

and his friendly interest in Bassanio directed him to an old Jewish money lender named Shylock who henceforth plays a very important part in the story. In this last circumstance may be seen the very hinges of the plot.

It appear that previous to this, Antonio and old Shylock were not on the best of terms. The former spurned the latter simply on account of the very nature of his occupation, and the latter detested the former because the merchant took advantage of every opportunity to injure the Jew's trade by "lending out money gratis," and by otherwise submitting him to public humiliation. In a cruel and resentful nature, the fire of anger produced by such a friction is not likely to be speedily quenched. Patience and prudence may keep it smouldering for a while, but contact with favorable opportunity will promptly precipitate the inevitable blaze. Of such a vindictive disposition was Shylock, who mindful of past insults and indignities, but skilfully disguising his real hatred, received his enemy's request with an hypocritical air of friendly compliance. Shrewdly knowing that all Antonio's possessions were at sea, and sensible of the manifold dangers of the deep, he had his doubts as to whether they should ever reach their destination. Experience had taught him that:—

"Ships are but boards, sailors but men; there be land-rats and water-rats, land-thieves and water-thieves, that is pirates, and there is the peril of water, winds and rocks."

With a faint expectation that Antonio's ship might not return, Shylock decided to loan the money on a certain condition the strength of which is contained in the following passage;

"If you repay me not on such a day,  
In such a place, such sum or sums as are  
Express'd in the condition, let the forfeit  
Be nominated for an equal pound  
Of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken  
In what part of your body pleaseth me."

This was done ostensibly "in merry sport," and simply to gain the confidence and friendship of his inveterate foe. Ignorant of the real motive that prompted this bargain, and confident in the success of his commercial ventures, Antonio willingly signed the contract, and by this very act came near resigning himself to the cruel vengeance of the implacable Jew.

A short time after the signing of his contract, rumour announced the loss of the merchant's ships. The report was strongly confirmed by their failure to return within the three months allotted for the payment of the loan. Then it was that Shylock began to exhibit the real shrewdness and savage perversity of his nature. Thirsting for the merchant's blood, he applied to the Venetian court for an immediate settlement of the contract. The case was solemnly heard. Strength of evidence seemed to favour the prosecutor; sympathy was certainly with the defendant. During the proceedings, sums several times as large as the original loan were offered to appease the obdurate Jew, but they were peremptorily declined. Urgent remonstrances and melting appeals were unsparingly used, but all to no effect. The Jew's heart remained of adamant and his will of strongest steel. Sentence was pronounced, and to the sinister and sanguinary satisfaction of revengeful Shylock, Antonio was ordered to bare his bosom for the knife.

So far has been recounted, as much of the story as is required