Among the happy comedies of Shakespeare's earlier maturity,—As You Like It, Much Ado, Twelfth Night,—The Merchant of Venice, despite the loveliness of its poetry and the charm of its heroine, is out of place. With all its beautiful body of comedy, it has a tragic heart. The play seems a house divided against itself, and, on the modern stage, the last act, though much shortened from the text and bolstered up by boisterous comic action, remains, after that fearful trial scene, anticlimax. Perhaps Shakespeare, working over an old play, at first intending tragedy, fell in love midway of his piece with Portia and made the play close happily for her sake. But how bitterly tragic that such a woman should be made the instrument of judgment upon a grand, sensitive nature soured and rendered devilishly cruel by Christian persecution!

A play of this intense human interest needs only competent acting to become popular; and since the days of Booth, the Merchant as given by Mr. Irving and Miss Terry has remained the most popular, I believe, and the best Shakespearean presentation of our time.

The performance at the Hollis last week seemed to the Theatregoer in many of its details inferior to Charles I. The staging was rather less harmonious and beautiful, some of the minor parts were conspicuously poorer. Mr. Tyars, who made such an excellent Cromwell, was a brutal Gratiano; Mr. Royston, who made a tolerable Lord Moray, was to me—as Bassanio intolerable. On the other hand, Mr. Laurence Irving was an adequate Antonio; Mr. Dods- worth and Mr. Reynolds were capital Gobbo. Miss Terry's Portia has quite lost the girlish charm it had eight years ago, but in the great fourth act she was, as of old, quite lovely.

Mr. Irving has so completely identified Shylock with his own acting that we do not realize how otherwise the part could be played, yet few others of Shakespeare's characters are as problematical. Shylock was at one time acted as a comic part, and doubtless the coarse audiences of Elizabethan times found more in the character ludicrous than do we. On the stage Shakespeare wrote for, the Jew was not only a ludicrous, but a loathsome figure,—such, for example, as the extravagant, ranting, monstrous Barabas in Marlowe's popular play. But with laughter and loathing alone Shakespeare was not satisfied; mitigating no whit the hardness of the character, he makes him human and comprehensible, even pitiful. Shylock is fairly challenged to exact the murderous letter of his bond,—a bond proposed at first, I believe, with the intention merely of humiliating and torturing the Merchant's spirit, should he forfeit. In the very sentences that ask the loan the Merchant defies him:

"If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends:...
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty..."

Then Antonio, as it must seem to Shylock, tricks him away to dinner that his daughter may secure money and clote. After, maddened by Jessica's deceit, goaded and baited by Christian taunts, Shylock retorts: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

His wrath and revenge become immutable, even calm, and he appears in court in his bare, faded gaberline, the center of a storming and imploring crowd, the dull fixed point in that confusion of ducal pomp and gorgeous scarlet costume:

"I stand here for law...
An oath, an oath, I have an oath in heaven.
Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?
No, not for Venice. . ."

An eye for an eye, and on his part at least no deceit. The danger was understood from the beginning, and he can claim the forfeiture as relentless and bloody but unassailable justice. Fear of judgment cannot appeal to him.

"What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?"

Of this striking character Mr. Irving's version is judicious, keenly sympathetic and savagely powerful. He avoids what Edwin Booth (the Shylock of the past generation) felt to be the gravest danger of the part,—becoming broadly comic; yet there are touches of grotesqueness in the make-up and outbursts of inordinate rancour and revenge that incite in us at moments that dry bitter laughter which is as the crackling of thorns under the pot. Certainly Mr. Irving's Shylock is fiendish enough. Yet he puts such power into the few lovable touches that we constantly catch glimpses of what a noble mind is here o'erthrown. For example, in the scene just before Jessica's flight, Shylock shows, mingled with avarice and suspicion, simple and sincere love, as, with a kiss for Jessica and a word of grudging kindness about Launcelot,—"The patch is kind enough, but a huge feeder,"—he goes out into the night of Venetian revel, grimly conscious:

"But wherefore should I go? I am not bid for love."

If any one thinks Shakespeare did not mean to arouse sympathy for Shylock, let him see in Mr. Irving's play the scene of the Jew's frenzied outcry for his daughter and his ducats, with its moment of