

SHYLOCK.



IN the foremost ranks of Shakespeare's dramas stands *The Merchant of Venice*. In this production, what especially strikes the reader is the consummate art displayed in the delineation of the many different types of human nature presented before him. Among these the master-piece is Shylock. Strictly speaking this character is not an original one, as its framework had been built up previously by other writers. In the originality of its development, however, it has few equals, and well might the poet say, like Augustus of old, he found the character of brick and left it of marble. Shylock is a Jew who lent Antonio three thousand ducats for three months on these conditions: if repaid within the time, only the principal would be required, if not the Jew should be at liberty to cut from Antonio's body a pound of flesh. The ships of Antonio being delayed by contrary winds, the merchant was unable to meet his bill and the Jew claimed the forfeit. Portia, in the dress of a law-doctor, conducted the trial and when the Jew was about to take his bond, reminded him that he must shed not a drop of blood, nor must he cut either more or less than an exact pound. If these conditions were infringed, his life would be the forfeit. The Jew, feeling it impossible to exact the bond under such conditions, gave up the claim but was heavily fined for seeking the life of a Venetian citizen.

Shylock is the personification of Jewish nature in its most revolting form. Hence he is the very worst of men, for, since the Jew is stamped with the curse of God, wickedness is in him more hideous, more frightful than in any other person. What a difficult task, then, did not the poet take upon himself to perform? And well did he succeed, since his creature of art is so much a man of nature that when he speaks the hearer at once recognizes in him the pawn-broker of our day. In his utterances may also be detected that pride which murmured against Moses in the desert, which time and again brought down the wrath of heaven on the Israelites, which denied the Messiah on

account of the lowliness of His birth, which, in short, nailed the Man-God to the cross. The poet adds another shade to his portrait and brands that pride with the curse of the Most High. As in accordance with God's command, the serpent crawls on its breast and maliciously hisses at the passer-by, so Shylock's cowering pride sneers at the Christian, and seems to say to him: I am vile and contemptible, lower than the dust beneath my feet, but you are far worse. Jewish obstinacy persisted in the worship of idols, stubbornly maintained the stand it had taken against Christ, and finally, by refusing to submit to the Roman conqueror reduced the mighty city of Jerusalem to ashes, and thereby brought ruin upon the nation of Abraham's descendants. Here too the usurer's obstinacy in demanding the pound of flesh can be overcome neither by liberal offers, nor by heart-rending appeals for mercy, and here too obstinacy brings about the downfall of its possessor.

How wicked, how vile soever a person may become, there ever remains in him a certain amount of good. The soul created to God's own image must assert its presence in every human being. Shakespeare understood man's nature too well to overlook this fact, and so, even in the monster Shylock, may be seen a dim spark of that virtue so great among the Jews, patriotism. He loves, at least to a certain extent, his own people and the traditions of his fatherland. In Shylock's heart there is another tender spot which shows itself in his affection for his daughter, Jessica. She is the only creature that can awaken in him man's noble feelings. He smiles complacently on her, for she is his pride and his joy. He has ornamented her with precious jewels, made her the queen of his household, and she is to be the heiress of his immense wealth.

Shylock, then, possesses to an eminent degree the two greatest faults of his nationality: pride and obstinacy, and he moreover shows forth a faint touch of his nation's most cheerful virtue, patriotism. By the side of those strong national traits we see personal traits no less strong.