The first presentation of "Charles I" was in London in 1872; the Irving-Terry company presented it in Boston in the winter of 1883. This life of thirty years—venerable indeed for a modern play—seems little warranted by the qualities of the piece itself. It is one of those dramas with which we are growing too familiar,—a play that is not a play, but a succession of dramatic pictures. The four acts make no pretense at development of plot or character, and his- torical events are introduced, not as necessary parts of the story, but as details of a striking tableau. The play is not even self-explanatory, but presupposes some knowledge of history, and then violates that knowledge of history by extreme dramatic license. For example, Cornwall's angered assault with drawn sword upon the king secures a vivid though somewhat stagey tableau of rescue by the king's friends; the play, however, does not even suggest to us why the traitor, caught in this act of violence and outnumbered five to one, is quietly allowed to retire. To redeem deficiencies of plot, however, the play has some merits that seem less and less frequently to redeem this class of formless dramas,—it is in verse often pleasing to the ear and sometimes beautiful in phrasing; the characters are few and clearly defined. So the whole play is a series of four portrait sketches,—a row of figures in different pose, painted all on the same canvas, just as in the familiar triple portrait Van Dyke actually painted of the Stuart king.

For presentation of such historic portraiture, Irving's scrupulous attention to historical detail in stage setting is of course invaluable; and it should be added that the staging is not alone of antiquarian interest, but beautiful even as a pure conception. Rich, furthermore, as all the scenic effects are, they are so harmonized and so far subdued, that they never, even momentarily, dominate the action of the play.

Of the players themselves, there seems much to say, and all very difficult to say. In "Charles I" Miss Terry has limited opportunity; the piece is all Irving's. Perhaps, after all, it is satisfactory, when two such great actors are in the same company, to see now a play devoted to one, now a play devoted to the other,—as last year, Madame Bernhardt had "Camille" to herself, and M. Coquelin had "Cyrano" for himself. Miss Terry, the Theatre Review confesses, was 'his first "stage love," and that kind of love is cruelly exacting. Until the last act I could not feel that Miss Terry was anywhere near her best. The part is none too attractive, and the actress herself seemed to me somehow less winning, less graceful, and in poorer voice than she was, as I remember her,—God save the mark!—eight years ago. Perhaps there was genuine pathos in Charles's slow and quiet sentence in the later scene: "We are both much changed." The last act called Miss Terry to her full power,—power without superfluous touches, with few tears and nothing hysterical, simple and refined.

I have heard Irving's Charles abused and even laughed at. Undoubtedly, the actor has for any part very serious difficulties,—marked manner, not to say mannerism, much awkwardness and a grotesque figure. He has none of the physical attraction and no longer the youth that we feel necessary for the king only forty-two years old when the play begins. But for sustained, simple, masterly acting on an evenly high level, I have never seen anything better than Irving's Charles I. The part was a success when Irving began with it, thirty years ago; the actor has now, of course, perfected his technique, consequently he seems to hold not only his own rôle but the whole play in the hollow of his hand,—never a stage trick, never a melodramatic touch, never a breath of bombast, never a sense of effort; always the sense of reserved power. All those details which make other actors seem artificial, sometimes, to be sure, with dramatic effect, but none the less artificial,—nervous twitching of the fingers in supreme excitement, tragic lowering of the voice, melodramatic whispering,—Irving has cleared those all away. The play is full of melodramatic situations, but they are presented with that kind of inevitable and spontaneous simplicity that marks tragic moments in actual life; and of the playing, as of the life, now and then in the excitement we think,—how that might be dramatically heightened or enlarged!

This tremendous reserved force saves the play from being hystericly pathetic. Charles has so much keen bitterness of speech, and throughout his misfortunes so much unassailable dignity and control, that one's afterthought of the play remains oppressive and awful rather than tearful. One who has not seen the play can hardly imagine just the effect of the last lines spoken by the king to his wife as he departs for the scaffold,—spoken simply, and with the faintest suggestion even of a wan smile:

"To thee I do consign my memory . . .
I fear me I may sometime fade from thee,
Lest, when thy heart expelleth gray-stoled grief,
That I may hide no longer in thy memory.
O, keep my place in it forever green . . .
That sweet abiding in thine inner heart
I long for more than sculptured monument
Or proudest pomp among the tombs of kings.
Remember!"