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No. 3.—"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE" AS AN EXPONENT OF INDUSTRIAL ETHICS.

BY

J. CLARK MURRAY, LL.D.

[Reprinted from the International Journal of Ethics, April, 1899.]

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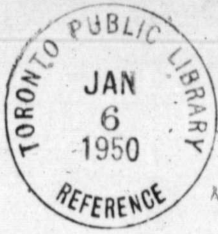
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"THE MERCHANT OF VENICE"

AS

AN EXPONENT OF INDUSTRIAL ETHICS.

BY J. CLARK MURRAY,

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"THE Merchant of Venice," by its very title, claims connection with industrial life. It presents the problems of industrial morality and the solution of these problems, as viewed by one of the greatest intellects of all time. The intellect, indeed, is that of a poet, and his treatment of industrial problems is, of course, colored by the requirements of poetic art. But poetry, as Aristotle said long ago, gives a more philosophical and more earnest view of life than history. In some respects, we might add, it is more philosophical than philosophy itself. For if history may lose sight of the universal in mere particulars, on the other hand, philosophy is apt, in its universal abstractions, to lose sight of the infinite wealth of concrete life which it is the function of poetry to portray.

The materials of this noble comedy, as students of Shakespeare know, are drawn from old tales which the industry of critics has brought to light. But no work of the great poet illustrates more strikingly the singular clearness of artistic insight with which he discerns the fitness of an old tale for his purpose, and makes his appropriations. While following

almost slavishly narratives that are as prosaic in style as the dullest chronicle, he quickens them into brilliant life as the vehicles of a noble idea.

Even if the poet had not been fettered by the sources of his plot, he could not have selected or invented a scene more admirably adapted for a great drama on the motives and the environment of industrial life. It is a commonplace of history, that the Italian republics took the lead in that new birth of humanity from which modern civilization arose. It is a significant fact, that the splendor of literary and artistic production, which is now most prominent in our memory of these old states, was associated with a corresponding splendor of industrial enterprise, just as in the ancient world it was among the industrial colonies of the Greeks in Asia Minor and Italy, that the first movements began of the glorious intellectual culture bequeathed to the world by the Greek race. Among the Italian states which were thus distinguished Venice took easily the first rank. In Shakespeare's time, it is true, her mercantile superiority was fast passing away before the new maritime activity of the Western and Northern nations, of Portugal and Spain, of Holland and England. But the mercantile enterprise of these younger nations was still too recent to have received any recognized place in the literature of the world; and consequently, even if Shakespeare had been obliged to construct a plot entirely from his own imagination, he could not have selected, for a story of industrial life, a scene more natural than one with the great traditions of Venetian trade.

The two most prominent characters also, given him in the old tales, are just such as fitted at once the mould into which his artistic aim required them to be run. The one embodies industrial morality as interpreted in the light of the ideal code of Christianity; the other exhibits, in full development, the degradation of industrial life when it is divorced from the inspiration of the Christian ideal. Yet neither is a mere abstraction personified. Both are concrete realities of human flesh and blood, of like passions with other men.

The Christian merchant gives its title to the play. And yet

the propriety of this does not at once appear. As Mr. R. Grant White observes in his Introduction, "the merchant, except to a keener and more reflective observer, . . . is one of the subordinate characters of the play." Accordingly the significance of the merchant's part does not seem to have struck the popular mind, and the play was apparently at first known by other titles or descriptions, such as the Jew of Venice, or simply the Venetian Comedy. Such designations probably indicated the impression carried away from the theatre by the ordinary mind. But the title, by which the play is now known, appears in both the quartos of 1600. It is therefore to be regarded as having received the sanction of the poet himself; and the merchant must be taken to embody the central idea of the drama, its meaning or "lesson."

Antonio, however, plays this dominant part not as a lifeless personification, but as a living person. Though he embodies an ideal, it is by no means as an ideal that he is portrayed. He is tainted with infirmities which make him but a man after all. At the very opening of the play he is introduced as exhibiting a sadness of demeanor that is not always agreeable to his friends. Too much, indeed, has been made of this. It is often forgotten that the word *sad* had not yet been intensified to the expression of positive mental distress, which is its almost exclusive meaning at the present day. In Shakespeare's time its common usage still suggested merely that subdued disposition of mind which we denote by such words as "sober," "serious," "earnest." This is indicated, in some measure, by the fact that the only friends, who express themselves at all strongly in regard to Antonio's demeanor, are light-hearted gentlemen like Salanio, Salarino, and Gratiano, —men who evidently have never dreamt of taking a moment's share in any of the serious work of life. Their frivolous temperament carries their merry banter beyond the courtesies of friendship. They cannot penetrate the secret of Antonio's quiet manner. They ascribe it first to commercial anxiety, then to love. Gratiano even cannot restrain his impertinent chatter from the insinuation that Antonio's reticent earnestness is a mere affectation,—

> "As who should say, 'I am Sir Oracle,
> And, when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!'"

These are obviously but shallow guesses. To the hint of love the reply seems to indicate a slightly irritated disgust; "Fie, fie!" The suspicion of commercial anxiety is belied by Antonio's whole career, and the unpleasant impression produced by Gratiano's rudeness has to be mitigated afterwards by Bassanio's assurance that his friend "speaks an infinite deal of nothing, more than any man in all Venice."

The truth in regard to Antonio's sadness is not far to seek. His brilliant industrial success has ranked him among the merchant princes of the great mercantile republic. "A royal merchant" he is styled implicitly by the duke. He spends with munificent liberality, lives in splendid indifference to the petty gains and losses of the very trade in which he is engaged. He can say with truth,—

> "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano."

But it is this very completeness of his success in life that produces the peculiar temperament of which his friends complain. This result is brought about, however, by a more subtle influence than any they could surmise. It is a very old truth that human joys in general derive their keenest zest from eagerness of pursuit, and are apt to become stale by ease of attainment and frequency of repetition. A position of superfluous wealth may thus weaken interest in the common enjoyments of life, and generate the jaded emotional condition of *ennui*, even in the extreme form of absolute life-weariness. Such a mood may well be described as sadness in the old sense of the term, especially if the etymologists are right in the theory that *sad* is primarily applied to one who is *sated* with the boons of life. But as the mood is not based on any positive suffering, as it arises rather from elevation above the common sorrows as well as the common joys of men, it will often appear groundless, inexplicable, even to its victim. It is therefore extremely natural that Antonio should open the drama, of which he is the theme, with the confession,—

> "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:
> It wearies me; you say, it wearies you:
> But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
> What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
> I am yet to learn;
> And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
> That I have much ado to know myself."

There is an incident in the play, akin to this, which is not often noticed. Portia, we shall find, is a sort of complement to Antonio in the exposition of Shakespeare's idea. She, too, is in the enjoyment of luxurious wealth. She is not called out of herself by the beneficent demands of any industrial occupation, and consequently she falls at times into moods of morbid *ennui.* It is surely significant that she bursts upon us in the play with a confession similar to that of Antonio, differing from it in fact only as the language of a woman of charming vivacity differs from that of a sober man of business: "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world." The secret of this life-weariness is revealed by the poet in the reply of Portia's maid, that "they are as sick that surfeit with too much, as they that starve with nothing."

It has been said that this temperament in Antonio stands in sharp contrast with that of the companions who twit him on the subject. It would almost seem, in fact, as if these somewhat trivial personages served merely as a foil to set off the character of their noble friend. They have, indeed, been hardly dealt with by some Shakespearian critics, who describe them as parasites of the wealthy merchant. This harsh judgment is clearly unjust when Gervinus carries it so far as to compare Antonio, amid this circle of friends, with Timon of Athens surrounded by flatterers, who fed upon him in his prosperity and deserted him in adversity. Antonio's companions, frivolous though they appear in relief against his earnest disposition, are genuine friends. In the darkest hour of his calamity not one of them betrays the sentiment of a parasite. They stand by him with manful sympathy, and are obviously ready for any sacrifice to save him. Their whole bearing proves that their language about him in his good fortune was not the language of parasitic flattery. Bassanio,

indeed, must be put on a different level from that of the other three. His relation to Antonio is that of antique friendship. In our day, when the social relations of men are so often reduced to a mere "cash-nexus," we are apt to feel shocked at the cool borrowing of Bassanio. But the old ideal of friendship expressed itself in a proverb which is often quoted with peculiar relish by the great moralists of the ancient world, to the effect that the property of friends is common. Nor should it be forgotten that in Shakespeare's time the lending of money upon interest was not yet accepted in the code of industrial morality as legitimate even in trade, while such a transaction could not have been thought of without horror between friends.

> "For when did friendship take
> A breed of barren metal of his friend?"

There is another aspect in which Antonio appears as no mere ideal, but a man with the common frailties of humanity. He cannot rise above the un-Christian prejudices which Christians generally in the past have entertained against the Jewish race, and by which great sections of Christendom continue to be influenced in our own day. In fact, our sympathy is for a moment drawn away from Antonio to Shylock, when, on the merchant applying for the loan to Bassanio, he is reminded by the Jew of the scurrilous insults he had heaped on him, spurning him, spitting on him, calling him dog. With unrelenting harshness Antonio replies,—

> "I am as like to call thee so again,
> To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too."

All through the play Shylock feels keenly the injustice of these insults, and resents them at times in a tone of righteous indignation that appeals to our common humanity, "What's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?"

In the very turning-point of the plot Antonio finds that he has to reap the fruit of the seed he has sown. The ruthless cruelty of the Jew, and the anguish which it brought upon Antonio and his friends, are but the inevitable retribution of those unrighteous insults. "What!" exclaims Shylock, on being taunted with his cruelty in seeking the life of Antonio,—

> "What! wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?"

From this alone, even if there were nothing else, it is evident that Shylock is no mere caricature. It does not appear even that he is intended for a representative specimen of the Hebrew race. Shakespeare may indeed have shared the current prejudices of the Christian world against the Jews. But there is nothing in the play to show it. It may be said that he might have selected a man of another nationality to embody his idea. But this would not have been easy. For, in the first place, Shylock was given in the old stories from which the plot of the comedy is drawn. Of course the character would have been rejected or altered if it had not fitted the poet's purpose. But for that purpose it happened that Shylock was admirably adapted. For Shakespeare had to go outside the community of Christians in order to exhibit an industrial character divorced from Christian inspirations. Now, the only community that kept clearly aloof from the Christian church, and yet came into trading relation with Christians, was the Jewish. The Jews were not only non-Christian, but (owing to restrictions placed on them in Christian countries) they were excluded from almost all industrial occupations that were regarded as honorable, and thus driven to the trade which was still generally considered, in a moral point of view, illegitimate. Even, therefore, if Shylock had not been furnished to him ready-made, Shakespeare would almost have been forced by poetic necessity to create a similar personage of the same race. In the portraiture of Shylock it is thus not the racial features that are most significant; they are obtruded mainly as serving to illustrate the moral character which it was the poet's aim to portray. This

is evinced by an anonymous work,* whose very design is to show the extent to which the idea of race has influenced Shakespeare in the development of character and plot. Though the writer naturally makes as much as possible of Shylock's racial connection, he only proves that, having taken a Jew to embody his idea, Shakespeare had to make him speak and act like a Jew, while the other characters treat him in accordance with the common sentiments of Christendom in reference to the Jewish race. The truth is, that the coarser colors in which Shylock is painted in the old tales are toned down by the great poet into a picture with a truer likeness of humanity and a more dramatic consistency.

It has been observed that a sentiment akin to pity is excited by the effect which the cruel fanaticism of Christendom had produced on the Jewish nature of Shylock. It should not be overlooked, moreover, that Shylock is not the only representative of his race in this play. His daughter, Jessica, is not indeed the noblest type of womanhood; she is far inferior in womanly nobleness to the Rebecca of "Ivanhoe." Yet she is sketched in pleasing features which imply the absence of all her father's vices,—the very vices which some critics imagine the poet to be satirizing as the inseparable characteristics of her race. This contrast between father and daughter runs through the play. It finds voice not only in the enthusiastic extravagances of her lover,—

> "If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven,
> It will be for his gentle daughter's sake."

The indifferent Salarino is equally hyperbolical, telling Shylock, when he claims Jessica as his flesh and blood, "There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory, more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish." The comical Launcelot puts the contrast in still harsher form by the coarsely jocular suspicions which his clownish nature does not shrink from uttering in the presence of Jessica herself.

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* "New Exegesis of Shakespeare: Interpretation of his Principal Characters and Plays on the Principle of Races." Edinburgh, 1859.

Shakespeare's Shylock is thus a type, not of racial, but of moral characteristics. He represents a character in industrial life that might be met with in any nationality, but happened to be given in a Jew, and had, of course, to be developed under the forms of Jewish thought and sentiment. It is the character implied in elevating selfish competition to the place which it holds in the direction of industrial activity. This competition makes gain legitimate by any means not involving absolute plunder. Consequently Shylock does not feel any scruple in following a trade from which the greatest gain could be most rapidly obtained, even though it was still condemned almost universally by the moral sentiment of the time. Against this moral sentiment he is obliged to attempt a vindication of his trade, and one might almost fancy that Shakespeare had made a special study of the Talmud in order to put into Shylock's mouth a curiously typical specimen of Rabbinical dialectic. It is drawn, as will be remembered, from the well-known device by which Jacob won an advantage over his father-in-law, Laban. Antonio's criticism of this dialectic is one that goes back to Aristotle at least, and was familiar in all subsequent discussion of the subject. It pleads that money is not a living thing, and therefore cannot be made to breed. Shylock's reply is also a revelation of his character. It is thoroughly in the style of men whose thoughts never rise above the lowest morality of trade. They arrogate to themselves distinctively the title of practical men, and claim for their reasoning peculiarly the authority of fact. "I cannot tell," he says; "I make it breed as fast." The mere fact of Shylock's thriving as Jacob had done is, to his mind, a complete vindication of his thrift. For "thrift is blessing, if men steal it not." That is Shylock's ideal,—to keep within the restrictions of law. There is, for him, nothing higher.

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

Such a mind is not open to reason. For reason it pleads fact, even if it be merely the fact of a reasonless whim clamoring for gratification: "stat pro ratione voluntas."

> "You'll ask me why I rather choose to have
> A weight of carrion flesh, than to receive
> Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that:
> But say it is my humor: Is it answered?
> . . . .
> Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
> Some, that are mad, if they behold a cat;
> . . . .
> As there is no firm reason to be rendered,
> Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;
> Why he, a harmless, necessary cat;
> . . . .
> So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
> More than a lodged hate, and a certain loathing
> I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
> A losing suit against him. Are you answered?"

A mind of this type imposes no limit on its greed. Its insatiable craving for gold will swallow up every sentiment of humanity. In Shylock, therefore, not only is there left no ruth for the victims of his rapacity in general, or for Antonio in particular. Even his fatherly love for the gentle little Jessica is shrivelled up by the blight of his ruling passion. "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!"

All this is simply the spirit, which still dominates trade, carried to its logical issue. In industrial work it is still almost universally assumed that a man may practically ignore the essential principle of social morality. In other spheres of life it is admitted, in theory at least, that a man ought to labor for the good of his fellows. In trade no moral shock seems to be in general felt when a man bluntly gives it to be understood that his predominant motive is simply to make gain for himself. He may even get the credit of being a thoroughly honest fellow, peculiarly free from all hypocritical pretence. Is it any wonder that the ancient moralists, with singular unanimity, regarded trade as incompatible with the moral character of a free man, and would not admit the tradesman to the rights of full citizenship? Of course, the intrinsic goodness of human nature—the divine image that is never

utterly defaced—commonly holds in check the inhuman tendencies of the trading spirit, and consequently a man in whom this check is to any large extent withdrawn seems an inhuman monster. But he is merely an extreme type of the character which is recognized as the normal qualification for industrial success. In every industrial community there are thousands of transactions every day, in which the necessities of others are not viewed as a pitiful call to loving service, but eagerly sought, and sometimes even ruthlessly brought about, as welcome opportunities of gain.

"The Merchant of Venice" gives dramatic interest to a nobler ideal of industry. Antonio, as the embodiment of Christian morality in trade, stands in complete contrast with Shylock. Shakespeare's exposition of his idea is in fact a happy dramatic antithesis. Shylock, as we have seen, represents a kind of trade which was regarded as incompatible with morality, as it exacted an addition to wealth lent when it seemed as if no addition could possibly be made by the loan. Antonio, on the other hand, represents that legitimate industrial enterprise by which the wealth of the world is really increased. But the spirit in which this industrial enterprise is carried on contrasts even more strikingly with the spirit of Shylock. Antonio's method of trade is not a rigid bargaining which confers an industrial benefit only while exacting a full equivalent in return. He indulges the sentiments of a generous, even heroic, friendship. He saves men in need of "accommodation" from the dire resort of borrowing from Shylock, and even delivers Shylock's victims from his clutches by paying their debts. "I oft," says Antonio,—

> "I oft delivered from his forfeitures
> Many that have at times made moan to me:
> Therefore he hates me."

All this is, to Shylock, unintelligible folly.

> "This is the fool that lends out money gratis,"

he complains. Such unbusinesslike methods are, in his eyes, an illegitimate interference with the gains of trade to gratify

a mere whim. He feels them especially to be a wrong inflicted upon himself, for which he may legitimately seek revenge.

For a man who occupies such a moral attitude the higher life cannot be said to have begun. He has not yet been born of the Spirit. Such, at least, is the unequivocal teaching of the Spiritual Lord of Christendom; and it is this teaching, carried into the sphere of industrial work, that forms the leading idea in the "Merchant of Venice." In industry, as in every other sphere of activity, no divine life, not even a truly human life, is possible for men until they rise above the narrowness of a morality confined within the limits of bare justice into the sphere of a charity or mercy which does not wait till duty is exacted, but anticipates such exaction by going out in quest of opportunities of doing good.

The idea of this larger morality is embodied primarily in Antonio. But the requirements of dramatic art prevented him from being a complete exponent of the idea. He is essentially a practical man,—a man of action rather than of talk. He contrasts with his lively voluble friends by his silent and sad demeanor. Being a man of few words, therefore, he could not give adequate expression to the idea of the play. He expresses it merely in so far as it can be gathered from his conduct. He fails to give it articulate voice. His exposition has therefore to be supplemented by one who has caught the idea in its loftiest significance, whose life has not paralyzed her speech by absorption in practical affairs, whose general culture and eloquence render her a peculiarly effective interpreter.

It is significant, to begin with, that this interpreter is a woman. If there is one feature which distinguishes the Christian ideal of morality from all ideals of a distinctively Pagan type, it is the prominence given to the virtues of love, peace, gentleness, long-suffering,—virtues which represent in its finest efflorescence the feminine side of human nature. The idea of the poet, therefore, which aims at exhibiting a life in trade breathing this fine moral atmosphere, could not have found its happiest exponent so naturally in one with the sterner attributes of the masculine nature. Here, again, the

person required by the poet was given in the old tale from which he drew, though here also we cannot fail to notice the clearness of that artistic insight with which he recognized the fitness of the given material for his purpose. It is an interesting circumstance, however, that the lady, who is made to embody the poet's idea, remains nameless in the old tales. Portia is therefore christened by Shakespeare himself. Apparently in his study for "Julius Cæsar" he had been impressed with the womanly nobleness of the Portia of Roman history.* It seems obvious that it was this impression that led him to give her name to the lady who stands out as the most charming figure in "The Merchant of Venice." When her name is first mentioned, she is explicitly said to be

> "nothing undervalued
> To Cato's daughter, Brutus's Portia."

Antonio is also described as a type of "ancient Roman honor;" and we may therefore take it for granted that, in giving her name to Portia, Shakespeare intended to recall what is noblest in ancient Roman character, but to refine its nobleness by adding the gentler features of a distinctively Christian womanhood.

The quaint legend of Portia's destination to marry in accordance with what appears a fantastic whim of her father, throws a strange glamor over her life. The Utopian scene, into which it transfers the plot of the comedy, elevates it for the time above the prosaic region of common trade into a fairyland of romance. The father's will, also, by its very extravagance is found to be not without a subtle meaning in the development of the poet's idea, and loses the character of purposeless caprice by being made the vehicle of an earnest moral purpose.

To pass over a subordinate point which will be noticed im-

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* It has been pointed out with truth by Mr. Stapfer ("Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity," p. 370, English translation) that Shakespeare's portraiture of Portia is not equal to Plutarch's, from which it is drawn; but Shakespeare's omissions may be vindicated by the subordinate part which Portia is called to play in "Julius Cæsar," compared with the place she occupies in a Life of Brutus.

mediately, Shakespeare's interpretation of the father's will must surely be gathered from the reflections of the successful suitor while he is deliberating on his choice between the three caskets. Bassanio, as we have seen, is altogether of nobler nature than the other friends of Antonio, who have been treated by some critics as mere parasites. His worst fault is a spendthrift recklessness, by which his fortunes have been ruined. Even of this he is frankly aware, and is now seeking earnestly to be rid. The experience, which he has bought through his fault, stands him in good stead at the critical choice of his life. He has learnt that gold is, at best, but an outward decoration of life, concealing often a worthless interior,—"the beauteous scarf veiling an Indian beauty." He will therefore have nothing to do with the casket which tempts by this gaudy outside; and we know from an earlier scene that it covered a death's head. He has learnt, also, that silver, then still the metal of exchange, is but "the pale and common drudge between man and man." This likewise he puts aside; and he thus escaped, as we know, the fool's head enclosed in the silver casket. He, therefore, decides upon the casket of "meagre lead," convinced that in its plain exterior there is more promise of substantial value than in the glittering show of silver or gold.

The whole character and conduct of Portia fit her admirably for the poet's purpose. From the first explosion of her *ennui* there is a peculiar witchery about every word she utters, and when we reach the issue of the trial we are ready to follow little Jessica in her generous hyperbole that "the poor rude world hath not her fellow." But it is the lofty generosity of her nature that illustrates the significance of her part in the play. Even her behavior to Bassanio, in letting her love go out to meet him as far as maidenly modesty will allow, indicates that she will not let human custom impose a hard and fast rule to prevent a generous act. But this generosity of nature finds its noblest expression in the readiness with which she sets out, before her honeymoon begins, to place her fine intelligence at the service of her husband's friend.

It is the scene of this service that places Portia in her most

brilliant light, and marks the culminating point in the development of the poet's idea. That idea, being the exhibition of a great moral principle in its actual working, could not find fitter exposition than in a scene which is a human imitation of the divine moral government. The trial in the Venetian court is not inferior to a sensational novel in the intensity of its plot-interest, while it is raised above all melodramatic trickery by the lofty tone of thought in which it is sustained and the noble end to which it moves. The scene gives a double exposition to the poet's idea. It shows the inadequacy for human life of any morality that is confined within the requirements of rigid justice, while it points, at the same time, to a morality of wider range, which embraces justice itself by emancipating it from the bondage of narrow rules into the freedom of the spirit. The first side of this exposition had been already foreshadowed in some subordinate scenes. In more than one way the poet had thus brought before his audience the contradictory claims which are apt to arise from the restricted requirements of justice being interpreted from opposite points of view by antagonistic interests. Thus the rights which a rigorous justice confers upon parents are brought into conflict with the rights of independent moral responsibility in children, when "the will of a living daughter is curbed by the will of a dead father." A similar conflict of rights arises between Jessica's claims and those of her father, Shylock. The perplexity of such conflicts is exhibited, on its comical side, in Launcelot's amusing debate with himself over his right to throw off the claims of his master and desert him for some more agreeable service.

All this illustrates the contradictions in which men become involved when they attempt to carry out rigorously the narrow ideas of mere justice. These ideas, by the very "determinateness" claimed for them by jurists, cannot represent the whole of the moral issue involved. It is therefore often possible, by logical inference, to found upon these ideas two requirements which neutralize one another by the impossibility of giving effect to both. This is obviously the source of that "glorious uncertainty of law" which has become a byword in

society, as well as of the very old experience that an extreme wrong may arise from an extreme assertion of right,—"summum jus summum injuria." But the fact that the ideas of bare justice are inadequate for the guidance of moral life, proves the necessity of rising to a larger principle of conduct; and it is the exhibition of this necessity that gives a glory to the trial-scene. Here Portia shows at her best. There is, for her task, a pathetic significance in the fact that she will not at first believe Shylock to be wholly impervious to the inspiration of the nobler morality. With the patience, which is an essential feature of the charity she represents, she endeavors again and again to make him feel the force of this higher plea. Her patience appears in striking relief against the attitude of the other speakers in the scene. All, with the exception of the duke, give vent to their impatient irritation in language which, so far from being conciliatory, was evidently in the highest degree exasperating to the Jew. Her final appeal to Shylock in exposition of the higher plea has, unfortunately for our purposes, become a common-place in every sort of book in which it could be conveniently dragged in to point a lesson of mercy. Its phrases have woven themselves into the very thoughts of English-speaking people on the subject, and become thus

> "Familiar in our mouths as household words."

It is perhaps necessary therefore for most men to overcome the effect of this familiarity in order to appreciate, with the freshness of a first impression, the noble eloquence of this famous appeal. To reach this fresh appreciation, it is most important to note the perfect fitness with which the appeal comes in as a natural part of the pleadings in the case. Portia had just admitted that the claim of Shylock could not be impugned on the ground of strict justice, and she urges accordingly that he must be merciful. "On what compulsion must I? tell me that," is the spontaneous demand of a mind which, as we have seen, never rises to the conception of any moral requirement beyond that which can be enforced by the strong hand of law. It is in reply to this demand that Portia bursts

into that noble address which rings like a series of brilliant variations on the theme that "the quality of mercy is not strained."

Even after this Portia continues to appeal to Shylock on the claims of charity or mercy, but to all her appeals there is a reply of uniform tenor, that such claims are not in the bond. It is only after all efforts have failed to lift Shylock into the spiritual region of a higher morality, that Portia sees herself obliged to descend and join issue with him on his own moral plane.

> "For, as thou urgest justice, be assured,
> Thou shalt have justice, more than thou desirest."

Then with fine dialectical skill she turns his morality against himself, by showing that the claim, which he presses against Antonio on the ground of justice, cannot, on the ground of justice, be enforced, inasmuch as its enforcement would come into collision with an older claim of justice which forbids the shedding of blood.

In this way the cause of the higher morality is vindicated by the claims of the lower morality annihilating one another. But a little incident at the close of the trial is apt to be passed without appreciation of its significance for the part which Portia plays in the development of the poet's idea. Is it meaningless that she declines the liberal fee offered by Bassanio for her services as advocate? This can scarcely be our judgment, if we note the reason she pleads for her declinature.

> "He is well paid that is well satisfied;
> And I, delivering you, am satisfied,
> And therein do account myself well paid;
> My mind was never yet more mercenary."

These words point to a new attitude of moral sentiment towards industrial work. Already this attitude is adopted in regard to the more spiritual work of human life, or rather no other attitude has ever been deemed morally appropriate. That work is always conceived as something which cannot be paid in the ordinary sense of payment,—something which is not commensurable with any currency in the world. The

degradation of industrial work is mainly due to the fact that it is not sustained by the highest and strongest inspirations of life. Here it is deemed not only allowable, but necessary, that men should cease to dream of the higher ideals, and court the corrupting influences which inevitably flow from working for pecuniary gain. There is no reason why the industrial life of the world should be thus divorced from the motives which are found to be most effective in other spheres of activity; and when it is made to thrill with the inspiration of these motives, it will find a sufficient reward in satisfaction with its own achievements.

It might be supposed that with the triumphant issue of the trial the poet's task was done, and the dramatic interest exhausted. But Portia's refusal of a fee leads to the incident of the rings; and this creates a new dramatic problem, awakening a fresh interest in its solution. The scene is thus, by a natural turn of the plot, transferred once more to Portia's home; and this ideal region becomes more than ever of a fairyland, as eye and ear are enchanted with the soft splendors of a moonlit night and the harmonies of delicious music. The features of external nature are thus in exquisite unison with the happy mood of the whole party returning from their recent triumph. The inspiration of the scene exalts thought and sentiment in all. Even the trivial circumstance of a light, seen by Portia in her hall as she draws near, has its solemn suggestions to her mind.

> "How far that little candle throws his beams!
> So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

The shallow Lorenzo himself is quickened for the moment to a more earnest depth of spirit, as he discourses to Jessica on the mystic power of music over the human soul, and tells her of an ethereal sphere-music sounded by the orbs of heaven,—

> "Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim."

No more fitting scene could be imagined for closing a drama in the spirit of the finest comedy. The merry little

by-play of the rings, which had been woven into the grander device of the trial, works its way, through an amusing mock-quarrel of the newly-wedded couples, to a good-humored explanation, while the grander device is by the same means unravelled in a manner that adds to the exultant feelings of the triumph.

It is a very stale criticism on the students of poetry, that they often find in the works of a poet a great deal more than he himself ever dreamt. The criticism may be just in some cases, but it is equally meaningless in others. A great work of poetic art cannot, in general, be less significant for the progress of thought than a new discovery in science or a fresh system of philosophy. Every step in the scientific or philosophic progress of the human mind brings into clearer view the organic connection of all truth, and must, therefore, as a rule, involve implications which could scarcely be surmised at the time. In like manner the artistic perfection of a poem depends on the completeness of its harmony with the best thought and sentiment of humanity, so that it must be directly or indirectly expressive of truth far beyond all that the author consciously intended. How far Shakespeare was aware of the teaching with which any of his dramas is charged, it is truly futile to inquire at this time of day. The task of the critic is rather to unfold the full significance of the ideas involved in the poet's plan and its execution. And if, in the case of "The Merchant of Venice," it be urged that Shakespeare did not, or could not, discern clearly the bearing of his splendid creation upon industrial morality, it does not seem irreverent to reply, that this spake he not of himself, but, being a great high-priest of humanity at the time, he prophesied for the guidance of that industrial era upon which the world was entering.