upon the heart of Antonio with almost tragic point, the pride and blindness at the
bases of his contempt and intolerance of the Jew would have spread through his otherwise noble nature and blighted its better growths.

Yet the poet was far from fully realising the meaning and power of mercy and forgiveness in human life. He could put noble and rhetorical speeches into the mouths of his characters on the superiority of mercy to power and justice; he could let his Portia make epigrams on its double blessedness. But he had not yet seen that it has the nature, if it had the power, to be the regenerator of the world. It is only its becomingness and beauty that strike him most and not its purifying influence upon the soul of the merciful.

Most of the philosophy of the play is still youthful and immature. Yet he has risen far enough above mere youth to laugh at its foibles and its view of life. He is now highly amused at the braggart ways of most young men before life has been kind enough to chastise and humble them; immediately after they leave school they feel superior to most things in life and think their world is no deeper than the little plummet of their own understandings; they have but to go on and to their “open sesame” all the poor outworn individualities that are ahead of them in years will fall down and beg of them to teach them wisdom and do their work for them. The nearer they are to school the more ready are they to hoodwink themselves thus and brag to others of their fictitious victories. The poet having reached a point of view beyond and above these poor little boasts and lies, makes merry over this trait of raw boyhood overgrown and he puts his merriment into Portia’s mouth; when she and her maid are about to don the garments of a young man she wagers Nerissa she will prove “the prettier fellow of the two;” she will

"Speak of frays,
Like a fine bragging youth; and tell quaint lies,
How honourable ladies sought my love
Which I denying, they fell sick and died;"

"then I’ll repent,
And wish, for all that, that I had not kill’d them,
And twenty of these puny lies I’ll tell,
That men shall swear, I have discontinued school
Above a twelvemonth. I have within my mind
A thousand raw tricks of these bragging Jacks,
Which I will practise."
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

This empty brag and puny fiction, these airs of superiority to most things mislead none but still more boyish minds, but to discard them is a surer sign of the approach of manhood than the best justification by nature of the premature reaping of the chin.

But the poet is not yet far enough removed from youth to be free from its methods of being and looking wise. He is not beyond sympathising with the "laugh-and-grow-fat" philosophy of the gilded youth of Venice when they attempt to console Antonio in his premonitory sadness. Salarino has fixed classifications for all men; he knows the merry fellows that "laugh like parrots at a bagpiper," and he knows those "of vinegar aspect"

"That never show their teeth by way of smile, Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable."

He sees but the prototypes. Gratiano has got perhaps a step farther in the classificatory wisdom of youth; he has come to a decision though a rash one; he has chosen the merry part in life; "Let me play the fool;" he hates to see a man "sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster," and still more the man who makes a pretence of being wise by being silent and solemn; nay he has got as far as being capable of wise saws and maxims that might have depth if they had experience behind them; his saying "They lose the world that do buy it with much care" has more in it than he yet knows of, and so his wisdom has less force than it should have upon his friends; the remark of Bassanio as soon as his back is turned tells the whole story of his reputation; "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice." And yet his are some of the best sayings in the play; he is a forecast of the poet's clowns who are ever uttering amid their follies flashes of far-reaching wisdom. His descriptions of character are vigorous and satiric and often end in proverbs like

"All things that are, Are with more spirit chas'd than enjoy'd."

There is, however, about the utterance of all these maxims of his the glib ease that marks the secondhand or merely intellectual wisdom of youth. They smack somewhat of the copy-book heading. There are amongst the noteworthy and truly wise sayings of most of the other
characters many that have the same tinge of reflected wisdom. Jessica's

"Love is blind, and lovers cannot see
The pretty follies that themselves commit."

must have sounded even to the poet's day an often reverberated echo. Whilst the speech of Lorenzo on music, as the moonlight sleeps upon the bank at Belmont reveals the mere theorizer; it forces to an extreme a maxim that has some truth in it to begin with:

"The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not touched with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils."

"Let no such man be trusted."

And the poet attempts to philosophize it and reason it out for this young romancer; but he fails completely; all he proves, if he proves anything, is that musicians are quite on a level with a

"race of youthful and unhandled colts,
Fetching mad bounds, bellowing and neighing loud;"

growing quite gentle and modest in their gaze when a trumpet sounds, but only as long as it sounds. The quarrels "treasons, stratagems and spoils" of musicians have almost become a proverb; and there is no country in the world so famed for music as Italy, and none so famed for cruel revenges, for treacherous stabbings and poisonings. Music undoubtedly has an entrancing effect such as no other art has—but only for the moment; nor has it by itself any moral effect; whilst it lasts it will prevent a man with a fine ear doing anything ignoble, in fact, doing anything else than listen; and if we could make sure that all men had a fine ear, then all governments would have to do in order to prevent crime would be to keep beautiful music sounding everywhere throughout the land; but if ever by any chance it stopped for a day we should have a revel of sensuality and crime. For all spurious elevation of feeling, or any merely sensuous effect that induces passivity of the moral nature is apt to leave the spirit a prey to gross, if not immoral thoughts, as soon as it dies out into the common light of day. The greatest criminals have often been deeply affected by music, and the greatest singers are more often than not the merest children or savages in their moral sense
and conduct. Thus the poet through his Lorenzo has shown how crude and artificial his wisdom is. He has been drawn into this shallow philosophy by coming across the Pythagorean idea of the music of the spheres, chiming with the "harmony in immortal souls," yet all unheard because of "this muddy vesture of decay." He rode his visionary hobby till he reached the shallow and false rule of conduct never to trust the man that had no music in himself. Perhaps he meant by music the higher moral order of the universe; but that may exist apart from all ear for melody.

The same royal roads to wisdom that lead only to crude and shallow truths are taken by even wiser characters than Lorenzo and his bride. Portia, and her reflection, Nerissa, often choose them; but they come nearer to truth in the end; for they take the well-trodden path of proverbs. Nerissa's maxims are admirable, as they are but resettings of old saws: "It is no mean happiness to be seated in the mean;" "superfluity comes sooner by white hairs;" "they are as sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing;" "Holy men at their death have good inspirations;" and "Hanging and wiving goes by destiny." But they can all be traversed with as close approach to truth; "It is no mean happiness to be seated in the extreme" of power, wealth, fame, e.g.; "a struggle for existence comes sooner by white hairs;" "Holy men in their lives have good inspirations;" and "Drowning and divorcing goes by destiny."

The sayings of Portia cannot be so easily mocked; they come closer to moral wisdom; for they issue from the heart and the experience. Those, however, that are most praised by her admirers seem rather to be euphuisms and to come from the side of intellect; as, when she gets a simile from the candle in her hall on approaching Belmont by night, "So shines a good deed in a naughty world," or when she says that

"The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren."

She is getting into the region of universal truths worth remembering when she says; "If to do were as easy as to
know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces," and "the brain may devise laws for the blood, but a hot-temper leaps o'er a cold decree;" they are but freshly put proverbs, but they are well chosen, reaching almost the heart of truth. More original and more truly wise and elevated is the thought in her speech on mercy. On as high a level, if not higher, is the wisdom implied in her good resolutions and noble conduct. She wastes few words about her intention to save her husband's friend, nor will let the left hand know what the right hand doeth. And when, saved by her, Antonio arrives at Belmont, she welcomes him "scanting this breathing courtesy," preferring to show her gladness "in other ways than words." She has indeed "a noble and true conceit of god-like amity," and we can well believe her when she says; "I never did repent for doing good!"

Antonio and Bassanio have almost as true wisdom, based perhaps upon wider experience. The latter probably because of his shipwreck in life, and the nobleness of the bohemian, raises friendship even above love in life; he feels the misfortunes of Antonio more keenly than the sufferer himself, and would give all to save him; his heart is more on the alert to fear the intentions of the Jew; "I like not fair terms and a villain's mind." And he comes out of the severe trial of the caskets successful, shown by the wisdom of Portia's father to be the noblest of all the wooers. He will not choose like the Prince of Morocco from sensuous desire, the primitive and elementary stage of human life that is drawn by mere outward show; and thus he will not have fate use her irony upon him, giving to desire that which it hates and that to which it must come, the gnawing worm and the cold repulsive grave. Nor will he be drawn, like the Prince of Arragon, by conceit of his own merits, to think that he deserves the best that life has to give, and so he avoids the mocking "tu quoque" of a fool's head that nature throws in the teeth of all the vain and condescending and scornful, who never kiss or love anything but their own shadow. He knows "the world is still deceived with ornament"
"The guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea,"

"The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest."

He has had already too much of the precious metals and seen how they cheat and humiliate. He will be humble and choose the unvalued lead. And he gets the reward of expecting little from fortune. Thus the dead merchant reveals strangely mature wisdom in this casket test; he has seen one of the fundamental insights of Christianity that contradicts all worldly wisdom, "The meek shall inherit the earth."

It is this that the maxims of Shylock deny and the sadness and experience of Antonio confirm. Both feel, with the keen sensitiveness of those who have lived and suffered, the symptoms of coming misfortune; as old wounds and aches are the best weather prophets, so the minds, that have felt the blows of fortune through long years, can tell when another of its storms is approaching. Long before there is the least prospect of loss of fortune or threat to life, Antonio is weighed down with sadness and will not be consoled; "in sooth I know not why I am so sad;" and he concludes

"I hold the world but as the world,
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one."

So Shylock dreams of money bags before the flight of Jessica, and feels that "there is some ill a brewing." And down on their heads come losses or tales of losses with the sheeplike "follow my leader" of both misfortune and evil speaking. But how differently the two take it! Shylock appeals to the bad precedents of his persecutors, and thinks that he may use the flesh he has purchased as Christians do their slaves—a clear sign of Shakespeare's condemnation of slavery. He learns no wisdom or humility by his griefs. Like the revengeful he thinks that they are "soft and dull-eyed fools" who relent and forgive. Antonio on the contrary bows his head to his sorrows and welcomes death as ending life before "an age of poverty." And as soon as fortune returns, he is ready to forgive even the man who threatened his life.
There is a world of difference between these two attitudes, the world that separates the savage from the much-travelled, much-enduring man of thought and feeling. Shylock stands on his rights; "What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?" He thinks he has examined every subtlety of the law and on legality he takes his stand, and concludes he may face the world without one qualm of conscience. He has no sense of the deeper wrong he does to the spirit of justice which transcends all laws with their quibbles and subtleties and rigid imperfections. More wrongs have been done by laws than by all the breakers of laws. And the intractable and untameable nature of this money-lender is seen in the fact that there is nothing he has so suffered from as the law and that yet he dares to take it as his friend and ally. Surely if there was one lesson his experience should have taught him it was to distrust this treacherous element. Yet here he was far on in life, this lesson still unlearned, in spite of his masterly intellect. If persecution and misfortune do not teach tolerance and mercy, then they but make the heart harder and more brutish in its wild passions; and when power comes to him there is no fiercer persecutor than the persecuted; his nature has gone back to savagery. What more repulsive sight is there than the human soul goaded by wrong and inhumanity to a blind passion of revenge! And subtle though Shylock is, he is caught in his own toils, and the very calmness of his defeat and exit tells the agony he is suffering.

It is not brain power that will give us wisdom, nor is it legality that will ever give us our rights. More than half of wisdom is moral insight, the decision of the noble heart; and right is more than law. This money-lender thought he did no wrong, because he kept within the limits of Venetian law; he had no heart to feel the wider wrong he did. And even had he had the wisdom to listen to justice and to see that she could bring him closer to his rights, he would still have been far from the highest wisdom. He dreaded no judgment, because he was so blind of sight; he could not see that nature judged him and had already begun his punishment; she had made him trust to legality, shorn him of all heart, all mercy, and made him deaf to the pleadings
of the higher law; and had she permitted him to win his case, she would have inflicted an even more terrible penalty than he had to suffer; he would have gone forth exultant in revenge, to grow more and more inhuman in his passions and desires.

Even had he listened to Portia's appeal to mercy, had he yielded and felt the pangs of sympathy for his victim, when he saw the crisis near, he would not have risen high in the scale of nobleness. To spare the prey and let him go untortured is no more than what the animal will often do. The mean passion of revenge would be already sated in part by having the hated object in its power. To glut it would be to weary it.

There is a height that far surpasses mercy or even forgiveness and oblivion of the wrong. And nature points the way to it. Throughout her scheme there is no living thing but suffers to advance the good of other things. The flowers fade and die and let their fairest tracery and colour fall into the dust that, when another summer comes, as brilliant hues, as delicate petal-work may flash in its sunshine. The filmy structure of the insect floats on the wind for a day and gives its life that others after it may breathe and live. The forest giants stretch their mighty limbs for centuries to shelter generation after generation of the wild wanderers of the field, and to fatten with their leaves, and, when decay comes, with their own trunks the soil that is to nourish other forests of myriad-ringed trees. Each type and form of animal gives up age after age, and countless millions of its individuals, that from it some type a little higher may be produced. And shall the crown and flower of living things fall out of the ranks of progress? Shall man, towards whom the whole creation through infinity has groaned and laboured, shall he with his far-stretching thoughts, break this eternal chain of nature? Not the most selfish or most criminal soul that ever lived can violate this law. The parents suffer that the child may be strong and flourish. One generation goeth that another may come. Nations struggle and conflict that the world may leave its spaces for the better nations still to come. There is no end to pain and anguish, there can be no end, as long as man has imperfections. We suffer and agonise and die that the men to be may be more noble than we are.
And the distinctive mark of man is conscious spirit and conscious purpose; he knows his future and his past; and he can recognise the destiny that lies before him and within him. Surely then the goal of all creation is that its vicarious suffering and its noblest product,—the human spirit conscious of itself,—should be combined, that the individual man should agonise in order that the race should reach its highest in the long infinity before it. Towards such perfection nature is ever pointing, ever goading him on; she makes his grosser passions soon weary themselves out and find their limit; she makes his selfishness defeat itself in subtle ways; and ever, like a kind mother who fears not his childish retorts and wilfulness, is leading him by paths he thinks he chooses for himself to that which she intends to be his destiny. That any man should choose her agonies before her pleasures to enhance the nobleness and joy of all his fellows has been the rare and marvellous exception hitherto. But the time shall come when all will consciously prefer their suffering that others may not suffer. And it is this time that the poet dimly sees as he makes Antonio surrender fortune—nay, life itself—in order that his dear friend, Bassanio, may reach his happiness.
"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"

AS ILLUSTRATIVE

OF THE ELIZABETHAN AGE.
"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE' AS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE ELIZABETHAN AGE.

THERE are times when the world seems to suffer convulsion and crisis. Its life leaps ages in a few brief years and leaves a chasm between past and future that no explanation seems capable of bridging. For a time this strange transilience is accepted as a marvel. The natural development is submerged—beneath the flood waters of a new heaven that wraps itself in cloud and mystery. A new life begins, a new earth appears that is a re-creation. History is dumb before the spectacle at first and can find nothing but figures of speech for its stupendous features. Existence has been reborn, the whole of civilisation transmuted by death and birth. The body of the past has vanished into dust, its spirit dissipated. The soul of mankind is reincarnated with pang and labour, to run the course of infancy, youth, manhood and old age.

But no metaphor can conceal for long the real nature of this seeming cataclysm, or the essential continuity of existence. History soon collects her wits and finds the future still stretching through the present into the past. The life in its development may be under ground, unseen; it is there nevertheless. None the less necessary are the winter-periods of human existence, that they send all symptoms and processes of life out of sight, or that they make by their barrenness and torpor the spring periods that follow seem new births. History sees this to be the true analogy and seeks evidence of the obscure preparation for the outburst of energy and splendour in every sphere. But the intimacy of relationship between the two periods is
even closer. It is one of evolution of the same character and being. And the new birth is on closer investigation found to be the most natural of sequences.

There is no better instance of such a phenomenon to be found than what is called the Renaissance. This was a movement that is often described as if it had been a cataclysm. It did produce in the attitude of the Western mind to the world and life a complete revolution. The methods of viewing existence and its problems before and after differ from each other almost as widely as death and life. And yet the movement originated in Italy as far back as the fourteenth century, when Petrarch and his contemporaries were giving new life to imagination and poetry by the study of the forgotten classics; whilst its full current was not felt in England till the latter half of the sixteenth century and its final issues are anything but exhausted in our own day.

Spread over so long a period, it is most inaptly described as a European convulsion. So gradual were its advances, so obscure its developments, that it was firmly rooted in Christendom before the Church realised its full significance. The church indeed became its nurse and guardian in the early years of its childhood and its adolescence. For fully two centuries she fostered its growth and took it to her very heart. Her princes and priests were its most fervent votaries. Even her popes sacrificed their faith, their belief in the central mysteries of the religion they patronised, to its interests and aims. Only when they found it become in the Teutonic North rebellion against their supremacy, did they oppose it and recognise its inherent antagonism to their purposes and policy. The reformers themselves failed to see how much it meant and accepted it as their ally. They could not recognise its essentially secular mission, its complete detachment from all religious purpose in its miscegenation of paganism and mediæval Christianity. They could not see that it must inevitably lead to Voltaire and Rousseau and the destructive theological criticism of our own times. It was the latter half of the sixteenth century that developed their long uneasy feeling with regard to each other into active hostility between the reformers and the humanists. Then it was they first realised that
there lay before them a long period of struggle and mutual criticism, that centuries must pass before Protestantism could be exorcised of the same intolerance that had possessed the old church, and humanism could be rid of its sensuous spirit and pagan morality, that no true alliance could be struck between them till the one had found its essence in individualistic religion, the worship within the heart and life, and the other had reached through science a loftier ethics and a rational reverence for true religion.

The camps were still friendly when Shakespeare came to the stage of life that first questions the world and wishes to know its secrets. Nay, the dire apparition of an embattled South in the Spanish Armada united them again for a brief moment only to make the widening fissure between them more manifest when it disappeared in defeat and tempest. And it was in these years that the dramatist's formative period fell. In his histories and early comedies he is feeling out after the questions that perplex the human mind; he is not yet bewildered by them; for he does not see their fundamental nature. But he knows that they are bewildering other minds, and he is eager to know their meaning if not their answer. When he gives solutions they are only tentative. And on the questions between humanism and the reformation he has not much to say. He inclines to the camp of the former; for he does not yet know what to think on religion.

The "Merchant of Venice" is the first decided indication he gives of his appearance on the side of the humanists. He had before sought Italy thrice as the scene of plays, and on each occasion had pitched upon the neighbourhood of Venice as the centre of his scene. But the "Two Gentlemen of Verona" and the "Taming of the Shrew" cannot be said to have much in them that is distinctively Italian. Whilst "Romeo and Juliet" shows more of the passions that belong to the people of Italy than of the enlightenment that marked the Renassance. Yet the choice indicates the drift of his time towards the old home of culture; and his preference for the ancient cities of Northern Italy, and especially for Verona, seems to point to the fact that he had some connection with the district around Venice by travel or by personal knowledge of travellers in it or natives of it.
That he returned to it and chose Venice as the scene of his first serious comedy is proof enough that he had some source of information about this region of Italy that failed him about the central and southern regions. And from the accurate and detailed knowledge of the locality and the manners we may almost conclude that he had visited it.

But the question is of little importance. For Italy was to the cultured Englishman of his day more than the mere peninsula called by that name. It meant all that we mean by the Renaissance; it was the essence and incarnation of that movement. All the advanced education, the classical literature and art, the great enterprise in thought as in commerce, the humanism of the new West with its desire for the natural however gross, and its devotion to the rational however unbelieving and even pagan, were Italian in their source and character. The gilded youth of the English Universities thought their preparation for life incomplete without a sojourn in the great Southern city of "sweetness and light." They brought back with them more than culture and art; the grossness of the manners and the flippant scepticism of the tone clung to them. And what rather belongs to ambitiously fashionable life in all ages and countries was set down as "Italianate;"—the scandals, the shallow cynicism, the lack of reverence, the ridicule and contempt for what is virtuous or pious, the blasé itch for something new especially if it is wicked or outrageous. But it was this that first shocked the reformers and made the new division in the Church that was beginning to be called Puritan draw off from the new culture and the new criticism that had come from Italy.

Shakespeare kept his work comparatively free from the Italianism that deluged the English stage in the earlier part of the following century. But he closely identified himself with all that was best in the new movement. For by the time he wrote the "Merchant of Venice," the rapidly organising Puritanism that was gathering under its influence the merchants of London and most of the new middle class, was taking up a decided attitude of antagonism to his profession. The Puritan councillors of the city of London had begun an active crusade against it. And Puritan preachers and writers were censuring it in no measured terms.
It is little wonder, then, that the dramatist should openly take sides. He was not yet so bold as he grew when in "Henry the Fourth" he took one Lollard hero, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, and turned him into Falstaff, the wild caricature of the church-going, psalm-singing quoter of scripture, and afterwards on being challenged, substituted the name of another Lollard, Fastolfe. His ridicule of the already distinctive mien and manner of the Puritan is more veiled and indirect. His most profound criticism occurs in the mocking speech of that fashionable young wit and buffoon of the day, Gratiano, when Bassanio chides him for his wild behaviour; he puts on an air of meekness and promises him to be sober, to

"Talk with respect and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer-books in my pocket, look demurely,
Nay more, when grace is saying, hood mine eyes
Thus with my hat and sigh and say Amen;"

"Use all the observances of civility
Like one well studied in a sad ostent
To please his grandam."

A less palpable piece of mockery is to be found in Lancelot Gobbo's soliloquy on his first appearance on the scene. The dialogue between his conscience and the fiend may be a travesty of the debate between a good and an evil angel for the soul of the hero, so frequent in the old moralities, and to be found as late as Marlowe's Faustus. But it is more likely to be a parody of the would-be dramatic or allegorical episodes of puritan sermons. For the word conscience was becoming almost a Puritan shibboleth, though it was also found convenient by the opposition camp, whilst it was especially the Puritan preachers that insisted on the personality of the devil. It certainly adds colour and point to a somewhat insipid soliloquy, if we take it as having this reference. One can easily imagine a Puritan serving-man of the time arguing out a difficult question of casuistry in the style of Lancelot, conscience as well as the fiend landing him in the camp of the great enemy. "Conscience, say I, you counsel well; Fiend, say I, you counsel well: to be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master, who, God bless the mark, is a kind of devil; and to run away from the Jew, I should be ruled by the Fiend, who, saving
your reverence, is the devil himself." The talisman phrases "God bless the mark" and "saving your reverence" are quite in the style of the Puritan before naming the devil. And his conscience-books, like the Anatomie of Abuses of Philip Stubbes published in 1588 some ten years before the production of this play, must have often placed him in similar dilemmas, condemning as they did some of the most innocent of fashions and amusements, and insisting on perseverance in the most repulsive duties and modes of life.

There are other hints of this clown being meant to mimic in as broad a style as Falstaff the manners of the new censor of the stage. We know that the Puritan servants were accustomed to take a high stand in criticising the morals and religion of their masters and mistresses. And this is exhibited later on by our dramatist in his Malvolio. Launcelot in his rougher, more uneducated way, speaks with an almost brutal candour his opinion of his young mistress Jessica. He has all the confident dogmatism of the new religionists in condemning their neighbours on the authority of some text. He indulges like Falstaff in the grossest licentiousness of word and act, and yet, like that vile caricature of the Lollard, he solemnly curses others for their lapses of faith. "Look you," he says to Jessica, "the sins of the father are to be laid upon the children", "therefore be of good cheer, for truly I think you are damned." And probably this Puritan misapplication of isolated texts of Scripture was in the poet's mind when he made Bassanio say:

"What damned error but some sober brow
Will bless it and approve it with a text."

It is the sober mien that seems to have been the distinctive mark of the Puritan in the mind of Shakespeare at this stage of his criticism. A peculiar dress, distinguished also by its sobriety, at a later period, brought out his individuality as something different from the ordinary Englishman. But this was in the following century. As yet he was only sober in his words and manners, and solemn in his censoriousness. Hence Launcelot's professions of staid superiority, and his attempts at demure dignity contrasting with his boisterous spirits and vulgar buffoonery. His attire, when still in the Jew's service, would perhaps help to suggest to the audience of the day the ridiculous
antithesis between the professions and the reality. There doubtless lay the chief humour of the character, whilst to us it has lost all its savour.

Perhaps in Shylock himself the dramatist meant to give another gross caricature of the new enemy of the stage. He is an adept in the use of Scripture for any special purpose he has in view. Doubtless, Antonio's remark, "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose," had already in one form or another been hurled against the Puritans by their opponents. And it was another weapon used frequently by the worldlings, if not by the prelatists, to charge them with preferring the Old Testament to the New, and adhering to the letter whilst rejecting the spirit, as we can see from Ben Jonson's "Bartholomew Fair," and other dramatic attacks on them. In Shylock this is brought out with great emphasis. They would show no mercy to the players, would drive them and their theatres from the most lucrative situations in the city; for these endangered by their ridicule the success of the party and shocked its feelings by their encouragement of frivolity and wickedness. Shylock would show no pity to Antonio, his scornful critic. They laid great stress upon the observance of the Sabbath, and upon those portions of the Bible that made the Lord a God of vengeance. He swears his most solemn oath "by our holy Sabbath," and he represents the amalgamation of religion and revenge. Portia stands for the ordinary Christian who appeals for mercy to God. But it sounds most inaptly on her lips when, addressing the Jew, she includes him amongst those who use the Lord's prayer and who expect salvation according to the doctrine of Christ;

"In the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation; we do pray for mercy
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy,"

Doubtless the poet was thinking rather of the appeal of the players to the Puritan magistrates of London when he put this speech into Portia's mouth. If it is so, then Shylock's reply "my deeds upon my head," an echo of the outcry of the Jews to Pilate appealing for the life of Christ "His blood be on us and our children," must have carried a
scathing and overloaded rebuke to those critics and enemies of the stage.

And we can well imagine players, who were classed by the Elizabethan law with vagabonds, using the words of Shylock to their righteous persecutors; "if you prick us do we not bleed? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest we will resemble you in that;" "The villany you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction." The cruelty of those in power taught the lesson of revenge to all who were subject to them. And as Shylock resolves on his villany ("I will have the heart of him if he forfeit,") he says to Tubal "meet me at our synagogue." It was this combination of outward piety and the viler passions that the dramatists and other worldlings accused the Puritans of. They prided themselves, according to the plays, on their superior virtue, on their resistance to all temptations of pleasure and on the sober and stoical upbringing of their children. So Shylock says to Lancelot in getting clear of him

"Thou shalt see, thy eyes shall be thy judge
The difference of old Shylock and Bassanio;"
"thou shalt not gourmandise
As thou hast done with me."

Then he bids his daughter,

"Lock up my doors, and when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then,
Nor gaze on Christian fools with varnished faces."

These were the usual musical instruments of the theatre, and it was on the stage that "varnished faces" especially appeared. All that was to be seen and heard within the walls of a theatre was "shallow foppery" to the Puritans in their "sober houses."

"Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter
My sober house."

And yet he was himself setting out for a feast, with much profession of unwillingness to go,—exactly the hypocrisy so often attributed to the Puritans by the play-wrights. As Portia says "It is a good divine that follows his own instructions."
And they not uncommonly represent the children of the Puritans as rising against their discipline and going over to the ungodly. So Jessica here reveals a most ungrateful and worldly spirit and talks with much disrespect of her father to the serving-man and others. She says to him

"Our house is hell, and thou a merry devil
Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness."

She adopts a manner of dress and speech and action that is opposed to all the sober tradition of her father's household; she appears in the garments of a page, she enters into the grossest conversation and accepts without protest the grossest suggestions as to her parentage, and she steals from her father to give to her lover and spends in the most extravagant and thoughtless way. And all this is laughed at as an excellent jest or passed over without criticism by the characters whom the dramatist clearly takes as representative of his own or the worldlings' side. And this is exactly consonant with the attitude of Jonson and other play-wrights towards the Puritans and their families.

Probably there were hypocrites in their ranks, as there are ever villains sheltering under every new and earnest form of religion and using it for their own evil purposes; and these generally make themselves most prominent. It was against their inconsistency of profession and practice that Shakespeare felt most strongly. He has no faith in mere lip-worship or in any religion that does not represent the whole life—its deeds and habits as well as its beliefs. Adherence to the mere letter of divine command, as of law, is a thing abhorrent to him. So Shylock and his schemes meet their due punishment in tragic failure. It is the broad spirit of religion existing under all forms and faiths that he has full sympathy for. And this is the main drift of Portia's speech—that where the spirit of humanity and mercy does not exist, there is nothing divine;

"It is an attribute of God himself
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice."

And in his time it was the most uncommon of qualities in the dealings of creed with creed. It was the recognised policy of every church that was dominant in any country to force the believers in other faiths into it. Threat, torture,
fine, imprisonment, every kind of force was uncondemned, if not highly approved, when conversion was the object. The Jewish faith had been the favourite scene of such missionary efforts in Christian nations for centuries. And now the divisions in Christendom gave a wider field for them and drew attention somewhat from the Jews. Catholic operated on Protestant and Protestant on Catholic. And in England a new schism was arising within the Church, and the Queen, with all her worldliness and tolerance, was by no means inapt at the lesson of schooling the Puritans and their divines. We hear of not a few, like Archbishop Grindall, whom she would dragoon into believing as she believed and as the church was supposed to believe. The poet has no sympathy with such attempts, opposed though he was to the Puritan schism and its faith and life. He does not approve of Shylock; as little does he approve of the kind of mercy dealt out to him; he has no belief in conversions by force. The pity of his audience he makes to go out to the Jew as the victim of this compulsory conversion stumbles forth to his fate. Instead of a comedy figure he becomes tragic. The speech of Portia on mercy is the poet's deliverance on the treatment of schismatics by the Church. And the difficulty of realising in that age the central idea of Christianity and of all noble religions is shown by the fact that the orator herself and her audience and sympathisers forget her glowing eulogy of the virtue as soon as it is they who have to put it into practice and not the Jew. He does not spare his own side any more than he does the critics of his profession—the Puritans, when their practice and preaching disagree. And that he has as little faith in easy conversions as in compulsory conversions we can see from the character he gives Jessica and the humorous criticism of them he puts into the mouth of Lancelot. When the Jew's daughter retorts, "I shall be saved by my husband; he hath made me a Christian," he replies, "truly the more to blame he: we were Christians enow before: e'en as many as could well live one by another. This making of Christians will raise the price of pork." It is little gain for religion to make or experience such conversions; it is still less gain for the common-weal.
Undoubtedly one of the chief lessons of this play was much needed by its age especially in England, that of mutual toleration by the various creeds and schisms. They had a most virulent hatred and scorn of each other, aggravated by the rapid changes in the religion of the court the sixteenth century had witnessed, and little as yet mollified or tempered by the visits of foreign potentates and magnates with alien if not pagan faiths. The picture of Portia’s wooers come from all the ends of the earth

(“The Hyrcanian deserts and vast wilds
Of wide Arabia are as thoroughfares now
For princes to come view fair Portia.”)

is meant partially to be a compliment to Elizabeth. Strangers came from all parts of Europe to see her and her court. And we can infer from Portia’s tolerant treatment of all comers how the English queen dealt with foreigners. One of the most subtle instances of this is the way she changes her language to suit the Prince of Morocco; to him, a Mahommedan, she says “First forward to the temple.” To Bassanio, the Christian, she speaks of the church. But something of the tolerance shown to foreigners was doubtless due to ignorance. For never would such a proud woman as Portia, still less her counterpart Elizabeth, have endured the approach of a Moor on any mission, least of all for matrimony, had she known of the life of the harem, and the Mahommedan custom as to marriage. Our heroine submits without protest to the possibility of such a fate when she allows the dark-skinned prince to try the lottery of the caskets and tells him that he stands

“as fair
As any comer she has looked on yet
For her affection.”

Doubtless such strange minglings of races and creeds in marriage must have occurred in that age, else we should not have had the stories of Othello and Desdemona, of Lorenzo and Jessica in our poet’s pages.

Shakespeare is not always so attentive to the niceties of time and locality as in this point. He makes Salarino, the Venetian, speak as if he were familiar all through his life with the English churches of the Reformation, where the poet must have seen in his boyhood the hour-glass turned to time the sermon.
"I should not see the sandy hour-glass run
But I should think of shallows and of flats."

And his reference to the Church as "the holy edifice of stone" is more appropriate to England than to Venice with its brick buildings. There are clear evidences in the play that the dramatist must have studied the Bishop's Bible; for its marginal note to Genesis ch. 30, v. 37 "Moses showeth afterward that God thus instructed Jacob" is clearly the source of Antonio's interpretation of Shylock's illustration of interest from the history of Jacob; the getting of so many "eanlings streak'd and pied" was not in Jacob's "power to bring to pass, but swayed and fashion'd by the hand of heaven." We can almost see the youthful Shakespeare pore over the Bible chained to the desk in that "holy edifice of stone" Stratford church. For he knows well both Old Testament and New, so many are the echoes of verses from either in this play, so quick is he at finding illustrations and phrases from them. Nor is his knowledge of the Apocrypha scanty. He has one or two echoes of maxims from Ecclesiasticus, as for example the beginning of Portia's speech on mercy; and Gratiano's "a Daniel come to judgment" is a reference to Daniel in "Susannah and the Elders" when the youthful prophet convicted the elders of false witness out of their own mouth.

But it was not the religious element of the new current of sixteenth century thought that the poet had most drunk of. He would not of course belie or outrage the reverences that he had learned in his boyhood. He had accepted the secular elements, the Renaissance, as far more representative of the coming times than the Reformation could be. Yet he never allowed the scepticism that was so prominent a phase of the Renaissance to thrust out reverence from his nature. If he had it to any great extent, he kept it in the background, in all his sixteenth century plays at least, in as much as he still had the more liberal section of Puritanism as an appreciable part of his audience. In the "Merchant of Venice" he gives no voice to the bolder thoughts on religion that distinguished the Italian Renaissance. His nearest approach to them is the neutrality he shows to all forms of faith. He has no harsh and condemning word for the Mahommedan. He might have spoken with some
severity, as the Italians themselves did, of the degeneracy of religious institutions in Venice; but he passes no comment as he makes Portia

"stray about
By holy crosses where she kneels and prays
For happy hours,"

and come with

"None but a holy hermit and her maid."

Nor does he let Shylock in retaliation for their scorn of his creed and worship, attack the religion of Christendom, but only its social customs that contradict its spirit—slavery and the looseness of the marriage bonds. It is the Jews and through them the Puritans that most suffer from his ridicule and then it is chiefly because of the dramatic necessities of the story. To a small extent the breach of his usual neutrality is due to ignorance of their customs. Had he known the Jews better, he would never have accepted the feature of his story, that makes Shylock demand mutilation of the body, even in a "merry sport;" nor would he, had he thought more of the family relations within a small and persecuted race, have made Jessica desert her father and her religion with such frivolous ease; it is true that he throws doubt in the jests of Lancelot over her Jewish parentage; but that only shifts the difficulty one step farther back.

As far as the Puritans were concerned, he evidently treated their beliefs and mode of life as mere eccentricity from the religious movement of the time or Reformation, and not the deeply-seated national passion that would involve England in civil war and revolution. He treated it, therefore, with light banter, sometimes with caricature, and finally with trenchant irony, as if it could be laughed out of existence.

His real interest was in the secular phase of the great spiritual movement of the time, as this play abundantly shows. It was not till the latter half of Elizabeth's reign that England came to her birthright in the Renaissance and claimed the intellectual wealth that lay before her in the literature and art, the scholarship and civilisation of Italy. Every writer of the time is embarrassed with the riches of
illustration that lie to his hand, and he too often lays on his borrowed and original classical learning "with a trowel."

Shakespeare, country-bred though he was, and free from the trammels of a university education and university precedents, indulges as much as anyone. And there are not a few instances in this play of over measure. Bassanio, Portia, Lorenzo and Jessica and even the clown Lancelot Gobbo are bitten with the gadfly of classical reference. It shows how widely the fashion had spread through English speech when he makes his serving-man speak of Scylla and Charybdis and the Sisters Three. One of the most singular things is that he keeps the conversation of the two almost characterless representatives of the gilded and fashionable youth of the time, Salanio and Salarino, almost free from it. at most an oath "by two-headed Janus" and a reference to "Nestor" and to "Venus' pigeons," evidently commonplaces of the day. Even Gratiano, the would-be wit of the exquisites, has little or nothing of it (one reference to Pythagoras), although he has so many speeches and jests to make. We can understand why the Duke with his dignity as judge to support does not indulge in so popular a fashion of speech; and Shylock, as a Jew of the money-making and not of the learned or professional type, is naturally ignorant of it. Of the unsuccessful wooers the Spanish or French prince, Arragon, has no tincture of it, whilst the Moor, as the representative of Arabic culture which was founded partly on Greek, is no mean adept at it with his fable of Hercules and Lichas. But that Antonio, "the royal merchant," should have no tinge of humanism or classical reference is significant; he knows his Bible as well as Shylock, but he shows no knowledge of classics; perhaps the meaning is that the merchants of London, whom he doubtless represents, considered this fashionable culture or at least this fashion of speech beneath their dignity.

It is a striking thing that it is the lovers that indulge most in the fashion. Bassanio and Lorenzo, the bankrupt adventurers, the fortune-hunters, are brimming over with conceits and illustrations from the classical learning of the time. They are doubtless the representatives of the travelled men of the world who have caught the latest and most effective embellishments of courtiers and smart men
of the highest social circles. That Portia should be even more accomplished than Bassanio in the use of classical allusion is a proof, if we had no other, that the noblest English-women of the time, like Lady Jane Grey, Bacon’s mother and aunt, and the Queen herself, made careful study of Greek and Roman mythology and history, if not of the Greek and Latin tongues. That Jessica could talk glibly of Cupid and Thisbe and Medea proves no more perhaps than that all young women of a certain social rank, Jew or Gentile, read the fashionable novels of the time, like the Arcadia and Greene’s stories, and learned and sang some of the love lyrics which were full of such names and references.

We might draw an inference from the fact that the lovers most indulge in allusions to classical mythology; it is that there was a close bond between the amorous and the classical in this age. And we know it to be the case that the Latin love-poets and especially Ovid were the vade mecum of the Elizabethan lover. It is the love lyrics that are especially saturated with classicality; and it is Shakespeare’s love comedies, and the love episodes of his plays generally, that contain most of his debts to the poems of his favourite—Ovid. There was a strong vein of gallantry, if not of the erotic, in the Italian Renaissance. It was a part of its return to naturalism that it should indulge freely in all the passions, but especially in that of love. The Italian cities of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with all their wealth won in commerce, revealed the enervating influence of their luxury chiefly on the side of the amorous; they were unrestrained, if not gross, in their amours. And it is in Italy that Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists generally laid the scene of the love tragedies like “Romeo and Juliet” and love comedies like “The Taming of the Shrew” and “Much Ado About Nothing.” It is Italy that is usually the scene of the Jacobean comedy of intrigue. If we are to trust, not merely plays like the “Merchant of Venice,” but sober censors like Ascham and Phillip Stubbes, this taint came into England with Italian humanism and Italian fashions. And we may take the grossness that enters not only into the conversations with Jessica and of Jessica, but in the last scene of the play into that even of
Portia, as evidence that the best women of the poet's audiences were not unaccustomed to broad if not impure remarks. With their maid-servants and even with their men-servants the great ladies seem to have permitted considerable licence of speech. Nerissa is on almost an equal footing with her mistress Portia; whilst Lancelot is insolent and even gross in his jests to his master's daughter Jessica and to his temporary master Lorenzo at Belmont. The clownish wit and freedoms of the servants must have been one of the most trying features of household life in sixteenth century England. The professional clown had almost vanished and his functions were evidently divided between the young jesters of society like Gratiano (who says "let me play the fool") and the boorish humourists among the servants like Lancelot, who is in the Folio or actors' edition called "the clown" all through the play. Several of the characters express with some asperity the censure of the age on this new division of labour; Lorenzo is most outspoken; "How every fool can play upon the word; I think the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence and discourse grow commendable in none only but parrots."

Yet the young beaux like Lorenzo himself and Gratiano and even Bassanio, were not much less offensive when they indulged in euphuism—that English twin of classicism in this age—over the niceties of love, (as in the lyric)

Tell me where is fancy bred
Or in the heart or in the head"

and when they boasted of their amorous victories. Portia when about to don masculine attire, tells how she will

"speak of frays
Like a fine bragging youth; and tell quaint lies
How honourable ladies sought my love
Which I denying they fell sick and died,"

"then repent
And wish for all that, that I had not killed them,
And twenty of these puny lies I'll tell."

They were gross, too, as well as subtle and euphuistic concerning love, as we can see from Lorenzo.

The matrimonial practice of the age as seen in the compulsion of the caskets and in the lightning-swift wooing of Portia, Nerissa, and Jessica by Bassanio, Gratiano, and
Lorenzo, and the matrimonial theory of the age as stated by Portia

("her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed
As from her lord, her governor, her king.")

still reveal the old trail of the subjection of women and explain why they had to accept such husbands and such frivolous and disrespectful if not gross speech from their wooers. It was the fashion of the time, perhaps emphasised by the example of Italy.

But Elizabethan England was saved to some extent and for some time from the Italian taint by a certain cosmopolitanism of taste and imitation. Portia indicates it in giving a witty account of her English wooer Falconbridge;

"he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany and his behaviour everywhere."

This eclecticism was doubtless due to the vast expansion of English commerce in the sixteenth century. It is not a Venetian, but an English merchant, that the poet pictures in Antonio, who has ventures for Tripolis, Lisbon, Barbary, India and Mexico, whose argosies over-peer the petty traffickers "like signiors and rich burghers of the flood," "the pageants of the sea"; for Venice had no dealings with America and could have had none with Mexico. The "rich burghers" are English and it is English "petty traffickers" that "curtsey" and "do them reverence." Hence the cosmopolitan quality of the English character and manners and clothes. But it was only superficial; for they clung to their insularity of education; even the travelled young noblemen, like Falconbridge, knew nothing of foreign tongues, whilst foreigners were as scornful of English. "He hath neither Latin, French nor Italian" says Portia and she "has a poor pennyworth in the English"; "who can converse with a dumb show?" And yet there was even at that time, although two centuries after Chaucer's, a certain chaotic looseness about English itself; London speech was still eclectic, using provincialisms, not merely in the phrases of clowns like Lancelot, but in educated conversation as between Antonio and Shylock (e.g., "whose own hard dealings teaches them.") It was in many particulars uncertain as to what was the standard. Little wonder that
it clad itself, even amongst men-servants, in a wondrously eclectic vocabulary gathered from all parts of the world. The poet, like his printers, had no sure instinct as to what was correct in his own tongue. We are not surprised, then, to find that although he has evidently learned Italian, he accents Stephano on the second syllable and transfers traghetto into tranect. So it is with his knowledge of Venice; though it is exact enough to be personal and direct, like that of many in his audience, he introduces the jury system into the republic and speaks of it as though it were a royal chartered city of England.

Even the moral sense of Englishmen was a little uncertain, whether that uncertainty was a result of the Renaissance movement or not. They would, like Italians, persecute the Jews for usury, for putting out their money at interest, and yet launch their fortunes or borrowings in great gambling transactions, and applaud Jessica as a "gentle" just after she has stolen her father's jewels and ducats. They would attack men of other races and religions for intolerance and preach sermons to them on mercy, and yet bait them as the Christians bait Shylock here. They would praise justice and freedom in most hyperbolic language and yet encourage slavery directly or indirectly, as Shylock says, and use the rack to extort confessions, a practice the poet condemns as we can see from the euphuistic reference to it by Bassanio and Portia ("I live upon the rack." "Where men enforced do speak anything;" "Promise me life and I'll confess the truth;" "Well then confess and live.")

Some of this was doubtless due to the inherent incapacity of most Englishmen to get back to first principles and their tendency to accept scraps of philosophy or morality or belief that will not match. Enlightened though the Elizabethan age was, we can see from this play how many superstitions were rife in it, belief in palmistry, in the fore-shadowing of the future by dreams and omens, in "o'er-looking" by the evil eye, in groans and sighs mortifying or killing the heart, in the blood as the seat of the passions.

Part was also due to the new wealth and the luxury and degeneration it brought into many circles. The great expansion of English commerce made many rich beyond their dreams and gave superfluity to many more. The
younger generation especially sought outlets for their fortunes in new extravagance. They brought what expensive fashions they could from Italy, such as torch-light parades and masquerading from Venice, so that link boys became a common feature of London life; the women took to painting their faces and wearing false hair. More legitimate art was introduced, too, as we can see from Gratiano's simile "his grandsire cut in alabaster," from one or two comparisons such as "laugh like parrots at a bagpiper" which seem to indicate pictures the poet has seen, but still more from the general atmosphere of art that belongs to the Belmont scenes of the play, which must have reminded the "gentles" on the stage of English counterparts. Music especially was greatly affecting the English imagination. The poet and his age even speculated on the ethical effect of music; it causes melancholy in Jessica; it has, they believed, power over the natures of beasts and the souls of savages; and they were inclined to attribute to it a lofty moral influence. Nothing shows so well the time's great enthusiasm for music as that speech of Lorenzo's which charges the unmusical man with "treasons, stratagems and spoils." Great sums were spent on the various arts; but especially on architecture and music. These and other extravagances reduced many of the younger generation to the state of the prodigal of Gratianos's simile "lean, rent and beggar'd by the strumpet wind." Bold and yet loveable Bassanios, giving banquets at the late and fashionable hour of five, and hunting for heiresses, all on money borrowed from friends, and loose-principled and gross-tongued Lorenzos, trying to recoup their ruined fortunes by abducting Jewesses with their ducats and jewels, must have been no uncommon feature of English society towards the close of the sixteenth century. More than Bassanio could speak of their too "swelling port" and

"the great debts
Wherein my time, something too prodigal
Hath left me gaged."

Evidently as early as 1594, the probable date of the play, the poet had noticed a melancholy in both men and women resulting from this extravagance and its consequences. Antonio enters sad and cannot explain his sadness. Portia
enters dejected and has no reason to give; "my little body is aweary of this great world." It was a fashion of the time as we can see from Jacques in "As You Like it." But the fashion has to be accounted for. It goes with fondness for moralising over life—an ethical maximism that belongs to the age. It is true we have to discount it somewhat for the almost Greek openness with which the men of the play and the time give vent to their inmost emotions. Shylock storms and rages through the streets. Antonio, in spite of all the cool resolve he shows in inviting the knife with a jest, weeps over Bassanio and wrings his hand at his friend's departure on a wooing expedition. After all this has been allowed for, we have a residuum of the fashionable melancholy of the men and women of the time to account for. It is not the ruin of fortunes; for Bassanio and Lorenzo are cheerful if not merry. It is the sense of unattained ideals. The Renaissance, and the reign of Elizabeth had begun with great expectations, noble pictures of what man might become. The century was dying out with these all unfulfilled; it was "aweary of this great world" and its cares and even its pleasures; they had come to "dust and ashes." As far as the poet was concerned this thought had not eaten very deeply into his mind. He was just conscious of it around him amongst men and women, young as well as old, rich and smiled-on by fortune as well as beggared. It had come from Italy as a constituent part of the almost exhausted Renaissance movement. But it found ready soil in the English mind at the close of Elizabeth's reign.

It is the melancholy of a time that has come to see the limits of its powers. Every great period begins with boundless hope of its own capacity to set the world to rights. As it grows in strength and stature its hope takes on the appearance of partial fulfilment. Great deeds are done, great thoughts tremble on the verge of great utterance, great passions sweep through the soul and seek harmonious expression in art. Science seems about to unveil the mystery of being and opens vistas that seem to stretch into infinity. The past yields all its knowledge and yet is mute before the mystic song of the future; all that has been falls into shadow beside what is to be. The whole spiritual atmosphere is charged with magnetic impulse that reaches
from far systems and still distant ages. There is hope, joy, exhilaration in the manifold activities that fill the life with success and the unlimited prospect of success. The laws and beliefs of the past have grown feeble and dim and threaten to moulder into dust like the men that educated them. But there are noble laws and beliefs to take their place—laws and beliefs that are nearer to the heart of truth, and still nobler approaches to the divinely final loom upon the horizon. The faintness of despair has vanished for ever from the world.

Its noontide feels no abatement of its powers, no weariness in their exercise. It still discovers and unveils the mysteries of nature, it still produces marvels of artistic beauty, and is wrapt up in its own aims and projects that still seem to touch the horizon of the infinite. There is not the buoyancy of exultation of its earlier years and work. Yet it feels able to master all that comes within its sphere and, if it had only unlimited time, all the secrets of the universe. It has unshrinking confidence and every success it achieves makes it bolder and more masculine. Only the short span of days and years and centuries gives it pause.

At last it begins to measure what it has done, and a question arises within its sense of victory and self-satisfaction. It discovers the limits of its years. And then there grows on it the sense of the paltriness of all its achievements and creations in the shadow of infinite space. It turns to the past and finds it less despicable than it had thought; the dead ages have close kinship and likeness to itself; and they are dead and their names that sounded so great to themselves are most of them forgotten, and the rest mere names; even their gigantic memorials and tombstones that were to outlast time have to be dug up from the dust and their meaning and purpose deciphered by scholarly pains and ingenuity; the heroes are myths that are attributed as much to imagination as to reality; the wondrous fabric of their civilization is but luminous mist woven by the dawn of the world; their deeds that seemed to echo to the ends of the earth are but "the shadow of a dream."

And this, it reflects, is to be the fate of its own great thoughts and books and achievements. "Dust and ashes" echoes through its spirit. All its immortal fame is nothing
but breath that dies out into the "vast inane" almost before
the carved lines on the headstone have grown too dim for
human eyes to read. "Dust and ashes" begins to re-echo
through all its philosophy. Hope has lost the rich colours
of its dawn. And it feels its source of energy wester
towards set. Its ideals—how tarnished they seem, how far
from fulfilment! Its great projects—how poor and trivial
they measure now that some of them are achieved! It
begins to be "aweary of this great world."

Not that it has yet realised the need of other consolations.
The fire of manhood burns too strongly in its veins. It has
not reached even the entrance to the valley of the shadow of
death. It only feels at times the breath of its corrupted
and lethargic airs. It only begins to meditate over mortality,
and feels it yet how near dissolution draws to it, how
closely hung over it is the pall of oblivion. It is not
unwilling to discuss the mysteries of being—but only in a
poetic way. It speculates on the problems of the soul and
the great worlds that give life and sadness to the face of
night. But it comes no nearer to solution than some
brilliant metaphor that touches its imagination, like the
Pythagorean harmony that this Elizabethan time thought it
found in the human spirit and the circling spheres.

"There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls."

It toys and coquettes with new and eccentric creeds and
soon grows weary of its own fancies. Its meditations have
not gone deep enough to strike on the foundations of life or
religion. They are only enough to affect the passing mood
with their futility and sadness. Its melancholy is but
another plume to the cap of youth, another grace to the eye
and gait of beauty, a fashion of the blood at best.

And the poet wears it still as but a poetic mannerism. He
is many years from the deep dejection of his Lear or even
the half-philosophic, half-capricious melancholy of Hamlet.
There are no life-problems in this play, no attempts to
probe the mystery of being, no sense of its depth. He is
busy with the passing questions of the time; the relation-
ship of nation to nation, race to race and creed to creed is
his farthest reaching. He was not even penetrative enough to see the thews and limbs of a young giant in the infant Puritanism; it was only ridiculous for its clumsy assumption of sober gait and face, and its awkward efforts to crush gaiety and pleasure. He was too much absorbed in the great movement of the Renaissance that was just beginning to die out in frivolity and grossness. He did his best to give new life to what was noble in it; and yet the melancholy of its exhaustion at times stole over him. So near was he to the close of the period and the century that he began to be "aweary of this great world."
THE ART AND HUMOUR
OF
"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"
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THE reign of Elizabeth is the first great mercantile period of England. Her ships had begun to traverse every sea, and her merchants had begun to think of competing with the great traders of the Continent; they were venturing even into regions that had scarcely been known to European commerce. And London was beginning to feel the thought of soon becoming the great mercantile centre of the world stir her blood. But not yet had she come up with her rivals, although she was near enough to them to feel their example stimulate her ambition and energy. Close at hand the Dutch in spite of their persecutions by Philip were beginning to forge ahead. Whilst Spain, with her possessions in America and great fleets of galleons laden with precious metals and precious stuffs, stirred her envy and hostility most. It was almost inevitable that in the race for wealth, England should come into conflict with this great treasure-house of the gold and silver of the new world. Lying as she did on the track to the West, with even better positions and opportunities for setting out on voyages thither, she was bound to feel that Spain had monopolised a road to fortune that belonged alike to her. With her coast population all seafaring for long centuries it needed only this incitement of envy to set her at variance with the proud conqueror of Mexico and Peru; the new religious division of the European world was the occasion; but the real aim was the mercantile supremacy of America and the Indies.
London was the heart of this new English life, and into her the new wealth flowed. She looked for guidance in the spending as well as the making of her fortune to Venice, the great heir of all mediaeval commerce and luxury. For several centuries Italy had been the mediator between the East and the West, and had taken the place in the modern world that Greece had held in the ancient, gathering within her narrow borders "all the wealth of Ormuz and of Ind," and trying to find objects on which to spend it. Her little city republics felt themselves able to cope with the greatest monarchies and their fleets and armies; and with so much concentration of riches in such small spaces, and the large and gracious leisure that is the common consequence they made thought and beauty and luxury their aim as no monarch with vast dominions could do. Each could make her streets and buildings the treasure-houses of all the art of the world, so many princes' revenues could she spend within her walls or borders. From the twelfth to the sixteenth century Italy then had been the home of art and literature and culture.

But of all Italian cities, none was so striking to the traveller as Venice. Though the sceptre was about to pass from her hands, this was the heyday of her fame and fortune; though commerce was already leaving Italy and settling on the western shores of Europe, she had still such a share of overland Eastern trade, and so many possessions along the Mediterranean, that she did not yet feel the effect of the change. Great as she had been in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for her wealth and art and power, she was still greater now and still prouder of her treasures and her merchants. And with her water-streets and gondolas and marble palaces and noble pictures, hers was the name that came to an Englishman's lips in Shakespeare's day whenever he spoke of art or culture or greatness of commerce. With her concentration of thinkers and poets and painters in her rich buildings, with her merchants living like princes of fairydom in their palaces along the Adriatic, she was almost a dream of romance realised.

Thus when in 1594 the poet felt that London was becoming a great centre of commerce, her merchant adventurers were employing the blood of England on
voyages that needed great courage if not heroism, and the overflow of wealth was beginning to create a great leisured class that demanded amusement and occupation for their leisure, he turned to the queen of mercantile cities throned on the waters of the Adriatic for a theme. Thus would he “hold the mirror up” to the nature that thronged the theatre. Thus would he enlist the interest of the citizen class most of which was so hostile to the stage, and lead them to spend their new-won wealth upon art and literature. The Thames by night with its sloping gardens and terraces and stairs, its torchlit boats flashing up and down its glassy surface, and the sound of music and mirth from the rich mansions that fringed it suggested analogy with the Grand Canal of Venice; but daylight even though it shone on a motley throng and dresses of varied and bright hue, revealed the unreality of the comparison; no marble palaces or rich-mosaiced buildings, no loggias or squares filled with noble statues, no galleries lined with splendid pictures, no libraries shelved with the treasures of Greek and Roman literature. It was little wonder that young Englishmen crowded to the water-city of the South, to see its marvels of art and learn the ways of highly-cultured men, little wonder that when they returned they wished to have the brilliant life of its streets and squares and princely houses lived over again in mimic way upon the stage. It was to their tastes and their memories he appealed when he wrote “The Merchant of Venice.”

Most readers and critics are puzzled by this title which he has given to his play. To them it is the tragedy and comedy of the Jew and his surroundings and revenge; for Portia and her wooing come in but as the happy background to the almost tragic issue, mingling her interests and fate with those of Shylock and Jessica. The merchant, Antonio, seems but a secondary figure, needed, it is true, as the victim of the master-passion, but overshadowed by the gaunt miser and his love of blood and hatred of the Christian with his unpercented benevolence. And all the great actors have emphasised this view of the play and its purpose by their assumption of the revenger’s character and elevation of it into strong relief against the others. But this is to ignore the poet’s art; for with deliberate intention
he named the play, knowing though he did that the popular element in it would be the revenge and trial of the Jew. Amongst a score of stage representations of the subject of Jewish usury and malice, following on the execution of the Queen's Jewish physician, Dr. Lopez, he gave a title to his comedy that would not reveal its connection with the topic of the hour. Clearly it was no haphazard act. He meant the prominent feature of the play to be the merchant-life of Venice in all its various phases, its appearance in the streets and marts, its open-handed generosity to friends, its risks and ventures with its far-sailing ships, its strict attention to the very letter of bonds, its democracy of wealth in the state, its hatred of usury and danger from the Jews and their loans, its princely palaces and estates for retirement on the shores of the mainland, its great riches attracting nobles and rulers from all quarters of the world to seek the hands of its daughters, and its proud preference of a poor Venetian merchant to all the birth and state of foreign princes. Without this unifying element, the play consists of two series of scenes unfagotted by any bond except the two or three characters that are common to the two. The casket plot has little or no connection with the plot based on the eccentric bond except that Portia is the object of the one and the saviour in the other. But if we accept the poet's title as the description of both, we see that the decision of the caskets is the natural device of a merchant prince the father of Portia, that it is a merchant who wins her and that it is a merchant state that guarantees the Jew in demanding his bond and Portia in the saving of the merchant friend of her husband. All the characters, except the Prince of Arragon and the Prince of Morocco are in some way connected with the mercantile life of Venice, even the Duke of Venice being but the senior magistrate elected by his fellow merchants.

Viewed in this light, the scenes and characters and comedy take their full significance. Round Antonio gathers a group of merchants, who represent all the morality and ambitions and manners of the highest commercial life to be found in the Europe of the sixteenth century. Antonio, himself, is its noblest embodiment, worthy to be held up as a model to London and her merchant-adventurers. He
will have no dealings with usury or usurers, either by way of loan or borrowing, as long as no higher motive than the making of money presses; he will have no "breed of barren metal." Yet Shakespeare was at this very time or soon after lending money on mortgage; we have evidence in documents; so that this virtue of Antonio, as a merchant, is meant only to be dramatic, to bring out the nobleness of his nature where friendship is concerned. He will break through his rule when his friend Bassanio needs it, and even ask a loan from a Jew whom he has constantly reviled for usury, and hindered in his trade of lending at interest. But there is one seeming flaw in the art of the play connected with this; it is left quite unexplained why he should not, now he has broken his rule, break it again and rescue himself out of the hands of this enemy of his, by borrowing from a friend for a few days till his ships should arrive; and even if he would not move for his own sake lest it should seem selfishness, his devoted followers Salanio and Salarino have money enough themselves, or could have credit enough to pay the Jew so small a sum as three thousand ducats. Perhaps they let the day pass for paying the loan, thinking the alternative was, as the Jew said, but "a merry sport." Yet it was foolhardy to madness to trust a business enemy who had been so often persecuted and reviled. And it is left unexplained too why Antonio, so great and rich a merchant with so great credit, should not be able to borrow the sum without interest from Christian merchants.

Perhaps the anomaly is to be explained by a trait in Antonio's character, a trait that belongs to him as the representative of merchant life in Venice—a certain recklessness of generosity that comes rather from inherited wealth than from hard-earned riches. The generation of Venetian merchants in Shakespeare's day have the characteristics of those who have not risen by slow steps to fortune. They all have a scorn of small gains such as Shylock and the Jews made in usury. They have, in fact, what is far worse than usury, the gambling, speculative spirit that arises in a mercantile community with huge fortunes amongst them made or doubled in single strokes. Great riches won in commerce tempt the less rich as well as the poorer to risk their all in an effort to multiply it in a
year. It is this feature of Venetian life that the poet emphasises in his group of merchants. Antonio has ventured the whole of his fortune in argosies sent to a dozen corners of the world, doubtless expecting a princely return. Bassanio, his friend has lost all his fortune in speculations; and, after borrowing from his patron to the fullest extent, comes, like a true gambler, to borrow finally 3000 ducats for his great and final stroke. With the confidence of the gambler who thinks his luck is going to turn, he gets his friend to imperil his life for him; and that friend in the same reckless spirit is willing to submit, for the sake of his unfortunate protégé, to taking a loan from a Jew whom he has again and again reviled and obstructed for lending money on interest; and as the three months of the bond run out, and none of his Andrews return, it is doubtless this speculative imprudence that makes him neglect the commonest precautions and trust to the Jew’s chancing to have the same generosity as he would himself exhibit in the same circumstances. He has been as reckless in scorning and reviling and spitting upon Shylock, and thus making enemies of those who might have been neutral. Then when the trial is over and he is saved from the revenge and hate of this gratuitously-made foe, he as easily forgets the attempt upon his life and pleads that part of the penalty be remitted. His generosity is loose and purposeless and unthinking, just like his pride and condescension and scorn; it costs him nothing to give or forgive; and without fortune, he would have been the careless, happy bohemian as ready to lend his friend’s money and possessions as his own.

Portia shows the same lavish generosity; but it is more thoughtful and far-seeing. From her merchant ancestors and their hereditary wealth she has the speculative spirit, ready to trust to luck; but there is more wisdom and active virtue in her display of it; for she has left the atmosphere of money-making, and is employed only in money-spending; and her woman's instincts and finely trained tastes tell her how to lay out her fortune best. She sees in a moment the recklessness of her husband and his friend, and she as quickly sees how to rescue them from the dilemma without imposing her wealth upon them or obtruding her generous actions. With the same keen foresight and high-toned
wisdom she manages the Jew in the trial, leading him by gradual stages to self-revelation of all his unmerciful spirit, and accepting the platform he ultimately chooses to stand on, the letter of the law. In this duel between the wider spirit of humanity and the narrow intolerance of legality, the art displayed in the character of the two chief actors is marvellous. There is nothing to approach it in the early plays of Shakespeare, except the wooing scene of the young widow in "Richard III." over the coffin of the husband the crookback has murdered. Whilst the characters of Portia and of Shylock transcend anything the poet has yet created for subtlety of art.

The contrast between them, their spirits and the atmosphere around is meant to reveal how wide a chasm may divide phases of commercial life. Shylock represents the sordid depth to which the human spirit may fall in its pursuit of wealth. Portia represents the nobleness of heart and brain, of life and surroundings that a mercantile fortune may permit of. And around them are groups that show their spirit in various degrees. In Jessica, dishonesty and heartlessness are the outcome of her father's absorption in filthy lucre, whilst there remains with her love of beauty and romance. In Tubal, avarice has not yet driven out devotion to a friend. But the life of all three stands out in dark relief against the generous extravagance and lordly air that belong to the true merchant-life of Venice. Bassanio and Lorenzo are instances of the adventurers who seek to make their fortune in the world of romance and matrimony. Bassanio at least has been a spendthrift, ready to risk all and more than all in order to gain still more. They are not over-scrupulous about the means of attaining their amorous and financial end. But they are both lordly in their unscrupulousness and touched with the romance of life and the poetry of nature. Antonio, mature and wise though he is assumed to be, has the magnificent simplicity that belongs to a man who has dealt with fortunes like halfpence; he takes no sordid precautions for the success of his ventures; he has never an afterthought in his generosity and self-sacrifice for a friend, no penitence or conditioning in his scorn of what he thinks sordid and mean; he is splendid and gracious in all his virtues and faults, in his recklessness,
his condescension and contempt, in his sadness and acceptance of his fate, in his unresenting endurance and his forgiveness. But it is Portia that shows this lordliness and magnificence of Venetian mercantile life at its highest. It is true her father has retired from its eddies; but he passes on to her his tendency to be fascinated by its speculation and its reliance on luck. She has its pride and condescension along with its democratic preference of a Venetian merchant to all the princes in the world. She has its rapidity of action and unbounded confidence in the power of managing. She combines its magnanimity to friends and guests with its keen eye for every loophole in a rival's or enemy's case. And around all her actions is thrown an air of romance. Our imaginations are touched by her every movement. Never did commerce rise to such a pitch of aristocratic splendour and poetic grace and beauty.

But there is a Venetian group that takes away from the romance of the life. The friends and followers of Antonio Bassanio and Lorenzo have something commonplace about them. They reduce the poetry of magnanimity to the prose of selfishness. They think of nothing but their ventures upon the ocean and the vulgar enjoyment of life. They are the merchants who supply the wit of the play, Salanio, Salarino and Gratiano, representatives of the gilded youth of the time. They are very proud of their jesting; and yet it is the shallowest euphuism, straining after fine or absurd analogies, and when found, drawing them out into the thinnest thread of wit. It must have been chagrining to the poet to have Elizabeth's courtiers, with brains and ambitions and manners such as these young men have, sitting upon the stage and lisping out their infantile nothings upon his plays, with the air of having said something very superior. He did not often take his revenge, and here they are but mildly rebuked in being reproduced as these Venetian parasites.

Salanio and Salarino have some little respect for themselves; but like summer flies and summer friends they disappear as soon as they have brought out the relations of Shylock to Antonio, and have felt that the latter is utterly ruined. They condole with him as long as they feel he is the richest merchant in the place and try to raise his spirits
by their jests; but when they see him drift into the power of
the revengeful Jew, they never think of holding out a
helping hand to him, they vanish from the stage; youths of
such expensive manners and tastes could surely have paid
the three thousand ducats; but it never enters into shallow
brains to do so; they are too much absorbed in their own
enjoyment of existence, in the vanity of their fine jests
and analogies, and in the puny condescensions of social life.

Every refined age and circle is full of these gorgeous and
buzzing ephemera that sail on the wind of fortune and look
down with lofty scorn on their plodding fellow-mortals.
We need not expect individuality in them; that lies in their
tailor's hands. And so the two here look as like each other
as fly does to fly in the summer air. Perhaps Salarino is a
shade more observant and witty, perhaps Salanio a shade
nearer to melancholy; it is Salarino that can classify men
into those "that laugh like parrots at a bagpiper" and those
"of vinegar aspect;" it is Salanio that utters most sympathy
with Antonio in his misfortunes; but both are inveterate
gossips, eager to give and hear the last news upon the
Rialto; and both flit about together from masque to masque
and rout to rout, shunning all duty, all that demands
sacrifice in life. They are too slight in their feelings and
wit to fit a scene so close to tragedy as that of the trial; and
so they vanish before it.

Of a different type of the gilded youth is Gratiano. You
find in most social circles devoted to the pursuit of amuse-
ment, a member of it, generally a shallow young man, who
is willing to act the buffoon, and to suffer all the indignities
of the position for the sake of the laughter he excites; he is
boisterous, obtrusive, overbearing and witless in his mockery,
fearing and hating the silence and critical look of the wise,
"speaking an infinite deal of nothing," yet vain of the
laughter which it needs no wit on his part to stir in his
customary audience, toothless in both wit and wickedness,
yet loving the reputation of both and landing at last in a
domestic fiasco, in being the abject slave of some woman of
even inferior position and capacity. Such is Gratiano in
the circle of Bassanio and Antonio. One or two of his
satiric pictures like that of the silent sage sitting "like his
grandsire cut in alabaster" "whose visage does cream and
mantle like a standing pond;” and one or two of his smart echoes like “A second Daniel, a Daniel Jew” will pass muster. But we grow weary of him and them, and it is only his comparative fierceness of mockery in the trial scene and his comparative silence in the casket and other scenes that reconcile us to his presence; whilst it is a pleasure to see the tables turned upon him by his wife Nerissa in the matter of the ring. We know from his remark with which the play ends that this smart serving maid and echo of Portia is about to chastise him into a proper and obedient and quiet husband. Reflected or original, she has got a practical wit that with her woman’s capacity for skirmishing and fluent speech, and her quick instincts, will easily overcome his “skipping spirit” and clumsy masculine jesting. A few months and we should see his hyperbolic picture of himself under restraint fulfilled; he would

“put on a sober habit,
Talk with respect, and swear but now and then,
Wear prayer-books in his pocket, look demurely,
Nay more, while grace is saying, hood his eyes
Thus with his hat, and sigh, and say amen,
Use all the observance of civility,
Like one well studied in a sad ostent
To please his grandam.”

It is your bold, boisterous, rude buffoons that are sure to be cowed at home.

Even though now and again his wit rises above the artificial and strained, and becomes entertaining, his friends will be well-pleased at the change. But almost as great a social pest as the buffoon and professional wit is the clownish humourist and practical joker like Launcelot Gobbo. He is a rustic, uneducated edition of Gratiano, and must have tried the patience of even his new master, Bassanio, by his crude familiarities and irrelevant jesting. He thinks he is called on to exercise his humour on all occasions, in season and out of season; he must play his practical joke on his blind old father, even when they have not met for many a day, and would have mountebanked “upon his mother’s grave.” The best thing about his jests is that they contain much humour, that he is not conscious of; his malapropisms are often very apt; and his blunders are
almost always amusing. But he is altogether too self-conscious to be a true humourist; even in his soliloquies, where indeed he is at his best, he is too vain of his fine dialogue between the fiend and his conscience to make us laugh. He is, in fact, a rude echo or rough copy of the young Venetian wits, who like Gratiano, would ever be jesting. And in listening to them he seems to have been like Holofernes at a feast of learning and stolen the scraps. For he lards his conversation with references even to classics such as Scylla and Charybdis and the Sisters Three. Yet he is an advance on the humourists of the earlier comedies; he is the transition from Launce and Speed to the professional clown who wears motley, the philosophical Touchstone, and the keen-witted practical joker Feste. Like the latter he is "a merry devil," and robs life "of some taste of tediousness." Like them he combines humour and wit, sly satire and strained affectations. But like Launce and Speed, he is a tedious fool, irrelevant in his talk and desultory in the performance of his duties.

By far the deepest humour of the play is that which permeates its more serious purpose and scenes. Portia, when criticising the merits of her various wooers, mocks them with sharp wit and yet feels that she is jesting over her own destiny. Perhaps the best of the practical jokes in the play, and there are more than usual, is that of the rings; and this deals too with life-and-death interests, the happiness or misery of their married life. But it is only in the wolvish jests of Shylock that we find the fundamental humour of existence. As he is hunting his enemy to the death, he plays like a tiger with his victim. His is the humour of exultation over a life he is about to tread into the ground. So exhilarated is he by finding at last an opportunity of revenging his lifelong persecution and wrongs that his gloom and fierce absorption in his pursuit of money cannot help breaking forth into jest. He finds out the most subtle shift for making the Christian laws crush a Christian and truly makes of it "a merry sport." It is his fancy impels him to this, he says himself in the trial; and his fancy extracts from this pound of flesh all the sport at the expense of the Christians and their laws and justice and mercy it is capable of giving. Through most of the play it
is he that is the "merry dev'l" and not Lancelot. And only the final catastrophe makes us feel safe in presence of this demoniac humour existing in human form.

It was not long before that the poet had begun to realise how devilish mockery might be. His Richard the Third was his first representation of the devil turned jester, of the omnipotence of evil allying itself with humour. The merely human heart, when about to perpetrate some cruel or revengeful act, hurries towards it in breathless silence and fear that it should reveal itself to men, and comes from it hiding every trace of the perpetrating hand. This English king murders the heirs to the throne, clears a path to it for himself by bloodshed and plays jestingly with the deeds and their results in humorous omnipotence. He wooes the widow of one of his victims over his coffin, and wins her too to abandon her weeping and her funeral passion and turn back to marriage with the crookback himself. And through the play he laughs at every human feeling, even when he is trying to touch hearts with it for their destruction. He has stripped himself of every weakness that would mar his course; alone he knows he must be; even the mother who bore him turns against him and he mocks her with the mimicry of filial love. His rejection of all human love or pity or mercy gives him the feeling of omnipotence over those dull fools that still fear conscience; and like marionettes he makes them move upon the stage of the world or away to the block he sends them in the spirit of jest. How he glories in the foul wrongs he does, and in the ruin he sows athwart the land! And his exultation makes him jest with his victims, and laugh in his sleeve as he hoodwinks them.

It is the same comedy of the Inferno that the poet brings into his Othello and Lear. Iago is the devil in human form that counts all human life and human virtue but a farce to be laughed at and simulated as on a stage; Edmund is less crude in his fiendish mimicry of human emotion; he is more the master of crime who never hesitates at any evil deed, and plays the hypocrite because he has been slighted by his own father. Shylock comes between the royal crookback and the tragic humourists of evil. He has good cause to hate all Christian humanity, so shameful have been
the scorn and revilings he has suffered from them; the mockery and foul contempt have been enough to turn all passion in his heart to inhuman revenge. And thus he is more human in his fiendish exultation and wild humour. He does not make us shudder merely that such souls do live in forms of men; but when he is foiled of his revenge we half pity him as he passes out into his Cain-like outlawry and hate of all mankind.

Not half so real in its terror is the humour of those supernatural embodiments of evil that appear in mediaeval story and the plays based on it. The heart-exhausting laugh of Mephistophiles in Goethe's Faust is not half so appalling as the temporarily omnipotent humour of these man-like fiends of our poet. He bears upon his face the brand of hell; his every movement has the gloom of pitiless hate upon it; and his victims pass into his power with open eyes. His jests have all the stench of the chemic elements of the Inferno in them.

But these so natural fiends have nothing but the foulest sediment of human nature in the making of their characters. The flesh and tissue of which we all are formed are theirs, the soul and feelings that dwell within our bodies dwell in theirs. We know why their hearts have been driven out of them. The same wrongs and insults and scorn occur to all of us; the same bitterness wells up in our hearts against the workers of them. And it makes us shudder that there is within us the making of such lives; we shrink from them in horror that our passions and our wrongs are such as theirs are. It only needs the ruin of our conscience, the disbelief in human love and truth to make us revel in such diabolic purpose and jest.

For within the bosom of the world there is a midnight pool that has its waters from the lowest depths of hell; and never human pity or love or reverence reaches it; across it gleam the lurid flashes of demoniac humour, the only light that ever comes upon its murky levels. Yet close to it lie all the fountains of human passion and human thought; and nothing but human mercy and love divide them from it. If by some woful chance this thin partition break, and into a human heart its slimy waters flow, then farewell all that marks the human from the devil, a jester of evil lives
amongst men; wherever he moves the atmosphere seethes with malice and slander and the vilest of passions. He reigns supreme and only death can save his victims or his neighbours or himself from his loathsome and appalling jests.

Not till his last wise days did Shakespeare see that good has its humorous omnipotence too, that the noblest of hearts may jest with the fates of men, but for their happiness. He had seen that the demoniac cruelty of these jesting fiends recoiled at last and sent them to destruction. But only in his "Tempest" did he discover that the deepest wisdom and benevolence may use its power in sadly humorous way, that forgiveness and self-sacrifice may go with "merry sport." Goodness to our younger moods seems all sombre and puritan. It is only in our later days when the heart has grown confident in its wisdom, that supreme love and supreme jest may be combined. Then we have found the reconciling heart of nature and can see that heaven laughs about us and may deal with us as gentle humorists often do with children, bending our wilful passions through laughter to their noblest ends.
SHYLOCK.
SHYLOCK.

WHEN we look minutely into the lives and conditions of a locality and get the men and women to unburden their hearts, the tales of imaginary or real wrongs are enough to sicken the humane. (We seem to be made by nature to wound the feelings or crush the life of others whether we mean it or not.) Each in his struggle to live, or to gain what he thinks his rights, or his share of the good things of the world, elbows his neighbour aside or tramples him under foot often unconsciously, as often with intent. For life is a struggle and a competition even at its easiest and best; and it is the cruellest feature of it that where one wins others must lose; and the loss often means deep wounding of the heart or maiming of the life or work. But the hardest thing of all is that such mutual harshness is inevitable; for without the conflict of desires there never would be progress of the human race.

In history we see this lesson "writ large;" engraved in letters of blood, the handwriting on the wall needs but the humane eye to read its meaning. Nation has risen to wealth and luxury and fame over the prostrate forms of other nations. Race has swept over race to seize its share of the clods of earth. Down into the soil the feet of armies have trampled millions of their fellows to reach their ambition. But it is not the horrors of war, its deaths and woundings and widowings, its cruel destructions of the industry and the products of peace that make history so harrowing a study; it is still more the trivial or false passions of kings or heroes they were meant to gratify and the unjust causes these took up. And perhaps the worst of it all is the long series of wrongs and revenges they lead to, haunting the generations after and staining them with blood, or binding them with chains of the body or the soul. For
these wild passions, gratified, only stir wilder passions still to be gratified.

"The evil that men do lives after them,
The good is oft interred with their bones."

This is truer of men of action who take large part in public life. For the system of politics has been established in the interest of a small section of mankind; and injustice seems to have been the very spirit of it, in the past at least. The selfish and cruel and intolerant rules that conquerors and great monarchs have set up in their own favour are exactly those that feebler human nature in power desires to perpetuate.

It is thus that history is such a tragic page to read when we strip off the poor tinsel glory of war. Every great name is written in blood; every great movement has risen from wrong and has grown in flame and ruin. But the deepest agonies are unwritten, the most excruciating effects of it all never appear. These are the petty tyrannies that have no glory attached to them, the chains and slaveries that are spiritual and unseen. Ah! if only we could open the book of fate wherein the century-long sorrows and pangs and stifled cries record themselves! Then might we have cause to mourn man's inhumanity to man. But we can see glimpses of the silent wrongs in the exultations of the oppressors or in the pictures that the dramatists or poets have given to please the fancies of the ruling class. He who reads with sympathetic eye will feel how tragic is the record.

But perhaps the most woeful of histories is that of the Jews in modern Europe. They gave it its religion and that religion turned round and trampled them under foot. A little nation hemmed up in a little corner of the East, they had never found any scope for their talents in conquest or in robbing their neighbours; rather had they to suffer division, defeat and exile. But their intellectual energy and ambition found vent in a noble literature. And at last the conquering foot of Rome stood on their soil and over the Western world they were scattered like dust. But with them they took their racial characteristics never to be blended or even coloured by the peoples they mixed with. Without holding together as bohemians or pariahs in camps outside
the pale of civilisation like the gipsies, they remained as peculiar a people, clinging with tenacity to their religion, their literature, their race traditions, and their purity of blood. But the very contact they had with civilisation drew the attention of the governing peoples to them; and this attention could be nothing but cruel and unjust in those cruel and unjust ages of the past. Might destroyed their rights. Torture, plunder and scorn, imprisonment, exile and death, these were the amenities of their life in Europe. Unlimited power in the hands of a class or a nation or a race, as in the hands of a man, means perpetual abuse of it to tyrannise over our fellows. The sense of it leads to the fall of the rationality before the passions.

The gain of tyranny is generally to those whom it tramples upon, if it drive them not out of life and all the amenities of life. For it hardens their tissues and makes them able to survive as the fittest. Their conditions develope powers of overcoming them. And no finer instance is there of this than the Jews in Western Europe. Forced out of all the honoured spheres of life, they took to those that were despised. They could not become ecclesiastics or warriors or statesmen or lawyers or even merchants. Poets or dramatists they could not become; for they clung to their own language and rejected the vernaculars. But there were two neglected pursuits that could be made much of. Medicine was left to the mercy of chance and quackery; and they learned from the Arabs in Spain all that was to be learned in that branch of knowledge. Their services came to be valued all over Europe in king's courts and noblemen's houses. Even into countries like England whence they had all been driven they found their way; we hear of a doctor Lopez about the court of Elizabeth and in the household of Leicester, where our poet must have met him when performing, and studied the character for his Shylock; otherwise he could not have personally studied the Jewish nature in his own land. But there was another sphere they made more completely their own—that of finance. There had been from ancient times a strong prejudice against taking interest; and the heads of the old Christian Church had forbidden it to Christians. Yet it was manifest that men must get into debt and need loans for a time to get out
of it; and few would be inclined to lend without some return for the use of that which they could use profitably themselves. It was like attempting to stop the flow of a river: the attempt was certain to send it only in other and more mischievous directions. Thus the whole money-lending business of Europe fell into the hands of the Jews. And the constant efforts to deprive them of their due return only developed in them greater cunning and greater hardness of nature. All the intellectual power of their race ran in this direction and gave them the command of the purse-strings of Christendom; till at last in our century they have been freed from all the unjust restrictions that hemmed them in, and mingling with other races, they are losing their national exclusiveness and peculiarities and their force of genius is becoming a great factor in music and painting, in literature and politics.

But Shakespeare lived in an age when the energy of the race was driven wholly into money-lending and all the loathing and hatred that accompanied the pursuit. Debtors at all times have felt a natural antagonism to their creditors as men who tyrannise over them. But there were added to this the Christian and traditional condemnation of usury, and the centuries-long growth of scorn and detestation of the Jews. As an Englishman he could feel this only at second hand; for they had been driven out by Edward the First in 1290 and were not admitted as a people till Cromwell allowed them in 1650 to return. But there was one Jew at least in England, and he held a position of great eminence and trust as physician to the Queen. Marlowe, in his “Jew of Malta,” which was written about 1590 must have sought the sources of the bitterness against the race which he imports into the play in some nation on the continent, or made it merely dramatic. But at the date Shakespeare wrote and produced his “Merchant of Venice” (1594 or 1595) there was great commotion in London against the Jews, because the court physician had been proved guilty of leaguing with Spain to poison the Queen and had been executed at Tyburn early in 1594. And Henslowe’s diary shows that in the latter half of that year there were no less than twenty representations of plays with the Jew as their subject.
The poet, therefore, was only expressing a patriotic feeling and appealing to a wide-spread detestation when he wrote his “Merchant of Venice” and gave so many offensive qualities to his Jew. Had he done otherwise, undoubtedly his play would have been hissed off the stage. It is interesting to see how he reconciled the large sense of tolerance and humanity which was growing upon him and the satisfaction of this wild rage against a race.

A large number of commentators on the play hold that he has meant Shylock to be a tragic hero, the champion of his nation, standing up against the injustices of Christian law. And there is something to be said for their view. For as we read the play or see it now played on the stage, we feel pity for the old man, driven forth in contumely and defeat before the cruel powers on which he thought to have his revenge. Is not our sense of justice outraged by the insults poured upon him and his unhappy race? His creed is laughed at and persecuted openly.

“You call me mis-believer, cut-throat, dog, And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine.”

Kicked, spat upon, hustled, “spurned” like “a stranger cur over the threshold,” followed by a shouting rabble of boys, reviled at every corner and even by Christian rogues, his losses laughed at, his gains mocked, his nation scorned, his bargains thwarted, his friends cooled, his enemies heated even by such models of Christian virtue as Antonio—can we wonder that in his heart there was bitterness? And though his race was not ejected from Italy as from most other countries, they were labelled by the dress they had to wear—the red hat and yellow gaberdine, and fenced off in a certain district of each town as if they had been lepers. The state endorsed the mockery and railing of its citizens, till at last sufferance was the badge of all his tribe. Is it not piteous to look upon the sorrows of this woe-stricken race, waiting through the long centuries for some retaliation, and then only bringing tenfold retaliation on their own heads? The same passions and longings and thoughts thronged in their bosoms as in those of their persecutors and revilers—aye and keener feelings and quicker thoughts. Quick they were to see the weaknesses and vices and crimes
of their tormentors; yet dared they not lift a finger in self-defence, in revenge, else the law would crush them and torture them. Was it not natural that they with their sensitive natures should harbour up a feeling of hate and a longing for revenge? Will not even the worm turn? And who with a human heart could bear these long insults and wrongs without learning the lesson of villany thus taught them by their enemies, without acquiring the cunning that would take advantage of their enemies' own weapons? The result we have before us in the play was according to the inmost laws of human nature; and Antonio alone was quick enough to see. With his haughty Christian scorn, he tells the Jew that he would repeat the same indignities again to him, that he is asking his money as from an enemy not as from a friend; and in the trial scene he feels that it is useless to appeal for mercy to one who has never received mercy, that he can expect no tenderness in the application of that law which he has never applied tenderly to the outcast nation.

And at last it is only by a quibble that the tables are turned on the Jew and the merchant escapes. Nothing but legal sophistry and special pleading would ever have accepted the position that flesh could be taken without blood; it could as well have been argued on the other side that flesh was not flesh, without the blood in it, but carrion and corruption, and that Antonio had signed the bond fully knowing this patent fact. As manifestly a quibble is the point that no less than a pound of flesh was to be taken; surely any law in the world would have permitted a creditor to take less than his due if he wished. So it might have been argued as powerfully by the plaintiff's counsel that thousands have lost pounds of their flesh and more without losing their life, and that therefore the eccentric condition did not necessarily mean an attempt against the life of Antonio; whilst surely it was the duty of the merchant's friends to have a surgeon in the court and every precaution taken to save his life after the excision. Lastly, the refusal to take the payment of even threefold the debt would surely not preclude in any court of law the creditor accepting it after he found the alternative condition was impossible. Such might have been the unanswerable
replies of the Jew to the defence of Antonio. And evidently a mercantile state like Venice could not afford to trifle with its own laws or refuse to insist on the fulfilment of the bonds its merchants entered into. The condition, absurd and inhuman though it seems, would have had to be fulfilled. And as inhuman things as this were often done to Jews.

But all the poet wished, if he had legal sophistry enough to see this reply, was to overwhelm Shylock with the weapons he had used and to send him out of the play tragically defeated by his own tactics, yet with some pity in the hearts of the spectators. Had the Jew gained his point, nothing but execution would have followed him, and Antonio would have been the hero of a tragedy, done to death by the inhumanity of revenge. He had to make it a comedy, and the ignominious failure of the Jew was no tragedy to the audience the poet had in 1594 when Lopez was executed. Yet he leaves a pathetic strain in the minds of a humane, unprejudiced audience, and he means to do so. For he makes Shylock a great contrast to Barabas, whom Marlowe introduces as the chief figure into his "Jew of Malta." That model and teacher of Shakespeare's has no pity for his Jew, and makes him a monster, the object of nothing but loathing and execration. And the poet knew this drama; for he brings in from it the features of the elopement of the Jew's daughter and echoes many of its scenes and expressions. The change in the nature is therefore significant. He means to enlist a certain amount of sympathy for his Jew, to make the humane feel how hunted and oppressed and tragic was the lot of this outcast race, how piteous were the conditions of all the persecuted and despised and rejected of men.

Such is the case for the favourable view of Shakespeare's Shylock. But it is to be said that it has been brought forward only in our century. In the poet's time he was spoken of as "the bloody-minded Jew", whilst it was the tradition amongst actors, down till Edmund Kean changed it, to make him wear a Judas-coloured or red wig; and the large false nose that Burbage, Shakespeare's friend, wore in the character, reveals the fact that there was to be sufficient of comedy about the character to deprive it of dignity. It is the new humanity of our times that has inspired actors
and commentators to bring out the nobler side of it. In Irving's representation there is a calm dignity as well as a wild passion, superiority of culture as well as savage hatred.

The other side has to be stated to get at the full truth of the poet's meaning. He has given the character so many repulsive features that we can see it was meant to gratify the feelings of his audience. His first appearance on the stage merely as the business man, the money lender, repels us. He will have nothing but business relations with Christians. Bassanio invites him to dinner and he replies with a sneer at the founder of the Christian religion and a boorish refusal, although in a later scene we find him going to dine at this same Christian's house. This shows that they are willing to treat him as a man of culture and of position and of the same rank of society, and that in his intolerance and exclusiveness as a religionist he is ready to insult his neighbour's religion and social kindnesses.

But already we see in this mercenary, churlish nature, the soil ready for the seed of revenge; and at the sight of Antonio there rushes into his mind the memory of all the slights done to his nation, but still more to his business.

"I hate him for he is a Christian;"

but more because

"He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance."

"And he rails
On me, my bargains and my well-won thrift;
"Cursed be my tribe
If I forgive him!"

"I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."

Here is the germ of the tragedy that is to ruin his prosperity; his nature is exceptionally narrow and selfish; he puts his religion above humanity and human kindness—a vicious attitude that belongs to all sects, but most to dominant sects desiring to be universal, and small sects that impose a shibboleth on entry to Heaven; he places his tribe above his religion; but the making of money is highest of all, being the true god he worships—a fault that attaches to almost all modern business life; and it is this passion for gain that is at the root of his criminal revenge, as it is at the root of half the crimes and revenges of our day. As soon as the
means is elevated above the end, the sordid pursuit debases even the most cultured nature and makes it the soil for all evil passions.

And we soon see the weeds grow apace in Shylock's mind. He puts on the little affectations that are usually the resort of the stupidly cunning who are trying to impress their neighbours. He, the keen money-lending man, pretends to have forgotten the number of months the loan is for. He is gathering all his astuteness for the tiger-like spring. He argues with the greatest coolness the religion and philosophy of usury. He enumerates all the indignities he has suffered at the merchant's hands as quietly as if he were counting coins. He listens without a sign of resentment to his scornful utterances about interest,

"A breed of barren metal;"

and to his comparison of him to

"A villain with a smiling cheek,"

"A goodly apple rotten at the heart;"

listens in like gentleness to his threats to repeat the spittings and the spurnings; and then offers him friendship;

"I would be friends with you and have your love."

He has thought out the whole plot against the life of this mercantile foe during the interview and he puts on the mask of friendship to hide his vile designs. He will catch him with his own bait—friendship and refusal of interest. He will lend him the money for nothing, and just for "a merry sport" he will make the forfeit of a pound of the merchant's flesh the condition of the bond. Antonio is astonished and delighted with the kindness. But Bassanio fears; and Shylock exclaims with pretence of high principle and nobleness of sincerity,

"What these Christians are
Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
The thoughts of others!"

And he adds,

"To buy his favour I extend this friendship."

Antonio's first thought is the truest; "the devil can cite scripture for his purpose." The real spirit of Shylock in this scene belongs to no nation; it is fiendish; it plays the hypocrite and uses the tones and words of virtue in order to
catch the soul. And the poet repeats this word—devil—about Shylock, till we feel it is a kind of chorus. Lancelot says, "The Jew my master, who, God bless the mark, is a kind of devil;" "the Jew is the very devil incarnal." Salanio says, "a third cannot be matched unless the devil himself turn Jew;" and again, "let me say Amen betimes lest the devil cross my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew." Bassanio in the trial scene invokes the Duke to wrest the law and "Curb this cruel devil of his will;" and again to Antonio, "I would sacrifice" wife, life and all "here to this devil to deliver you." His own daughter Jessica says to the servant Lancelot, "Our house is hell." And to clench all, the poet makes Shylock himself speak as if he were on the friendliest terms with the great antagonist; "Why then the devil give him good of it." Clearly there is meant to be a suggestion of the diabolic in this strange figure.

And he has no human feelings in his relationships. He treats his servants as the harshest and most niggardly of masters. He has no kindly feelings to his friend Tubal, but is quite neutral; his only thought about his service in following his daughter for him is the amount of ducats he has spent on the expedition. But he is most inhuman and unhebrew-like in his treatment of his daughter. If there is one virtue that is distinctive of the Jews, it is family love. Yet he has evidently dealt most harshly by Jessica and loved her not. And his own flesh and blood rebels against him and is ashamed to be his child, abjures her religion, and, worst of all, runs off with his ducats and jewels. He has governed her solely by fear; for when he goes off to dinner at Bassanio's, his last word is

"Perhaps I will return immediately;
Do as I bid you."

It shows the evil atmosphere she has lived in, that she steals from him and deceives him without reluctance. And his cry is not over her ingratitude or lost love, but for his ducats; "I would my daughter were dead at my feet and the jewels in her ear!" We should have expected him to recall now the affection spent on her young life by her dead mother Leah; surely if he had ever loved his wife and been happy in her love, he would have dwelt
upon its loss as the one thing needed now to console him. But he is only bitter that he has lost the turquoise which—not he gave her—but she gave him as a bachelor; Jessica had exchanged it for a monkey; he "would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys!" And this analogy is undoubtedly meant to throw a comic light upon his rage, and to suggest that his wealth would but play absurd and mischievous tricks with him as his daughter had.

There is not one spark of natural affection in him. His baser passions have left no room for that. Where avarice and revenge house, farewell to all human love and human pity; and he has both in him developed to a monstrous size. Nor has any character in the play such intellectual force or force of will as he to serve his vices. How quick he is to see the weakness in Venetian laws and shape a plan to turn it on his scorners! How deftly he hides his trap till his prey is in it! How subtly he acts the penitent and friendship-lover to still his victim's fears! How he smites the Christians home when they attempt to laugh at him or argue with him! It is from them he has learned the sweets of revenge, from them his villany, from them his intolerance and cruelty. And when they press upon him in the trial scene their plea of mercy, he hurls in their teeth their use of slaves, bought like their asses, dogs and mules; surely he is doing no more wrong in claiming the pound of human flesh which he has bought. The poet was conscious of the weak case Christians had if mercy and humanity were to be appealed to. And he makes them save Antonio by quibble and legal formality backed by might.

And herein they were safe. For Shylock was a formalist to the very heart; he stood by the letter of the law and nothing but the letter of the law. The Jewish law, he held, allowed him everything in the way of money-grabbing short of stealing, the Venetian law everything in the way of revenge short of actual stabbing the man he hated. And it was formalism, the letter of the law, that overwhelmed him, as it ever does overwhelm the formalist. He had respect for nothing in this life except money and strict law; and he was stripped of the one by and for his daughter turned Christian of her own will; and after rejecting the appeal to the spirit of justice and mercy which lies in his own
religion as in that he loathed, he found that "the letter killeth;" the subtle interpretation of the law condemned him to death and only those whom he loathed, using the merciful spirit he loathed, saved him.

But it is the love of revenge that is the dominant passion in this character; and it is its cruelty and inhumanity and irrationality that are meant to be illustrated by this part of the play. It is this makes him out a human wolf, this makes him watch for the life of Antonio, this makes him gloat to Tubal and to Chus in presence of his daughter over the chance of Antonio's flesh, this makes him scream with delight on hearing of Antonio's misfortunes, this makes him wish his daughter dead, this makes him reject all appeal to mercy or pity. And it is the futility of this passion, its self-defeating power that this play is meant especially to show. He is not ashamed to exhibit his wild passion in demoniac way, whetting his knife. And it is just at this climax, when he is exulting in the final fulfilment of his purpose that it recoils on his own head. He is utterly and irretrievably crushed by his own weapons and he has to lose all that is dear to him, his money and the outer husk of his religion—a punishment far more terrible than death.

There was nothing his age needed a more authoritative lesson in than this. Half the cruelties and wrongs of Christian countries arose from this unchristian passion. The wild barbaric desire of smiting back has existed in all nations and ages, but in inverse proportion to the amount of civilization. It is the animal in us, the first foundation of human nature, that contributes it. It produced the old lex talionis of primitive ages—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But as men have become more civilized they have less and less recognised it either publicly or privately. And if there is one proof clearer than another of the lofty nature of Christianity, it is its insistence on the rejection of this vice, its ethical code outleaping the finest thoughts of even our most advanced civilisation. How poor and vicious and barbarous seem all Christian ages and countries and most Christians compared with it! Only now are we beginning to awaken to our inconsistencies and to the truth of its noble commands, and it will take myriads of ages to carry them out in the life and to incarnate its spirit:
It is one of the most striking things in the work of our poet that, living so many centuries ago, in an age of injustice and revenge, he was able to anticipate this still-distant time and to see the self-wrecking nature of this cruel passion. He takes a Jew as its embodiment: but that is simply because there was no race in his time that had better reason to harbour a spirit of revenge. They had been cruelly trampled on and buffeted and reviled, and, with their keen faculties and sensitiveness, this scorn was doubly more-galling to them. The yoke had cut deeply into their hearts for centuries and yet they were unsubdued, unjaded in powers, unhardened in feelings. Surely if ever revenge was to be justly gratified it was here. If the passion recoiled on the life that harboured it, never could it be otherwise than self-recoiling, self-destructive.

And what a picture of defeat and self-entanglement he gives us in the play! So complete is the overthow of the old man by his own tactics, that with all the inhuman, nay demoniac, character of his passion we pity him as he vanishes from the stage. His whole scheme for slaying a Christian life by Christian laws, for exulting over his Christian victim as he slowly tortures him under the protection of Christian statute is foiled and tumbles into ruin. Nay, he falls into the pit he has himself digged. Nothing is more bitter than to exult in evil desires on the point of gratification and then to be humiliated by their means in the moment of triumph. And he has told his enemies where he is most sensitive, put the very weapons of torture into their hands. They drain his heart's blood by taking his wealth away; they deprive him of the only part of his religion he cares for—the letter, the appearance, and compel him to seem a Christian; and they heap upon him worse than death, the gift of his life at the hands of enemies he has spurned and exulted over. Surely if anything would teach his age the futility and self-recoil of its favourite passion it was this.

But there was a far deeper lesson in the play. For a far more terrible punishment had fallen upon the Jew, beginning as soon as the vice had entered into his heart. It had fixed upon the soul of him and had eaten like a vulture all the living force. Through the long years, he had fed this foul
enemy within his breast with usury pressed hard upon the
Christians’ needs; and out of this means arose another cruel
passion, avarice, to prey upon his vitals with revenge. Love
and friendship and happiness took flight from out his life;
he cared for none; none cared for him, not even the child
of his own house. Memory was bitter; the future was a
hideous dream. Amid the appearances of life he stood as
if he were dead; amid the realities of existence he was as
but a shadow; amongst men he stood alone, bereft of all
human love, all human relations, all that makes life sweet
and liveable. Hate, demoniac hate, had come as the ally
of revenge and soon it would embrace all the men he knew.
All who like Antonio from pity saved his victims from his
usurious revenge were linked to him by chains of hate; he
longed to dip his finger in their blood. And the latest
conquest of this passion was his own daughter Jessica. He
would have her dead at his feet. His house was hell, she
said. The diabolic torments were far deeper. His own
soul was hell, a more appalling hell than any that fancy
could paint beyond death.

It is the terrible nature of the punishment he has brought
on himself, infinitely more terrible than a death of torture,
that stirs the pity within us as he vanishes. For out into
the world he goes like Cain, an exile amongst living men,
like Cain with the unappeasable desire to dip his fingers in
the blood of his own kin, like Cain the poor shadow of one
demoniac passion that would if gratified hew down humanity
and make the world a desert. Ah! Who can tell the
horror of his life thereafter, with the human brain and the
fury of a wounded tiger, with the grovelling brutishness of a
savage and the unmeasured agony of modern thought?
Out into the darkness he flees, clinging to a life that is
every heart-beat a pang, the vulture passion gnawing at his
soul. Timon in his solitude and hate and scorn of mankind
is happy and exalted beside this incarnation of foiled
revenge. Though the poet has not yet the tragic power to
paint the exile of this accursed outcast, he knows the awful
punishment that the passion, sated or not, brings upon the
human soul.

And before he left the world, his last task was to show the
beauty of forgiveness of our wrongs. The wisest character
he ever drew, the sage magician of the Tempest, suffers utter wreck of all his worldly power and prospects at the hands of a brother, and with his only child is set adrift on the wide ocean in a sinking boat. He cares no more to live with such a sin against him from his own blood. On a lonely islet in midsea he finds himself cast. And there the discipline he gets from his little child masters the selfishness and self-absorption in him, masters every evil passion he has had. Alone with her, the thoughts that he has found in books grow into the life, and flower and fruit into heroic wisdom. And when his enemies that have conspired against his life and thrust him forth from amongst men, are thrown into his power, he has the "god-like amity" that comes from heroic wisdom and he pardons all. Ah! if only this would come in earlier life and save us from the blunders of ungenerous act and word, from the cruel self-infliction of revenge, what a noble world it would become!
PORTIA AND THE WOMEN OF THE PLAY.
ONE of the best tests of the civilisation of an age is the position of women. If they are thrust into the background, then is there something amiss; the men are unrefined, the institutions have as their main aim success in war, and there is a merely muscular standard applied to all forms of life. Manners degenerate into brutality and grossness, and might becomes right. For wherever woman is downtrodden, gentleness and chivalry cease to be public duties. And in fact their insignificance is also a result of the growth of the purely physical standard of life.

When they come to the front, then mere brute force is held in rein, and might falls into a secondary place compared with intellect and imagination and refinement. Men are ashamed to pit their animal nature against the talents of those who have not the bodies of Amazons. The contests of the time become a tilt of wits; quick repartee is thought of more account than muscular achievement. And if the evil that is in man must find vent in such a period, it takes the form of subtlety and social tactics.

The rise of civilian life in the scale is the surest sign of the rise in the position of women. For this means that quick faculty and invention are gaining the day against muscle and the use of the sword; the arts of peace are about to have their place above the art of war. Mere strength of body is about to become the servant of brain, and can be hired in any market at a few shillings per day. Whilst the cunning that has been used in stratagem and in the circumvention of armies is turned into the more profitable channels of commerce and diplomacy and courtiership. The advance of invention, of trade, of wealth, means the lapse of martial
life into a secondary place, and the growth of refinement and of the reverence for intellectual superiority and spiritual graces.

It is a striking thing that in the history of England such periods have coincided with the reigns of women. The elevation of the sex seems to be not merely a result of the progress in the arts of peace, but also a cause. When a queen is on the throne, diplomacy takes the place of war, politics the place of might, as spheres of ambition. All mere muscular superiority falls into the background, and literature and the arts and all that gives scope to spiritual talents advance; and it is here that woman has her chance of holding her own. At first when men oppose her education and speak with contempt of the training of her intellect, the boldest alone have confidence enough to come into the arena; there is in the beginning, therefore, of an era of woman's advance a certain appearance of masculinity and harshness that interferes with her more womanly qualities and graces. But soon the more gentle and timid are emboldened to try the wider spheres of utility and develope their mental faculties; then masculine scorn of them as blue-stockings disappears, and even shame takes its place at being out-distanced in culture and in intellectual and imaginative power.

It was in such an age that the "Merchant of Venice" was written. Hundreds of women of the upper and middle classes came, not into public life, but into the full heritage of their faculties, and showed themselves equal to their fathers and brothers and sons in manipulation of the learning and the treatment of the problems of the day. Few or none of them attempted literature; for women's culture had not had long enough root to give them the literary instinct, the inborn sense of power over thought and imagination and form. Only from the middle of the century, the time of the education of Lady Jane Grey and Elizabeth herself do we hear of them mastering the scholarship and learning that men had monopolised. The church had been for centuries supreme; and its officers alone dealt in culture and the products of intellect; and from their position and life woman was rigidly excluded. It was the Reformation and the Renaissance brought the change and a married clergy
allowed her to rise out of the contempt into which she had fallen. She at once set herself to the training of her intellectual powers, and seized upon the learning that had been reborn after the middle ages; classics she studied with the greatest eagerness, and it is one of the pictures of the middle of the century, the lady of birth poring over the page of Plato in the oriel window, as the men of the household issued to the hunt at the sound of the horn.

When Elizabeth came to the throne, she brought with her such a vigorous intellect, such well-trained faculties and so much knowledge of books and men, that she could hold her own with her ablest statesmen and with the astute monarchs in Europe. And it was natural that the ladies of her court and age should gain courage to rival men in their own sphere. Yet none of them ventured beyond scholarship and the moulding of men's characters. The Queen alone stepped out into public life and showed how masculine the intellect of a woman could be in state-craft and diplomacy and power of will. No monarch but Cromwell and William of Orange has ever sat on the English throne with such force of character and such power of facing the difficulties of a difficult time.

And the Englishwomen of her day, at least those who came within the influence of her court and of London life, must have had some of her masculinity of will and boldness of action. For the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies, written as they were in Elizabeth's reign, contrast strongly with the heroines of his romances which were all written after James came to the throne. The former have a tone of vigour and self-reliance that, without interfering with their womanliness, suggests masculinity. The latter are meek and gentle and almost unresisting, even when injustice overtakes them. Half of the former undertake difficult or dangerous expeditions, such as men alone in those days of unprotected highways and wild forest country were able to carry out; some of them adopt the guise of men, Julia in "Two Gentlemen of Verona," Portia and Nerissa, Rosalind in "As You Like It" and Viola in "Twelfth Night;" and all the rest have a strain of vigorous wit or power of forcing their will on others and striking out a career that makes them kin with Elizabeth. All the masculine women of his plays
during James's reign are cruel and wicked, Lady Macbeth, Goneril and Regan, Cleopatra; the good women are all shy and timid and unoriginating, Desdemona, Imogen, Hermione, Perdita and Miranda; the only exceptions are Cordelia and Volumnia; the former has the force of character to resist oppression and injustice, and she leads her husband's army, but she comes close to the reign of Elizabeth; the latter has something repulsive in her and is meant to represent the spirit of the later Roman women. Manifestly only the bold and wicked women thrust themselves into the court and into men's pursuits in James's reign, whereas in Elizabeth's the gentlest and most womanly of women could rival men in many of their special spheres without losing any of their beauty of character or virtue.

Thus we are prepared to find in the women of "The Merchant of Venice," along with their modesty and shrinking nature, a certain boldness in action, a strain of nervous strength that will lead them out of the common paths of their sisters. In Jessica this forwardness almost repels, it becomes so offensively inconsistent with the tender shyness that is the chief element of our idea of youth in women. It is not merely the conversations she has with Lancelot, marked as they are by familiarity and even grossness; for this may be explained by the custom of the time; there was little dignity in the relations of the master or mistress and servant in Elizabeth's reign, if we are to judge by the plays of the age; the servant was now the confidant and almost friend, and again the slave to be beaten and kicked and used cruelly; hence Jessica has Lancelot the servant as her only comrade in her father's house; "Our house is Hell" she tells him,

"And thou a merry devil
Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness".

Afterwards when established in Portia's house as the wife of Lorenzo, this free-tongued servant of Bassanio jests with her in what would be thought an insulting way in any other age; he laughs at her change of religion and her former avoidance of pork, and speaks slightingly and coarsely not merely of her father, but of her dead mother; and she accepts the rude offensive humour without a protest, nay, with distinct encouragement, and repeats it in another form to Lorenzo.
PORTIA AND THE WOMEN OF THE PLAY

As repulsive a feature is the coolness with which she listens to the grossness of some of his hints and jests. But the same feature is seen in most of the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies in their intercourse with their servants, especially if jesters. The clown of the sixteenth century household was evidently a "chartered libertine" who could inflict the most licentious utterances even on the delicate ears of his young mistresses. Portia is one of the few who listen to nothing of the kind, doubtless because she is imperious enough to make her servants bridle their tongues. Jessica is with all others but Lancelot modest and pure in everything she says or hears. Even when she appears first to her lover by night in her disguise as a page, doubtless a common adventure of Elizabethan ladies, she shows all the conscious shame of it that a true woman should feel.

"I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me,  
For I am much ashamed of my exchange."

This touch and her Juliet-like passion for Lorenzo are the womanly qualities that kin her with all Shakespeare's heroines. All his life long he thoroughly believed in the saying he quotes from Marlowe in "As you like it," "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" Even in his later days, in his tragedies and romances, he seems to think that the passion of youth must be sudden and overwhelming; his Perdita and his Miranda are almost as brief in their wooing as his Juliet. It is this explains the quick surrender of Jessica to Lorenzo; she can have seen him only from her casement as she "clambered up" and "thrust her head into the public street"; for she had been evidently kept like a nun in a conven by her father, seeing only his money-lending friends Tubal and Chus, since her mother Leah had died.

Such nun-like seclusion leads often to tragic reaction against it, a wild longing for the whirl of social life and an inability to cope with its temptations and dangers; it prevents knowledge of human nature and still more self-knowledge, and leaves the mind helpless and at the mercy of the first social whim. Jessica has had no woman's companionship, no mother's guidance, and she abandons all her past, all natural feelings of kinship for the first handsome stranger that puts himself in her way. Nothing in the play shows
better what a student Shakespeare was of human nature than the hint he gives of the source of her faults and blunders in making Shylock speak of his Leah as dead; her motherlessness has emphasised the masculine strain, that her age gave her, and her seclusion developed; whilst it takes away from her wooing those coy reluctances and shy timidities that are the prerogative and grace of youth in women in all ages.

She has the clumsy silences and lack of apposite wit that mark the recluse who ventures into society. She has little to say to Portia or in the presence of the visitors at Belmont, and that little shows her in no pleasing light; her presence is almost ignored except when alone with Lorenzo, seated on the moonlit bank; and then we discover the true reason of her elopement; she is romantically sentimental; she is as full as her husband of all the instances of sad lovers recorded in story, and she is affected to melancholy and silence by the sound of sweet music, a temperament that is sure to fall a prey to the amorous serenading of Venice; whilst Lorenzo has the safer and more masterful attitude to music and romance; he becomes talkative and philosophical under its influence.

But the sentimentalism of Jessica has a hollow and selfish and evil side. Under its power she has come to loathe the surroundings of her home; the indulgence in romance, when it does not stimulate to action, saps the will, like drinking, and discolours the actual life and even its natural duties and feelings, making all seem sordid and uninteresting, if not loathsome; it gradually substitutes spurious aims. With Jessica it has but scarred over and allowed to grow like a cancer beneath the flesh the false and commercial view of existence that has come to her in her blood and from the atmosphere around her. The constant talk of her father would be of ducats and jewels and loans and robbing the Christians; he evidently hides from her not even his wolf-like appetite for revenge and Christian blood; and the result is she has drunk in his sordidness and loathings and made him and his pelf the object of them; she grows as hard and selfish as himself; and she ends by robbing and cheating him, by turning her back upon filial love, upon religion, upon the memories of her childhood and upon all her past. The
elopement scene reveals a mean nature beneath the romance; her passion is not self-forgetful enough, her fear of her father not great enough to keep her thoughts from his pelf:

"Here, catch this casket; it is worth the pains."

she cries to Lorenzo from the window; and again

"I will make fast the doors, and gild myself
With some more ducats."

Worse still, she gives her dead mother's turquoise ring for a monkey; and when she hears of her father's passion for revenge against Antonio, instead of keeping silence, she chimes in to tell of his inhuman eagerness to have the merchant's flesh. But perhaps the worst of all is the ease with which she changes her religion. Nothing argues a shallow or untrustworthy nature so much as the rapid and anguishless leap from creed to creed, or ritual to ritual. It means a poor narrow self in her, when she can so in a moment turn her back on its development through youth.

Yet there is to be said for her that woman's nature takes more readily the colour of its surroundings, or of the predominant passion of the hour. This we see especially exemplified in Nerissa, who is almost the other self of Portia, deep in her confidence and full of her virtues and wit and mischief-loving qualities. There is no female attendant in the whole of Shakespeare so trusted and yet so vigorous in her character. She takes the same interest as her mistress in the fate of the caskets and makes the acceptance of Gratiano's offer of marriage dependent upon it; she enters with the same boldness into the expedition to Bellario and to Venice, donning with like ease the masculine attire; and she plays out with the same spirit the jest of the rings on their husbands. As but a secondary character, she has a minor place, although we feel, from her wit, her power of repartee, her wisdom in counsel, her vigour of action, that she seems fit to take Portia's place in a comedy of her own.

And yet, perchance, if she were away from the greater light, her capacity and colour of wit would vanish; we feel a large proportion of it is but reflected.

For the poet has formed no heroine yet in his dramatic career so able as Portia to bend her circumstances to her will; she seems to give colour and purpose to all who come
within her influence. She is the first of a long series of vigorous and pure heroines who have a touch of masculine wit or masculine will, Rosalind, Beatrice, Helena, Isabella, and Cordelia. But no one of them is so intellectual, or so capable of coping with the difficulties of the world as she. She moves through all the entanglements of life as if she could master them and find her way. She retains this element of masterfulness and sure-footedness after the poet has stripped from the mediæval enchantress of the original Italian story all the mysterious omnipotence that enthralls every visitor to her territory, despoils him of his fortune and makes him her slave for life. Portia is nothing but

"An unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractised;"

"Not yet so old;"

But she may learn";

and yet she has by nature and training as great power of fascinating lovers and drawing them from all quarters of the world as her prototype and original; her coolness and self-control and her power over character and circumstance almost rise to the miraculous and yet they are purely natural.

We can see the sources of them in the few hints we get of her parentage and upbringing. In her relations to her father she is the antithesis of Jessica, deeply reverent of his memory and even of his slightest and most unreasonable-looking wish; in spite of all the risks of it, she is determined to carry out his disposal of her hand by means of the caskets; she has full trust in his wisdom. Clearly he has been a man of noble powers, with a touch of the uncommon about him, knowing how much there is of luck in life, and feeling himself confident to control it through the weaknesses of human nature. A merchant prince of Venice he must have been to lay such stress on the power of gold and silver over the minds of men, making them with lead as the materials of the three caskets mark off the mean and sordid or arrogant and showy amongst those bold enough to woo at such risk from the unmercenary or humble and sincere. A man of elevated tastes for both nature and art he must have been to spend the wealth he had the capacity to accumulate upon a site of such natural beauty as Belmont and upon its added charms. Born to such wealth and luxurious surroundings
he could not have been; else he could not have handed down to his daughter such an untainted will and such a practical genius for the details of business life and all life. Nor was he without the wisdom to surround his only child with the best of his time, courtiers and warriors and men of culture from every country, in the atmosphere of whose thoughts she might be moulded to the noblest of characters.

And now when he is gone and she has grown to womanhood amid such influences, the fame of her beauty and her wealth and her surroundings and the strange condition on which she may be wooed draws princes and nobles and merchants from every quarter of the globe, all bent upon gaining such a prize. She entertains them with a courteous and lavish hospitality, yet shrinks from the thought of marrying the choice of the caskets, whilst insisting that none shall marry her otherwise. Many of them, from conceit or arrogance or sensuous desire, refuse the condition that in case of failure they shall depart and never speak to woman in the way of wooing again. Doubtless they came thinking their merits and graces would persuade her to abandon the fantastic arbiter of her fate; and in disgust at failing they go off without trying the caskets. She is indifferent to them all and glad to be clear of them. At last the Prince of Morocco, a man of dark complexion, accepts the hard conditions and from Oriental voluptuousness and worship selects the golden casket for its noble exterior and finds within a death's head. The Prince of Arragon next ventures on the cast of fate and led by his arrogance and conceit and scorn of other men, he selects the silver casket with its motto "Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves;" and he finds within the portrait of a "blinking idiot", a fool's head; thus her father wisely saw that it would be a man blown up with vanity that would think Portia was only his deserts, and laughingly prepared this mockery for him.

The same wisdom made him put the great prize into the worthless leaden casket and attach to it a motto that would repel all selfish and vain men; "who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath"; only a generous-hearted man, one who was ready for every self-sacrifice, a man in ten thousand, would accept this as the philosophy of his choice; and only a man of democratic tastes in friendship, of lowly estimate
of himself and his deservings, only one who cared little for pelf and never judged the world by its mere outward show would choose lead in preference to gold and silver. He knew that a young heiress, guided only by her immature judgement, would be apt to be deceived by the simulation of passion and generosity and grace, and that the most consummate and selfish villain of all her wooers would for the sake of her wealth simulate these most successfully for the brief period required; he was sure such hypocrites would never select lead. It is the same truthfulness and love of reality, the same generosity and admiration for self-sacrifice that attract the love of Portia to Bassanio and that guide him to the choice of the neglected casket with its exacting motto. She feels this is the one man in all the world made for her, the one man to whom she can surrender all her fortune and herself; and the eccentric wisdom of her father is justified by the decision of the caskets.

Into the daughter has passed as an instinct this wise insight into human nature and the confidence and calmness it engenders. It is this has made her choose her maid and confidante, Nerissa, aright; it is this that has preserved her from the wilfulness and caprice of an only child, brought up without mother and later without father in luxurious circumstances and to splendid prospects. It is this that makes her prefer the penniless commoner of Venice to all the princes and nobles who come to woo her. She almost thinks with her dead father that luck is but another word for shortness of foresight and is controllable by knowledge of human nature and wisdom. Hence the cheerful confidence with which she faces life, her trust in her father's casket-test, her quick-won belief in Bassanio and his friend Antonio, the rapidity with which she forms her project for saving the latter, and the boldness and intrepidity with which she carries it out. She sees the end almost from the beginning, and acts with all the quick decision of a man trained in the world of action. She never hesitates, not even when she finds her cousin, Doctor Bellario, ill; she at once decides to don the garments of a man, and to take upon her the rôle of a young advocate; she knows herself and is sure that she will have command of every nerve, if need be.
And the trial scene is enacted by her without revealing any but her inmost personality, the personality of the seldom revealed sanctuary of the heart and the fundamental beliefs. It is a marvel of self-control and self-revelation combined. She uses the whole gamut of human appeal before she resorts to her last stroke. She first tries that which would most strongly affect a nature like her own, an appeal to mercy; and though the famous speech beginning

"The quality of mercy is not strained"

is evidently meant as a youthful advocate’s first rhetorical effort, it opens up the very fountain of her deepest emotions, the basis of her instinctive wisdom; she knows that he who gives and forgives is twice blest, that mercy is far above justice or glory or power, that it is even godlike. Finding this fail she appeals to Jew as a usurer and miser. Then by addressing Antonio and telling him to prepare his bosom, and by giving hints of the scene that must follow, she tries to rouse his pity for a sufferer like himself and the natural horror of bloodshed that lies in every human bosom. Step by step she brings out that he is but a wolf in human form, a devil without a trace of human feeling except revenge. And then when she unbares his reverence for nothing but the letter of the law, she begins to work him round to self-defeat by his own weapons and tactics. She resorts to the final quibbles with which she has prepared herself, and which, ignoring as they do the spirit of justice like Shylock’s conduct, she doubtless abhors from her inmost soul. She drives him back to a request to have only the principal and to the most terrible punishment of all—the gift of mercy at the hands of those to whose prayer he refused it. Thus she saves the life of her husband’s friend and repays the debt he has incurred. And in the same moment she plays a trick upon Bassanio which will humble his judgment at the outset of his matrimonial life; she, as his advocate, compels him to give her the ring which he swore to her he never would surrender without his life. And she draws out the agony for him in the final scene, delighted the meanwhile that he loves his friend so much as to give this for him. She the better knows he has the basis of true love in him—self-sacrifice; for she knows it was the first and best impulse of her own love to give up all to him she loved.
Love was the one thing that was needed to give this noble character its final development. Before Bassanio came she confessed

"My little body is aweary of this great world;"

she had not reached the cheerfulness that true wisdom attains as its consummation, the cheerfulness that is afterwards the distinguishing feature of her character. Nor had she before risen above uncharitable laughter at the weaknesses of men, though she knew it revealed a false attitude to life;

"In truth I know it is a sin to be a mocker"; and yet she anatomised her selfish and self-seeking wooers. It was when she truly loved that she rose above the spurious superiority, that mockery gives, to the noblest of all superiorities that transcends all mockery. It was then that even Lorenzo saw in her

"A noble and a pure conceit
Of godlike amity";

and that even Jessica saw

"the poor rude world
Hath not her fellow."

It is the only noble thing in this little proselyte and deserter from duty and the love of kin, that she is able to appreciate the greatness of Portia, who is all that she is not; she is so blinded with the light from this noble character that in her presence she is silent in adoration. For there she sees reverence for a father raised almost into a religious feeling, love for the past enshrined without slight thrown on the present, a vigorous self brought completely under control, great passion made subservient to duty, the keenest enjoyment of life surrendered without a regret for the sake of friendship, unbounded fortune and luxury failing to enervate the power of self-denial and self-sacrifice, a great intellect that leads to no scorn of womanly feeling, or disintegration of belief, and a hold of the universal elements of religion based on love for humanity and reverence for a supreme ruler of the universe. If she has a chance of salvation from her own selfish and capricious passions, it is not in the companionship with Lorenzo, not in her love of music and the sadness it engenders, not in her keen sense of the beauty of the world, but in her capacity of being
influenced, as Nerissa has been, by the nearness of this noble character. She has begun to feel the world she longed to enter with her lover, "but a poor rude world" in the light of this beautiful soul; and she will in the sympathy for it that has sprung up in her heart, soon recognise with her husband the "godlike amity" of it that is the source of all its beauty and greatness. A life spent within its influence would awaken in her the sense of duty and true reverence and open her eyes to the great wrong she has done humanity, love, kinship, and self, and teach her how there is no permanent happiness in life without the complete sacrifice of self.

Jessica is the type of what Venice was becoming in the poet's day, enervated by luxury, heedless of human prudence and human feeling, indulging in lavish extravagance and display, satisfied with the present, content to let past and future sink. Portia is the type of what Venice might be, glorious in her power, splendid in her arts and all the surroundings of life, ennobled by her culture and intercourse with the best of every nation in the world, yet full of the spirit of love and charity and self-sacrifice and heroism. Her young merchants were preparing woe for themselves and her, wasting their swift-gathered fortunes on caprice and luxury and vice, sapping their energies by endless pursuit of pleasure. Display of wealth rather than nobleness of art or beauty was the end and aim of her thus enriched; the pleasure of the moment was getting substituted for the pleasure of lasting act or literature or art. Never had she been so far-spreading in her power and fame as in the poet's day; she, not Rome, was now the wonder of the world; and thither all travellers bent their steps from every clime to see how great and beautiful a city might become.

And out of her fame and loveliness the poet shapes a dream of what she may yet grow, if she kept her love of beauty without permitting it to sap her energies. Out on a fair promontory of the Northern Gulf he builds a lordly palace for his heroine; high above the Adriatic it stands upon a crag whose base the unebbing waters of the central sea with varying murmur lap. Encircled by a wall of rock there lies at its feet in windless peace a harbour edged with marble piers, flecked with the colours of the deep-shadowing gondolas, or by the galleys of far-travelled princes. Up gleaming steps
climb or descend groups of mariners or servants dressed in the varied hues of far-scattered lands. And on the summit slope emerald swards that stretch up to the marble terraces and colonnades, niched with noble forms cut from the heart of the everlasting hills and woven into a moving circle of many hues by the gracious life of courtiers and highborn ladies. Above them tower the courts and tracery windows and high-gleaming roofs of the wide-stretching palace, from whose turrets float the pennants of the princely suitors and guests. Here in this home of art has lived from infancy its lovely mistress, the goal of all this voyaging from far and near. Around her every pleasure that human thought can fancy is ready to her hand. The air floats incense-laden from the myriad flowers and trees that star her meadows and her lawns. Sweet sounds entrance the listening spirit, faint echoing from distant alleys and groves. And as she looks forth she sees the cataracts that veil the far blue with moving rainbows; and out on the horizon rich-laden galleys making for the golden city of the sea, across the jewel-paven waters, their sails all golden in the sheen of dawn or sunset, or pirate or fisher craft fantastic as their sailors creeping round the rugged islands of the Illyrian coasts, the shadows of their mountains anticipating night and sheltering their course. Behind stretch miles of forest or of fleece-dappled meadows, rising to the Euganean hills; and up above them sleep in everlasting snows the giant peaks of Alps. And when the thin moon sails up in stately radiance above the dark rim of hills, what spirit is so dull and earthy as to repel the sweet enchantment? Flooded are the levels of the sea with silver silence, flooded the sloping banks whereon the "moonlight sleeps." The far-off mountains gleam like the palace walls of marble; faint breathings of distant music steal upon the perfumed air and make the listening soul swoon almost with its softened harmony. Above, the worlds flash down their spirits from their silver eyes, and "in their motion like an angel sing," wafting sweet echoes to the earthly melody "within immortal souls."

In such a paradise what human spirit in its "muddy vesture of decay" could resist the enervation and the opium dream of life? Is there an antidote in man to cure the heart of this nepenthe of pleasure that steals over it? We
are the product of circumstance; and such a lotus-eating atmosphere must kill the energy of the soul. And yet the poet places here within this pleasure-breathing palace, amid this ever-floating incense of adoration, a woman as stoic as the Roman Portia, a soul as pure and noble and vigorous as ever lived in hero trained by chivalry and warfare. And the secret is she knows the power of love and places self-sacrifice and friendship and duty in the shrine of her life. Art and beauty and pleasure she counts as but the handmaids of love. No other thing could save her soul from ruin.
ANTONIO AND THE CHRISTIANS
ANTONIO AND THE CHRISTIANS.

IT is the nature of human power to resent question. It grows more arrogant and overbearing, the more its prerogative is acknowledged, the surer its footing becomes. Unquestioned might soon claims that it is right beyond possibility of question. Put what virtue you will into a throne that is securely fixed, and you will see it before long degenerate. Pity, mercy, thoughtfulness for others readily vanish from the heart of prosperous authority. For the “native hue” of masterful resolution that succeeds resists change and adaptation to circumstance as an offence. And an all-conquering will eats out its own heart and faculties as the Sultan bowstrings his kin. It is a marvel to find humanity and gentleness in old and full-grown power.

And there is good reason for this in the development of man. The law of the survival of the fittest has piloted him to his place in the animal kingdom. And for untold ages this must have meant the survival of the strongest in will and cunning. In the struggle first for existence and then for the superfluity of existence everything was fair. To gain his dominance over the other animals with all their strength and superiority of bodily size and often deadly powers, there was needed the continual display of cunning and subterfuge and absolute ruthlessness of slaughter. Then came the enslavement of the more useful and manageable. Cunning grew into skill and skill into art. But behind it was ever the ancestral appetite for power, growing stronger instead of weaker as the generations proceeded.

To dominate, to yearn for domination, was the outcome of the internecine combat for existence, not merely to have the species tame or exterminate all other species, but to get internal mastery. The law of the survival of the fittest
has not only foreign but domestic force. Within the kind it works as pitilessly, as destructively as without; else the kind could not have survived. Unit wars with unit, and combination with combination. Man starts as a social animal: for during a large section of his life the individual is helpless against the forces of nature. And only that type of man survived which devoted most care to the protection of the young during their inchoate and subject stage. It was the family that was the practical unit during the earlier stages of human development. It is the family that still fights for supremacy and survival in the ultimate analysis of the human appetite for power.

It is true that family expands into clan or tribe, and tribes unite into nations. It is true that in all historical wars and struggles, if not in most prehistoric too, the combatants are far larger units than either family or clan; it is nation against nation, race against race, and civilisation against savagery or even West against East. The units widen as history proceeds; the issues become farther-reaching, the havoc appalling. Yet analyse them and the final unit will be found to be the family. It is the survival of the dynasty that is the end and aim of all monarchic wars. And even in democracies it is the love of family that gives all its intensity to patriotism, raises it above a pale and shadowy ideal.

But never throughout the whole ascent of man has this longing for survival of the family lost its inevitable shadow, the appetite for dominance; nor has that appetite lost its pitiless characteristics, when gratified. "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven" is still the victorious mood of human nature, and may still be called its satanic and destroying attitude. To thrust the weaker to the wall, to brow-beat and enslave him, is the native tendency of unquestioned power. And till the barriers of race vanish and love of family be transformed into love of mankind, this cruel aspect of the survival of the fittest will persist.

Meantime it is religion that has given the appetite for power its keenest edge. To rule the inmost feelings of men is an ambition it can never transcend; to mould or dictate their beliefs and reverences, to make them the same as our own, has been ever one of the strongest, though most latent,
instincts in the human breast. Philosophers and scientists attempt to give it issue by means of reason; great conquerors and statesmen by means of the fame of their achievements; artists and imaginative writers by means of their productions; orators and actors and musicians by playing upon the emotions. But it is the religionist, who, when he has it and permits it full scope, has it in its most tremendous form. He will have the whole world accept his creed. For it is the nature of religious belief to find its best proof and confirmation in universal assent; and obstinate heresy is rebellion against its deity and profanation of his shrine—the world. All belief desiderates undissenting acceptance; but religious belief has an insatiable passion for it. Most creeds have lamely had to be satisfied with convincing or forcing the conviction of all within their power or neighbourhood and with the assurance that if only the rest of the world knew their deity they would worship him. It is the last conquest of civilisation to master this instinct and make it await the slow discoveries of reason as the only true substitute for universal assent.

Shakespeare lived in a time that had just endangered and shaken the belief in world-wide unity of creed. The Reformation had brought out the inevitable differences of opinion that had been threatening for centuries the seeming unity of Christendom. European religion had been rent into North and South with an undecided borderland between. The wounds of inner dissension had for ages been scarred over by the strong hand. But now that power was divorced from unity of creeds, and kings and governments took the side of protest and dissent, the desire of the human soul to choose and mould its beliefs for itself—an instinct in most as strong as the other—grew bold and questioning. Hunted creeds drew themselves together again. Scouted opinions reappeared. And reasoning laymen, if not churchmen too, began to hesitate about the infallibility of their received standards of truth. Englishmen at least began to wonder whether all truth were contained in the tenets of Christendom. And the idea of toleration or provisional sufferance of beliefs, that were not against good government, order or morality, dawned upon the Western world; yet so faintly that it was ever being lost sight of even by its wisest thinkers.
It was this problem of toleration that was filling the mind of Shakespeare when he worked out "The Merchant of Venice." It was not how the races and nations of the world were to live side by side without ever-recurrent collision for outraged rights and profaned ideals, but how the different attitudes towards life and all its problems that difference in religion meant could neighbour each other and endure the tacit or open denial of each other's beliefs. There had been an easy solution, when the church was universal in the West and could either smooth or crush out all appearance of disagreement in creed. But now there were Catholic and Protestant side by side in the same race, in the same nation, in the same family, and there was no acknowledged principle but the strong hand for obliterating the profanation of one belief that the presence of its contradiction seemed to mean. Destroy the denial by destroying the denier; that was the one maxim of religious unity. Through Edward's reign and Mary's, Shakespeare's relatives and locality had felt the practical absurdity of it in a country like England. And the tales of persecution for the sake first of the one faith and then of the other must have stirred the young dramatist's mind over the dilemma. The practical compromise of Elizabeth's reign thrust the insoluble problem out of sight for a time. But as the century drew towards a close and the enthusiasm against the Armada, which had fused the two creeds for a moment, died out, the old attempt at unification by annihilating the contradictory revived. And the question pressed home upon the minds of thinking men for a solution.

The dramatist chose his topic from a neutral sphere. The Jews were persecuted alike by Protestant and Catholic, were the outcasts of Europe, and no personal or religious feeling could be touched by introducing them and their case upon the stage. He chose likewise as the scene a country and city that were far removed from England and her national peculiarities, and yet would suggest by their circumstances the English analogy. Italy was Catholic still; but Venice was the model to which commercial England looked for guidance in dealing with other races and other religions. He might solve his problem and draw his lesson with fullest effect and yet avoid the excitement of all religious or national or personal feeling.
Shylock he had to make sufficiently repulsive to fit the English idea of the Jew; nor had he to distort much the traits of a long-persecuted people to get a personality that would be repulsive to a dominant and over-bearing creed. And in his portrait the London audiences might read what intolerance of any profession or any creed would produce in the victims. Shylock is wedded to his money-lending and money-getting till it has become an absorbing passion; the only feeling that can compete with it in him is his desire of revenge; this has eaten his heart out; and in the court he seems almost wolvish in his pursuit of his victim, Antonio. But the recoil is as terrible; he changes from the wolf into the victim; our last view of him is as he goes out to feed upon his baffled passions. Intolerance has engendered vindictiveness and an immortal vendetta is the result. He will not rest till he has paid out the Christians for this fresh insult to him and his religion and his profession.

It was manifestly not a lesson for the Jews; for there were practically none of them in England; and how could the persecuted begin the game of mutual tolerance? It was the Christians that had to be taught, the Puritans who persecuted Shakespeare’s own profession at this time, the Protestants who, in their arrogant dominance, persecuted the Catholics at least by social means. And it is in painting the portraits of the Christian merchants in the play that he enforces the lesson of toleration most effectively. They are worth studying in order to see the manners that social or religious or political dominance breeds.

Antonio is, of course, the centre of the group; and upon him the poet has lavished all the virtues and qualities most admired in Christendom and in a dominant class. He is most reckless in his generosity, most loyal in his friendship, most devoted to his caste and its privileges, most candid in his sincerity to his peers and yet most courteous, most contemptuous of all that does not accord with the conventional ideals of his class, most high-minded in all transactions, most noble under threatened torture, most brave to meet death, most dignified in all the circumstances of life, favourable or unfavourable; the very ideal of Aristotle’s magnanimous man. He is, in short, the best that Shakespeare could make of the merchant life in its highest phases.
Yet when we analyse his treatment of Shylock, the natural flaws of such a character are emphasised. We grow weary of his perfection when we look to the principles upon which he reasons and acts. They are most of them based on the irrationality of intolerance. He is by trade a money-getter himself; but he hates and persecutes every way of following it but his own. He buys goods in the cheapest market, (that is takes advantage as far as he can of the artisan or manufacturer,) and sending them to the East he sells them in the dearest market, (that is takes advantage of those who know not the country of their manufacture and the conditions that rule their price); he has an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies, a third to Mexico, a fourth to England, and "other ventures he hath squandered abroad." If there is one way more rapid than another for making a fortune in merchandise, it is trading with markets and people too distant to ascertain the true values of the goods to be sold. There is risk, as in all royal roads to riches, risk from "land-rats and water-rats, water-thieves and land-thieves," and "then there is the peril of waters, winds and rocks." It was in those days even more than it is now a kind of gambling in which enormous profits balanced the risk of complete loss. Mexico and the Indies were still at the close of the fifteenth century the outer rims of the earth West and East; and they are thrown in as destinations of ships of Antonio to show how venturesome he is in his transactions, what a gambler he is. And to leave this trait beyond the reach of a doubt, we are led to believe by himself and his friends that he has all the ready money he has in the world though not his whole estate embarked in these risky "Andrews" spread over the oceans; he has ventured his last penny upon the turn of fortune; he may be a beggar or a millionaire within the circle of a year. There is boldness undoubtedly in the policy; but it is the boldness of the gambler who lays his whole fortune on the red or white, not the boldness of the legitimate trader who has a reserve or insurance to cover losses, and keeps some capital in safe ventures to begin with again if he should lose all. Such a man would not fail to be reckless in his gifts and lendings; he has no assurance of the future; to-day he may be the richest in the land, to-morrow as poor as the
beggar on the street; to-day then he will lavish his money on his friends; to-morrow he may be in a position to need reckless generosity on their part. His are the spirit and the policy that form the stuff of striking and romantic bankruptcies, involving thousands in ruin and starvation. Though he insists it is not his ventures that make him sad, we can find no other reason, nor can he give any himself; all he can say is that the world is a stage where every man must play a part and his a sad one. It means that he is, like the true devotee of luck, subject to unaccountable extremes of mood. Now he is buoyed up by hope; again when the turn of fortune is undecided he is buried in despair; he is at the mercy of something which is fluctuant and irresponsible and his storm or sunshine come without his knowing whence or why.

If we look at the Jew and his business, the object of the merchant's scorn and contumely, we shall find less of the reprehensible in it, according to all modern economical, if not moral, principles; Shylock fulfilled nothing but the modern function of a banker; he lent out money at interest, money which he had partly borrowed from others, as we can see from his reference to Tubal furnishing him with the sum required—three thousand ducats. He acted, in short, as intermediary between lenders and borrowers and thus like modern banks enabled capital to circulate freely. Without him and "his tribe" the mediaeval man who wished to venture further in his business than his means would allow, like Bassanio, was dependent on the gifts or free loans of friends. The Jews with their usury shops formed the only mediaeval organisation for letting stranger borrow of stranger.

It is true that Europe of the middle ages had fallen heir to the ancient hatred of usury. Rome had been more agricultural than commercial and a system of free circulation of money at interest had never arisen; hence, as in most purely farming nations, it was only men in great difficulties that applied to strangers for loans; they had exhausted the money and good-nature of their friends; and it was only natural that strangers should exact a high rate of interest and full bond over the property in order to cover the great risk. Usury had, therefore, an evil name and involved in its odium even moderate and fair interest. The church
sympathised with the debt-oppressed yeoman and condemned usury, appealing to the old Jewish law about taking usury only from the stranger. The body politic could not do without loans on interest; and the Jews as outcasts had to take up the business. But as the church and the Christian kings and nobles counted their employment as immoral and often failed to pay interest or even repay capital, their interest had to become usury in order to cover the increased risk of loss. Hence the great odium attaching to both the Jews and their business.

But in Venice the old reason against the lending of money on interest had ceased to exist; for she was the great mercantile city of Europe and could scarcely avoid the free circulation of capital in order that her commerce should flourish. As Antonio puts it

"the trade and profit of the city Consisteth of all nations,"

and hence all bonds, however fantastic the pledge or interest might be, must be kept. Her commerce depended on the justice she dispensed to alien and Venetian alike.

It was absurd, then, for the merchant to call Shylock dog "before he had a cause," to rate him about "his moneys and his usances," to call him

"misbeliever, cut-throat dog
And spit upon his Jewish gabardine,"
"to void his rheum upon his beard,"
"To foot him as you spurn a stranger cur
Over your threshold."

This was the very spirit of religious intolerance imported into the world of business. Where the difference lies between the risk of Antonio's capital in a dozen ships to various parts of the world in order to double it in a few months and Shylock's loan of his capital to a merchant on interest it is difficult for us to see; perhaps the Jew's return was a little more of a certainty, but it would not be so great; if anything Antonio's business was more gambling and it would keep a larger proportion of the return out of the pocket of the maker of the goods than Shylock would take by interest out of any man's pocket. The Christian merchant's contempt for the Jewish money-lender is, therefore, quite gratuitous. And his kicking and spitting
and railing are scarcely what we should expect from so dignified an aristocrat as Antonio is represented as being. They are as offensive as Shylock's adherence to his absurd bond in spite of all appeals to mercy and justice. The difference is that the persecuted, down-trodden Jew rests his claim for retaliation on legality, whilst the domineering Christian has as his only excuse for his intolerant conduct, convention, the usage in Christendom. The one prides himself on his tribal narrowness and his love of revenge; the other on his insolence and irrational contempt for the making of money by other modes than commercial gambling. Persecution had bred the vindictive habit of the one; "sufferance is the badge of all our tribe;" dominance for ages had bred the haughty intolerance of the other. Both think their favourite passion a virtue, based on some law of nature and therefore not to be questioned.

Bassanio shows less of the insolent tone to the Jew; but that is perhaps because he is practically a beggar; he is deeply in debt; and he has to rely upon a friend for the sum upon which he is to try his last lottery. He ventures in the true spirit of the gambler. his last throw, thinking the luck will turn. He has been living on a minus for some time in great extravagance, and though reluctant at first, consents to put the life of his friend in danger for the sake of his three thousand ducats; nay, it is he who goes to the Jews though he knows how hard they were with their debtors. Like the true bankrupt, he is reckless with his expenditure and invites others to a banquet for which he knows he has not the money. And the scheme by which he proposes to turn this minus into a plus is to annex the fortune of an heiress. For about her, too, there is the gambling atmosphere; her husband is to depend on the choice of caskets, at the best a matter of luck, as she shows by her preliminary fears. If usury or excessive interest to cover excessive risk in lending to desperate men is to be condemned, then surely still more is this gambling spirit that trifles with the fortunes and liberties and even lives of others. It was trust in luck that led Antonio to put his head into the noose and leave his life at the mercy of the enemy whom he had so spurned and of the winds and waters. It was the same trust in luck that led the Jew to
lend to broken men and to give up the usual rate of interest for the chance—a most distant chance—of legally getting the life of his old enemy. And how could the Christians expect mercy from him after crowning their insults by dealing him the cruellest blow they could have dealt a Jew? They stole his daughter and his ducats; the only passions Christendom had left him the chance of gratifying were the love of family and the love of property; to outrage both at once was to wound him to the heart. His only child is taken from him and married to one of the creed that has so persecuted his race and religion. And surely the very acme of torture for him is reached at the close of the trial, when, with an air of generosity, Antonio and the Christians first take from him his property and then the chance of leaving what else he may acquire to a Jew and lastly compel him to deny his religion.

Of a truth this was generosity and mercy with a vengeance! No torture could have been invented more subtle than this for a Jew, who, by his isolation in Europe, had grown to be the very incarnation of love of race, of family, of religion and of money. It is only the refinement of sophistry that can find much difference between the vindictive spirit displayed in this and that displayed by the Jew in adherence to his bond, especially after all the fine speeches about mercy and justice. And all through the scene Gratiano continues the vulgar method of insult towards Shylock that he has learned from his ideal Antonio. Both sides are alike faulty; both Christians and Jews take huge risks in speculating with their money and expect huge returns in case of success, in other words, gamble; and both indulge in the extremes of vindictiveness. The only difference is that the Jews are in the minority, the Christians have the upper hand. The down-trodden have to take round-about, snaky, unhandsome ways of gratifying their two passions. The dominant are bold and haughty and have accordingly a certain grace in gambling or in taking revenge. The vices of the Jew are therefore drawn as mean and despicable; those of the Christian, though the same in essence, are almost transfigured into virtues by the gracious sense of superiority with which they are accompanied. It is one of the strangest of human phenomena, the halo that success
throws round villany. So dominance paints vice as virtue, or at least grace.

"That in the captain's but a choleric word
Which in the soldier is flat blasphemy."

The ruling family or race or sect has a veil thrown over its worst faults, a veil that blinds it to them. Might is not merely right, but virtue and grace and nobleness and goodness.

The poet could not help giving such different colours to the same vices. For he had an eye for the reality of nature, as well as for the prejudices of his audience. And in nature he saw the cowering, yet subtle, recoil of suppressed anger and revenge; he saw the ungracious vindictiveness of the long-persecuted, their morbid passions, their furtive look; he knew that there must be in the Jew, though he could not have studied him and his manners closely in England, a character that was a cross between the slave and the successful monopolist; he knew that the long tyranny with its capricious injustice must have bred in him the clumsy timidity of the bond, whilst his long monopoly of the trade in that which is the concentration and symbol of power and opportunity in civilised life, must have bred in him the passion for dominance. Where could the poet find so good an instance of the unslaked appetite for power and of the vindictiveness that its suppression breeds? Where could he find a more salient analogy for the hunted Catholics in the reign of Edward the Sixth, and the hunted Protestants in the reign of Mary? Whence could he draw a better lesson for the Puritan merchants who were attempting to suppress the histrionic profession and to annihilate the natural love of the drama, than from the efforts of the Venetian merchants to suppress a branch of money-making that was a necessity to all commercial intercourse, that was a demand of civilised nature? Would his audience and their friends the London merchants be quick enough to see what it meant? Would they be able to conclude that all intolerance of race or religion or occupation or taste has undying recoil or vendetta? He showed them how intolerant the Jew was, how intolerant the Christian, how intolerant the money-lender, how intolerant the merchant; and he makes us feel at the close that the end of this comedy is not the end of the tragedy; the Jew
has been balked of his vengeance, his fantastic bond; the Christians have accomplished theirs in the most subtle and complete way; they have gratified their religious and professional and racial passion for dominance by compelling Shylock to abjure his faith, by stripping him of all his possessions and by marrying his daughter out of his race and religion; is this likely to be the final issue? Will not the Jew mole and plot to gratify his great passions for dominance and revenge, his as great contempt for other races and faiths, his as great love of money and family? Retaliation breeds nothing but retaliation, intolerance nothing but intolerance. The poet himself was, like his enemies, the Puritan middle class, at this very time lending money on interest; and the boundary line between interest and usury was too indistinct to permit their throwing stones at the Jews. The true reason, then, did not lie in the peril to money-lenders, but in the undying evil of persecution and intolerance, in the vendetta that revenge becomes.

Even the gentle Portia, with all her eloquence about justice and mercy, is not free from the taint. She joins in the Jew-hunt with great alacrity and personal enjoyment. In the trial scene she plays with Shylock, whom she knows she has in a trap, as a cat plays with a mouse. And after torturing the heart's blood out of him by taking his money from him for his renegade daughter and her Christian husband, and standing by when he is compelled to abjure his faith, she passes as lightly away from the scene as if it had been a most delightful jest. It is only another baiting of the traditional victim of mediæval practical jests. Once she has cracked the heart-strings of the old man, she quite forgets her own lesson that she eloquently urges concerning mercy. The "quality" of it "is not strained", "it is twice blest"; but manifestly it is only so when exercised by the Jew, the victim, the persecuted, else the Christians and she herself most would surely have put it into practice for the sake of the double blessing. Never was the preaching of a virtue so immediately followed by the opportunity of putting it into practice. But it never strikes any of the professors of Christianity that the essence of their religion should be shown to its enemy. Instead of convincing him of its nobleness, and so truly converting him to believe in it, they
force him into it. The Duke professes to use mercy in commuting the penalty of death into loss of all his goods. But, as Shylock says, this is no mercy to him;  

"you take my life  
"When you do take the means whereby I live."

To him, now that they have robbed him of his only child, it is more than life; and this they well know. Yet they prefer to true mercy this mockery of it; and perpetuate the vendetta between Jew and Christian. It was exactly the tender mercy the Protestant showed to the Catholic and the Catholic to the Protestant in England after the Reformation. Few were brought to the stake; most were stripped of house and property and friends and social position—of all that made life worth living. And doubtless many of those tender mercies were thrust home with jibe and refined torture and contumely and insult, as they were in Shylock's case. It is ever the nature of long-predominant human power to exhibit its intolerance towards the minority on which it tramples, in exquisitely vulgar forms; to whatever refinement it may pretend, it is unquestioned power that brings out the dormant savage in the human breast.

And well might the poet ask, as we still ask, if there is any solution to this ever-pressing problem. How are we to keep the enthusiasm of faith and yet tolerate the creeds of others that differ from ours? How are we to love the God whom we reverence and yet not hate those who ignore Him or despise Him? Is it possible to worship in His shrine with true fervour and yet shut our eyes to its neglect or profanation by men of other creeds? Is it possible to hold a belief with devotion and earnestness and yet resist its promptings to hostility towards those who are indifferent and antagonistic to it?

These are questions as urgent to-day as they were in the days of our dramatist. They seem little nearer solution. What coarse contempt for the faith or profession or social status or political colour or manner of life of others we hear daily poured forth! In literature it is somewhat subdued, if not refined, by the width and indefiniteness of the audience addressed. It is in a limited community or locality that it gathers vulgar confidence from repetition and from hearing its own echo reverberate till it seems almost the voice of the
world or even the voice of nature. It makes recluses of the best men, who hate to hear this utterance of the meanest passion of mankind parrotted into the voice of God, who turn their eyes away from seeing the incapacity of the human soul in community for tolerance.

"An habitation giddy and unsure
Hath he that buildeth on the vulgar heart."

But the "vulgar heart" is everywhere, amongst assemblages or communities or sects of men, however refined or elevated in position. The "vulgar heart" appears in all its caprice, its contempt for others and its intolerance, wherever two or three are gathered together. And hence the natural hermitry of the wise in all ages.

But is there not any better solution than this retirement from the conflict, this abandonment of the problem? Does not history point to some more practical way of meeting the difficulty? Have there not been ages and nations that have reached something like the fulness of tolerance? The answer history gives us is that the most tolerant ages and peoples have been the most indifferent to religion, and the most fervid believers have as a rule been the most bitter persecutors. It is of the nature of enthusiastic belief to feel insulted by dissent from it, whether active or passive. And it is men of the world who have worn the edge off all their beliefs that are best able to bear differences of opinion. The solution thus indicated is compromise, the surrender of all greatness or emotion in order that some working basis of thought may be calmly reached, in order that, in the sphere of faith, essentials may be agreed upon. But the difficulty here is to decide what is essential and what is not; the accident of one man's belief is the foundation of another's. Most atheists and most religionists are at the opposite poles in the comparative importance they attach to morality and the belief in the existence of a God. It appears indeed as though every belief must be held indifferent, non-essential, if compromise is to be the basis of tolerance. In short, all faith, all enthusiasm, all earnestness must become a vanishing quantity in tolerant periods.

But is it worth while to sacrifice all that makes life most pregnant of meaning to most, that, in fact, makes life progress and develop most rapidly, for the sake of social
and religious and political peace? Is this any better than social and religious and political death?

Nor would the attempt to sort out all opinions and beliefs into separate communities be much better, if it were possible. The final arrangement and separation would be into units. For in the highest development every man has something distinctive in his answer to the problems of existence.

But here, as so often, in reaching what is the final term of absurdity or impossibility, we touch upon the basis of the problem. In the question of tolerance it is really units we have to consider and not communities. And Shakespeare in his plays indicates the solution. He has dealt with all the fundamental problems of existence, all those to which creeds and faiths attempt to give answers and yet he has given no sign of what sect or religious division he belongs to. Both Catholics and Protestants, both Theists and Christians have claimed him. For he has given solutions that might be accepted by all; he has struck on the common foundations of all faiths. He has treated every religious question apart from emotion and has hidden his distinctive creed within his own breast. He will not inquisition his neighbour's, nor will he have his own inquisitioned. He is with the noblest life in whatever dogma its stimulus may be expressed.

"For modes of faith let graceless zealots fight,
His can't be wrong whose life is in the right."

Perchance a time will come when all worship will be purely spiritual, when every man's shrine will be his own heart. Then shall we see his faith only in his acts and not in his creed or church or words. Then by their deeds will men be known, and not by their long prayers or their fastings or their devotion to ceremonies. Then worship shall be direct from the soul to its Maker, a silent breathing of fervour that will need no medium, that will fear no obstruction. It is a thing of pure spirit and nothing but spirit should intervene between it and the source of all its being. Our bodies are but the creatures of a day, our acts and gestures the outcome of the fleeting moment, our words but breath that dies into the inane. And wherefore should we let the higher serve the lower, the immortal make
obedience to the mortal? Every means of worship that partakes of evanescence stains the purity of the sempiternal. All religion is but the yearning of the soul within us for its original and final home. And its utterance but defeats it. It is not for the common light of day. Shy and recluse, it awaits in the shadow of gross material things the final effulgence of the Infinite. Embodiment stains and mars it. Expression stifles it. Even the service of the arts obstructs it. Its noblest incarnation soon grows corrupt and worldly as it prospers.

And does not this point the way to the true solution of the problem of tolerance—silence before the mysteries of existence? We have not, we can never have, language limpid enough, expressive enough to reveal all we mean when we feel nearest the divine. Nor can ceremony or art, however noble or impressive, aid us the more in reaching mutual religious intelligence. There is an electric influence in worshipping crowds; but it soon vanishes and leaves the world more bleak than before.

Surely all our paths of thought concerning adoration lead us back to the temple within our breasts. It is the heart that is kin with the broad spaces of the universe as the true shrines of the Deity. Here can we hold communion with him unobstructed. Here need we fear no profanation by other men or other creeds. Here may we worship without fear of the obtrusive world. No time or space, no limits of material bound its aspirations. We can stand underneath the Infinite of night and feel our thoughts over-leap the interstellar spaces; we can fall on “the great world’s altar-stairs that slope through darkness up to God.” None can intrude or break “the sessions of sweet silent thought.” No power can stand between us and the object of our adoration. We are the temple of God and kneel within the temple of creation. Here and here alone shall we find the true remedy for all intolerance.
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