

MORAL OF THE MERCHANT OF VENICE.

I believe there is in Shakespeare much merit that critics never saw. Passages that in the dramatist's wizard mind were for weighty reasons considered as "gems of purest ray serene," may now be valued as instances of Shakespeare's mediocrity, and may be subject to that utter disregard which is the fate of

"Many a flower that's born to
blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on
the desert air."

This statement is in justice to the Prince of Dramatists; but now a redeeming word for his critics. In their behalf I must put forth the opinion, that critics have discovered in Shakespeare many beauties, the creation of which their author never intended. It is by no means strange that in so voluminous a writer as the Bard of Avon, there should occasionally appear in his productions one of those happy accidents, which now and then rise like the Will of the Wisp in most unexpected places to cheer and assist us onward in our task even though we be ignorant of their presence. Shakespeare was a man; and as such, we must infer that he like other mortals has occasionally been subject to the covert workings of that blind little busy-body commonly called *chance*, and that consequently in the flights of his literary arrows, some have been submitted to that fortune so neatly expressed by an American poet when he said,

"Full many a shaft at random
sent,
Finds mark the archer little
meant;
And many a word at random
spoken
May soothe or wound a heart
that's broken.

Dryden remarked that Shakespeare drew his images from nature not laboriously, but luckily. Others go equally as far in saying that even the morals of his plays have not been studiously designed, but that as every story may to a greater or lesser degree have some commonplace maxim to unfold, so also the moral lessons of Shakespeare have been evolved casually and unintentionally, by the natural progress of his plots. My desire is to briefly treat this question, through the medium of one play, the Merchant of Venice, in order to see if through its perusal we may be able to obtain any enlightenment concerning so interesting a subject.

To begin with, there is no doubt that each play of Shakespeare, but especially his masterpieces, tends to inculcate some important moral principle. Thus the fate that accompanies the insidious villainies of Edmund and the shocking ingratitude of Goneril and Regan, contrasted with the tender sympathy and love all readers entertain for Edgar and Cordelia, plainly shows that the manifold curses attendant upon filial impiety, are the precautionary precept of King Lear. The precipitous evils which terminate in the sicken-