

SHYLOCK.

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 In olden times Shylock was represented on the stage as a monster of avarice and cruelty. More recently he has been made quite a hero. Yet he is neither a hero nor a monster, but an intensely cruel and avaricious man. Shakespeare's creations are not monsters; if they were, he would not be the true poet, whose office is to hold the mirror up to nature. A natural monster is a contradiction in terms. The discovery that Shylock was not *unnaturally* cruel and avaricious has caused a reaction in his favor altogether too revolutionary. First judgments are best judgments on these matters; that is, the first is better than the second. I had rather call Shylock a monster than a hero. Read the character to the uninitiated and they are horrified at *Shylock's* meanness and malice, and surely not without cause; the judgment of the people is the judgment of a god in things literary as well as in things political. The best view of a character is the common-sense view touched up and refined by critical observation. In reference to the Jew, we recognize, first of all that he was cruel and grasping, and then we discover that these characteristics were the natural outcome of his circumstances.

Trying to get a glimpse of our character previous to the events of the play, we find that Shylock's life had been cramped and contracted in every direction. He was a Hebrew, full of pride of race and the traditions of his people, but had been forced to look on helplessly while the Chosen of God were plundered and oppressed by their more powerful neighbors; circumstances had compelled him to submit himself apparently to personal contempt and bear indignities with a patient shrug. He seems probably to have been a leader among his people, and, perhaps, as a young man had cherished schemes for the restoration of his race to their ancient dignities. As a Jew Shylock saw his consistent Judaism mocked at by inconsistent Christians: "You have among you many a purchased slave," he said at the trial, and no one could answer the implied argument. Moreover, in his domestic life he had been robbed of his consolation. We know very little of the Mrs. Shylock, but what we do know is very much in her favor. "It is my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor: I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys." She was a woman at least to be remembered; not, surely, like the frivolous Jessica, but a woman who could think and feel with Shylock, and appreciate the calm pleasures of his sober house. Cut off, then, like all his race, from a broad unrestrained life, Shylock seeks his consolation in commerce and becomes the intense and avaricious usurer, loving gold because of the power it gives him over those whom he holds by no other tie, and loving gold for gold's sake. In commercial life he comes in contact with Antonio, who is at variance with him on every point, "He hates our sacred nation," and offends Shylock the Hebrew—he is an inconsistent Christian and offends Shy-

lock the Jew. He lends out money gratis, and maddens Shylock the usurer. He kicks and spits on Shylock and enrages the proud man.

Chance throws into Shylock's way an opportunity, not of ruining Antonio, but of acquiring *some power* over him, and instinctively he seizes it, trusting that circumstances may turn the matter to his advantage. The scene helps to develop the idea of the Jew's isolation. His home companions are a fool and a thoughtless girl, whom he has some sort of affection for, but who look upon the stern old man as a kind of incomprehensible fiend. He is bade forth to supper, starts, then hesitates. "But wherefore should I go? I am not bid for love; they flatter me." Then his avarice comes to his aid. "But yet I'll go in hate to feed upon the prodigal Christian;" and he goes, but not without a presentment of impending evil. Returning, Shylock finds how he has been duped. Jessica has fled, deserted, plundered, wronged him in every way. He had lost his hold on his own flesh and blood; his avarice had been foiled; his daughter had dishonored his race and religion. Shylock becomes mad for the time. For whatever doubt there may be concerning the sanity of Hamlet, there can be no question in reference to the Jew's. How else can we imagine this man self-contained and bearing the badge of sufferance, crying out his wrongs in the open way, and hunted by the boys of the streets. Even at his next appearance he is in a state of agitation, not far from madness. Hath not now he heard that fate has thrown Antonio, his deadly enemy, whom he thinks to have a hand in his daughter's flight, into his power. Immediately he hires an officer and registers an oath not to relent towards Antonio (and it must be remembered that an oath was binding on the Jew, while an obligation to be merciful was not).

In the trial scene he is again calm and terrible in his strength. His case is a good one, and, according to his narrow standard of right, he is doing no wrong. His coolness and indifference to abuse shine out, "Repair thy wit, good youth, or it will fall to senseless ruin." "I am not bound to please *thee* with my answer." Old Shylock and Portia can come to no understanding. The Jew cannot learn the lesson of mercy. Portia is so far from entering into the Jew's feelings as to appeal to him on the *Nazarite's prayer*. Her open, beautiful, tender youth forms a fine contrast to his cramped, deformed, hardened old age. When Shylock's hardness and malice are at their height, sympathy flies to his foes; but when the old broken man cries "Nay, take my life and all, pardon not that you take my house when you do take the prop that doth sustain my house; you take my life when you do take the means whereby I live," we again realize how resourceless he stands. And when to the absurd demands of those around, he answers, "I am content," and sinks back into the old patient attitude, he has our pity. The jests of Gratiano and the hispings of Jessica, cannot blot out the memory of the dark, lonely and oppressed old Jew.