

HENRY IRVING.



HENRY IRVING AS "HAMLET." (ENGRAVED BY J. H. E. WHITNEY, FROM THE STATUE BY E. ONSLOW FORD.)

THE object of this article is twofold: to discover the position to which Mr. Henry Irving is entitled among his contemporaries on the English-speaking stage, and to examine the qualifications, natural or acquired, which have enabled him to attain that position. The task is more difficult than it would be in the case of almost any other living actor of eminence, on account of the

peculiar circumstances attending Mr. Irving's career: his sudden elevation to the topmost heights of popularity by his own countrymen, the extraordinary diversity of critical opinion concerning him, and the prejudices naturally arising therefrom; his disregard of physical limitations in his selection of characters, the wide range of his work, and the strange confusion of the old and new styles of acting

which, in conjunction with innumerable mannerisms of his own, constitutes his present method. The only way to reach an honest verdict is to dismiss from consideration all that has been written about him in the way of praise or detraction, and to treat him as an artist unknown here before that memorable evening when he made his first bow before an American audience in the character of *Mathias*.

In this first performance, it was most interesting to observe how the personal fascination of the man—that subtle attribute commonly called magnetism—gradually asserted its power over his hearers, compelling their attention and controlling their sympathies, in spite of their disposition to be critical. There were few persons in that great assemblage, which was largely representative of the taste and culture of the metropolis, who had not heard of those extravagances of speech and gesture which have been the occasion of so much bitter denunciation, and who were not eager to detect them. Little knowledge or discrimination was needed. The actor had not been upon the stage five minutes before he had justified many of the accusations of his most vehement assailants. When *Mathias*, after divesting himself of hat and cloak, strode across the stage, with lounging gait and heaving shoulders, and hailed the village gossips at the supper-table with a series of dislocated syllables, each shot from the throat like balls from a vocal catapult, the spectators sat in blank amazement, as if uncertain whether some monstrous joke had not been played upon them, and Mr. Irving was not an actor of burlesque, mimicking the heroes of the Old Bowery. Had a census of opinion been taken in the middle of this act, the verdict would have been that the foremost player of the English stage was an insolent pretender, offering as the most precious outgrowths of modern art the mouthings, stridings, and grimacings of a century ago. But this impression was as fleeting as it was false. In every player who has won public distinction there is some marked, if often indefinable, quality which exercises its influence upon the audience, independent of the histrionic methods employed. It soon became apparent that there was in Mr. Irving's work something far more potent than audacious extravagance and eccentricity. As the action of the play proceeded, evidences of resolute purpose and elaborate design began to reveal themselves. As the eye became accustomed to the excessive gesture and the ear to the curious mode of delivery, it was possible to discern beside the coarser outlines the delicate coloring of the true artist, and to appreciate

the laborious skill with which the progress of the struggle between conscience and will was portrayed. Here plainly was a man of subtle thought and keen perception, who had carefully traced the whole process by which a man of strong will and brain might be harried by the hidden torture of remorse and dread to despair and death, and who had carefully studied the physical symptoms by which the gradual advance of the mental malady ought to be portrayed. From the moment when, at the end of the first act, he was confronted with the apparition of the murdered Jew, and fell prostrate, with a half-suppressed shriek of agony, infinitely more expressive than any louder cry, he riveted the attention of his hearers, and his success was thereafter only a question of degree. The results of constant and intelligent study, aided by a keen comprehension of the full scope of the character, were manifested in a hundred different ways in the second act. The growing physical exhaustion, the haggard, weary face, the quick suspicion of the restless eye, the nervous petulance in the scene with the wife and daughter, the whole treatment of the episode of the counting of the dowry, the miserly weighing of the suspected piece, and the horrified recognition of the coin which came from the fatal belt; the rigid watchfulness with which he listened to *Christian's* theory regarding the disposition of the Jew's dead body, and the hysterical burst of laughter with which he declared that he too kept a limekiln in those old days; his feverish anxiety during the ceremony of signing the marriage contract, and the frantic outbursts of hilarity with which he sought to drown the fancied sound of sleigh-bells in his ears during the betrothal dance,—demonstrated beyond all doubt his possession of a rich imagination, true dramatic instinct, and thorough mastery of stage resource. The most notable feature of the impersonation up to this point was the extreme skill by which the rapid approach of *Mathias* to a condition akin to absolute mania was indicated. There was apparently, whether intended or not, a suggestion of positive insanity in the momentary and desperate assumption of recklessness in the murderer's solitary dance in his barred bedroom as he listened to the music of the revelers without. This assumption of what may be called a species of horrible nervous exaltation, conveying as it did an impression of almost insupportable strain, was a fitting prelude to the vivid terrors of the dream scene which followed, and which brought the impersonation to a most striking, pitiful, and imaginative climax. There has been small divergence of opinion touching the actor's

interpretation of this episode. It was a veritable picture of despairing guilt at bay. His breathless protestations and contradictions; his incessant cry for *Christian*; his demand for proofs, and his petrification of fear when confronted with the bloody robe; his terror of the mesmerist, and his desperate resistance to the mysterious fluid which was to rob him of his one defense; his mechanical recital of the preliminaries to the murder; his startling pantomime of the manner of the deed itself; the bold and picturesque attitude depicting the horror of the murderer at the glare of the dead man's eye, and the realism of the actual death, with the suggestion of the strangling noose,—were all triumphs of execution, and dispelled all doubt as to the genuine power of the performer.

The limits of this review will not permit detailed consideration of the various points of excellence in each of Mr. Irving's performances; but the play of "The Bells" is so intimately connected with his fame, and, as is now proved, furnishes so satisfactory a test of his artistic resources, that it is worth while to examine this representation with some minuteness. The chief emotions involved in the character of *Mathias* are remorse, suspicion, dread, greed, and cunning, all curiously blended with a capacity for warm family affection. The nature of it is complicated, but the portrayal of the different elements composing it, as will be seen upon reflection, does not call for the manifestation of genuine passion. In other words, the character has in it no attribute that is either great or noble, and is not, therefore, capable of great or noble treatment. Its phases, either individually or collectively, can be interpreted by means distinctly mechanical, without the aid of inspiration. If, indeed, the part was raised by the glow of genius above the level of ordinary humanity, it would cease to be *Mathias*. It is the humanity of Mr. Irving's impersonation—apart, of course, from his inhuman mannerisms—which gives it its true significance and value. There are few, if any, really broad strokes in the portrait. There are rigid angularities which only mar the beauty of the outline, but none of those bold masses of color which the painter of the highest type dashes in, as if by instinct. The effect is created by innumerable devices wrought with the utmost premeditation, although the execution is so neat, firm, and free that it has much of the effect of spontaneity. These devices represent the sum of artistic attainment. They signify a vast amount of physiognomical research, a control of the facial muscles which could only be acquired by patient practice, an artistic per-

ception of the picturesque in pose, and a knowledge of the principles of gesture as dogmatically taught by Delsarte; but they do not necessarily indicate the existence in the player of any faculty greater than a comprehensive intelligence. When a dramatic crisis is ennobled and illumined by the fire of genius, the observer is too greatly moved by the effect to be able to analyze the means by which it is created. Can any one ponder on the mechanism employed by Salvini in that piteous death-scene in "La Morte Civile"? There the sense of acting is entirely lost, and the spectators sit in motionless awe, even after the curtain has fallen, as if in the presence of actual dissolution. In the *Mathias* of Mr. Irving there is no such supreme moment. The illusion is never quite complete, and the attention of the spectators is sustained, not by engrossing interest in the fate of the mimic personage, but by admiration of the executive skill displayed by the performer.

The selection of *Charles I.* as the second character in the series of his performances was clever policy, the contrast to *Mathias* being so extreme as to raise the presumption of the rarest versatility. And Mr. Irving is undoubtedly a most versatile actor, in spite of the mannerisms common to all his assumptions, although in this particular instance the test was by no means so severe as at first sight it seemed to be. It may be granted at once that there is no similarity between the two characters, but it is nevertheless true that the actor possessing the qualifications necessary to a successful embodiment of the first would find little difficulty in playing the second. To put the case in a different way, the emotions of *Charles* are far less varied and far less acute than those of *Mathias*, and are far less exacting in the demands upon the actor's powers of intellectual conception. Neither part rises to the altitude of true passion, to say nothing of tragic intensity. The chief characteristics of *Charles* are gracious dignity, a courtly mien, aristocratic repose, an air of gentle melancholy, and the tenderness of a loving, indolent, but frank and noble nature. It is the king of the play, not of history, who is to be considered. There were beautiful little touches of paternal tenderness in *Mathias*, and Mr. Irving's treatment of the family scenes at Hampton Court was charming in its careless grace and unaffected tenderness, although he effectually shattered the illusion at one time by his vicious eccentricities of elocution in reciting the story of *Leaar*. The whole episode was managed with the finest sense of pictorial effect. Every detail of pose, of gesture, of

color and grouping, had been most zealously studied, and the eye was constantly delighted by some striking change in the living picture. The work of the actor, in short, was subordinate to that of the artist. As the play proceeded, however, some of the most delicate expedients of the accomplished actor were used with admirable skill. In the scene with *Ireton* and *Cromwell*, for example, the variety and significance of Mr. Irving's facial expression were uncommonly fine, the more so because the actual movement of the features was the slightest possible. Given a mobile face like that of Herr Schultze, and an actor of average ability may create vivid effects by means of grimace, but it is only the genuine artist who can express the workings of the brain by methods almost as delicate as the processes of thought itself. The slightest exaggeration, either of gesture or expression, would have robbed the impersonation of its most artistic quality—a serene and lofty composure at a dangerous crisis, which was essentially royal. The disdain expressed in the question "Who is this rude gentleman?" was superb, and there was genuine majesty in his delivery of the line, "Uncover in the presence of your king"; but the effect in both instances was clearly due to art rather than inspiration, and could be wrought without any natural dramatic power. Where dramatic power was really needed, where *Charles* returns defeated from the field of battle to the queen's tent, he failed completely for the first and only time in the play, his manner being theatrical and artificial to a degree. The situation is almost tragic, or might be made so by an actor of real emotional fervor; but Mr. Irving struck no sympathetic chord. There was no ring of honest feeling in his voice, no suggestion of heartfelt impulse in his gesture, which was conventional, stilted, and unimpressive. Here was an opportunity for bold and imaginative treatment of a noble theme,—the portrayal of a regal nature in the first shock of crushing calamity,—and his acting was devoid alike of force and of imagination. At such a crisis, the mere cleverness of the player could not atone for the absence of genius. It recalled to memory the candle of *Colonel Sellers* which collapsed when it was asked to do duty for a fire. Fortunately, this was the one point in the play which required an exhibition of passion. Thereafter the story is purely pathetic, and the pathos, moreover, is of a kind which depends upon resources easily within Mr. Irving's control. Thus far he had shown himself much stronger in the suggestion than the manifestation of emotion, in intellectual appreciation than in physical delineation; and after the surrender

of the king, the tone of the play is one of repressed and dignified suffering. The natural refinement of Mr. Irving stands him in good stead in these closing scenes. The rebuke to the traitor *Moray*, a really fine bit of blank verse, was delivered with a dignity and pathos worthy of the highest praise, and the "repose" of the actor was a triumph of training. This was the loftiest achievement of the performance, because the effect was wrought by himself alone. In the last act, in the final farewell to his wife and children, the circumstances and the assistance lent by other players contributed greatly to the establishment of an illusion, and the absorbing interest of the situation devised by the author could scarcely have failed to stir the profoundest sympathies of the audience, even if the interpretation had been far less picturesque and touching than it was.

In "Louis XI.," which was the play selected to follow "Charles I.," Mr. Irving won the greatest personal success of his engagement, and justly, for a more brilliant example of elaborate and harmonious mechanism has rarely if ever been witnessed upon the stage. The personal appearance of the actor as the decrepit old monarch was a triumph of the dresser's art as well as of artistic imagination. The deathly pallor of the face, with its sinister lines; the savage mouth, with its one or two wolfish fangs; the hollow cheeks, surmounted by the gleaming eyes, whose natural size and brilliancy had been increased by every known trick of shading; the fragile body on the bent and trembling legs,—presented a picture of horrible fascination. It was as if a corpse, already touched by the corruption of the tomb, had been for one brief hour galvanized into life. The conception was exaggerated to the verge of grotesqueness, but the thrilling effect of it was indisputable; and, after all, a little exaggeration in the depiction of a character bearing few traces of ordinary humanity is not a grievous fault. As has been already pointed out, Mr. Irving's sense of the picturesque is very keen, and it is plain that he intended this impersonation for the eye and the fancy more than for the judgment. If tested by the rules of probability or consistency, it would be seen to be radically false and incoherent. Innocence herself could never be cozened by so palpable a hypocrite as this, and it is preposterous to suppose that so groveling a coward could by any chance become a ruler of men. In the veritable *Louis* there were, in spite of his hideous vices and despicable weaknesses, certain elements of greatness which in this portrayal are never even dimly suggested. The actor has simply out-Heroded

Herod by bringing into the strongest relief the theatrical side of the character so vividly sketched by Sir Walter Scott. For the historical personage he cares nothing, for the theatrical everything. It is worthy of remark that this impersonation has been pronounced a masterpiece by most of the actors of note who witnessed it. Now actors, as a rule, are not good critics, inasmuch as their professional habit leads them to study the mechanical rather than the imaginative or creative powers of the performer. They are apt to estimate a work, not by the soul which animates it, but by the executive detail which gives it a good surface finish. When the "business" is minute and neat, the grouping varied and effective, the exits and entrances picturesque, and the meaning of every line illustrated by a great wealth of intricate gesture, their ideal of dramatic expression is satisfied. Inspiration is a quality with which few of them have any intimate dealings; and when they happen to encounter it, they are likely to regard it with a feeling akin to contempt, if it does not happen to be in accord with that bane of the modern stage—tradition. Of mechanism, however, pure and simple, they are necessarily excellent judges, and their verdict in this respect on Mr. Irving's *Louis* is of positive value. It is, moreover, in accord with that of critical amateur observers. The cleverness of the whole performance is extraordinary, and the effect of it is all the greater, because the very exaggeration of the outlines in the picture drawn conceals effectually the mannerisms which mar all the rest of Mr. Irving's impersonations. It would be difficult, however, for the most ardent admirer of the actor to mention a point where absolute greatness is displayed. There is no opportunity, of course, for pathos, and there is assuredly no manifestation of passion. The exhibition of craven fear, in the interview with *Nemours*, is perhaps the nearest approach to it, but there is no effect in this which could not be wrought by theatrical device. The great merits of the performance lie in the wonderful manner in which the fanciful and grotesque ideal is sustained, and the skill with which the weaknesses of the actor are converted into excellences. There is not an instant which does not afford its evidence of deliberate calculation and assiduous rehearsal, and there are little bits of masterful treatment here and there which will long live in the memory. Among them may be noted the picture of the king warming his wizened and wicked old carcass by the fire in his bed-chamber, mumbling excuses to his leaden saints for the one little sin more which he hoped to commit on the morrow; the

scene with the peasants, with its ghastly suggestions, and the final death episode, the horrifying effect of which was due not only to the rare skill of the acting, but to the startling contrast between the wasted, bloodless body and the splendor, in texture and color, of its habiliments. The portraiture throughout was a marvel of detail, most cunningly devised and most beautifully executed. It failed only, as the preceding impersonations had failed, at the crises where the glow of true passion was essential to vitality. Emotion was indicated with unerring certainty and with infinite variety of resource, but it was never fully expressed. The obvious deductions to be drawn from the performance were that Mr. Irving excels in eccentric acting, that he is deficient in physical strength, and that he can depict the workings of the brain with much more certainty than the emotions of the heart.

The correctness of this judgment was strongly confirmed by his performance of *Shylock*, which, for an actor of his reputation, was absolutely bad, although it had, it is almost unnecessary to say, many admirable points. It is needless to consider it at length. In appearance it was a most attractive figure, dignified, intellectual, and thoroughly Oriental. But the promise to the eye was not fulfilled to the other senses. The most fatal objection to the impersonation is its inconsistency, a fault which Mr. Irving is generally most careful to avoid. In the earlier scenes, in fact all through the play up to the trial scene, *Shylock* is presented in his most forbidding colors. Those elements in his character which involve the pride of race and religion and the love of family are mainly disregarded, and the grosser attributes of sordid greed, supple servility, and malignant hate are brought into the boldest relief. Without entering into any discussion as to whether or not this view is the right one, it is clear that when it is once adopted it ought to be persisted in to the end, whereas Mr. Irving's *Shylock* at the crisis of the play undergoes a complete transformation. It may be willingly conceded that his interpretation of the last half of the trial scene is most picturesque, dignified, and pathetic, but it is wholly irreconcilable with what has gone before, and therefore false. The technical execution from the moment of the Jew's overthrow is very fine. Here, as always, the finest qualities of the actor are displayed in repose. The forlornness of a misery so deep as to be proof against all further trial could scarcely be more touchingly rendered, while the manner of the final exit would have been masterly if it had not been so incongruous. Previous to this there had been little to praise.

Apart from the question of conception, Mr. Irving's performance lacked force. There was not one single note of true passion, or one touch of genuine pathos, while the lines were often made almost unintelligible by the vilest of elocutionary tricks. His gesture, too, was excessive and not always significant, and in other ways his performance was distinctly below the standard which his previous achievements had established.

Mr. Irving's next appearance was in the double characters of *Lesurques* and *Dubosc*, in Charles Reade's melodrama, "The Lyons Mail." The descent from Shakspeare was somewhat abrupt and long, but the piece afforded him abundant opportunity for the display of some of his most noteworthy characteristics, especially his power of supplying natural deficiencies by the resources of artifice. The distinction between the two men, so much alike and so much unlike, was boldly drawn and ably maintained; but the true significance of his acting, as in several previous cases, was in its suggestiveness more than in its accomplishment. *Lesurques* was a comparatively easy task. It called for no serious outburst of emotion, and the actor had already proved his capacity of representing patient and tender fortitude under unjust suffering in the part of *Charles I.* He used the same methods with complete success in *Lesurques*, the less complicated character. It was in the second act, where *Lesurques* is charged with the murder, that he did his best work. His gradual change from a mood of amused incredulity to puzzled apprehension, and finally to indignant protestation, was uncommonly clever, and afforded one of many proofs that he can act with the utmost simplicity when he pleases. In *Dubosc* he was less happy, although this assumption bore far more convincing testimony to the scope of his resources as an actor. The ideal which he had pictured in his mind was admirable, but his equipment was too limited to reproduce it in fact. To melodrama of this kind certain physical qualifications are indispensable. Mr. Irving has not the thews or the bulk of a typical bravo. His very voice is a symptom of physical weakness, and his features are cast in too delicate a mold to signify a nature of bloody, brutal violence. He knows this, and, with the instinct of the true artist, seeks to hide these irreparable defects by stirring the imagination of his audience. His *Dubosc* is a pygmy in avoirdupois, but he has the swagger of a Hercules. To conceal the weakness of the voice, he speaks in the husky, liquorish monotone of the sot, and for animal ferocity he substitutes dogged, sodden callousness. All this is very clever, even brilliant; but the

extreme ingenuity of the expedients which he employs more or less defeats its object, and inevitably, because the device somehow becomes an attribute of the assumed character, and imparts to it a certain intellectual elevation which is foreign to it. All these expedients, moreover, fail at the supreme moment when *Dubosc*, in a brandy-born delirium, watches from his garret the preliminaries of the execution of his victim. No mere attitudinizing, or staggering about the stage, or demolition of a "property" chair, or originality of attitude, in lying prone on his belly on the floor and kicking his heels in the air, could compensate for the absence of that ferocious passion and muscular strength which give plausibility to the conception. This is the one scene in the play which provides a test of melodramatic power, and it would be ridiculous to pretend that Mr. Irving passed the ordeal successfully. He proffered the shadow for the substance; and it is probable that the majority in an audience of average mental capacity might be beguiled by the extraordinary adroitness of his simulation into believing that they had witnessed the real thing. They would not cherish the delusion long if they could see this scene interpreted by an actor of real melodramatic energy. Who, for instance, would dare assert that Mr. Irving, in such a character, could endure comparison with E. L. Davenport, J. W. Wallack, or Charles Fechter?

The two other parts in which Mr. Irving appeared in New York were *Doricourt*, in "The Belle's Stratagem," and *Richard III.* They may be dismissed with very few words, not because they were uninteresting, but because they added nothing to the previous knowledge of the actor's abilities. The *Richard* was a fragment, exhibited in one act only, and that the first. It would therefore be presumptuous and unjust to speak confidently of it; but from the specimen given, it would appear that the conception lies about midway between the old-fashioned *Gloster*, embalmed on this stage by John McCullough, and the cynical tyrant of Mr. Booth. It seems to combine a large part of the staginess of the one with the intellectual elaboration of the other. That it possesses tragic force is not likely. The *Doricourt* is chiefly valuable on account of its furnishing one more proof of Mr. Irving's mastery of all stage accomplishments. He has acquired all the traditional methods of the old English comedy, and reproduces them with that air of courtly and measured elegance which the younger actors of to-day strive in vain to imitate, and which was the stamp of the fine gentleman a century or two ago. In other respects, the

impersonation lacked sparkle and volatility, savoring too much of the tragedian in disguise; but it is only fair to add that there is probably no other living tragic actor who could play it half as well.

From *Mathias* to *Doricourt* is a wide range; but none of the characters thus far considered are of the highest dramatic rank, with the exception of *Richard*, which was not played in its entirety. Nor in Mr. Irving's performance of them was there anything to encourage the hope that he could give adequate expression to the great characters of tragedy. It is generally understood that he wished to make his first appearance here as *Hamlet*; but it is fortunate that this experiment was not tried, as his engagement would in that case have begun with a severe shock to his reputation. As it was, he had established his claim to admiration when he essayed the part of the melancholy Dane in Philadelphia, and had partly disarmed criticism by demonstrating the extent and limitations of his abilities. It is not easy to understand why this impersonation should have excited so fierce a storm of controversy in England, for there is not room for much difference of opinion about it. It exhibits all the virtues and weaknesses which would naturally be expected by all observers of Mr. Irving's acting, and would only create astonishment in persons unacquainted with the eccentricities and affectations of his style. These vices, grievous blots as they are at all times, become almost unbearable in Shaksperian tragedy, and could nowhere be more offensive or anomalous than in *Hamlet*. There is not, moreover, sufficient originality in the conception, except in the matter of minute details, to atone for the frequent violation of elementary principles. In this, as in every other part undertaken by him, he labors to increase the pictorial effect to the utmost, and the over-elaboration of artifice in the illustration of particular scenes often results in mental confusion. It would puzzle an expert in insanity to determine positively whether Mr. Irving's *Hamlet* is actually mad or not. Generally he is a natural personage enough; at times, his madness is clearly feigned; at others, as at one point in the interview with *Ophelia* and during parts of the play scene, it is, to all appearance, real. The question is not of particular importance, for the entire absence of tragic passion effectually relegates the performance to the second class. In the great scenes of the play—in the meeting with the *Ghost*, in the closet scene with the *Queen*, in the challenge to *Laertes*, and in the death scene—there was not a gleam of tragic fire; and it is scarcely

too much to say that the tragic side of *Hamlet's* character received no representation at all. The action was spirited, picturesque, dramatic, and incessant, and would have been most eloquent and impressive to an audience of the deaf and dumb; but in the delivery of the lines there was no thrill of passionate emotion. In other words, the actor was incapable of executing the design which his intellect had elaborated. In the quieter conversational passages of the play he was entirely successful. Here his fertility in all expedients of gesture and expression stood him in good stead. His scenes with *Horatio* and *Marcellus*, with *Rosencrantz* and *Guildenstern*, with *Polonius*, and with the *Players*, were almost wholly admirable, and were acted with a naturalness and simplicity which made his extravagances at other times all the more noticeable. His treatment of the scene with the *Grave-diggers* was perfect, the spirit being one of gentle and philosophic melancholy, lightened by a tinge of amusement. The impression gained from the impersonation as a whole was one of elaborate study, rather than subtlety. Most careful thought had been expended, evidently, upon the possible significance of lines and words, and upon the invention of illustrative business. An instance of this minute care was furnished in the case of the *First Player*, who had been instructed apparently to wave his arm in a particular manner, to enable *Hamlet* to make a clever point later on, when instructing him not to "saw the air too much with your hand, thus." Again, in the beginning of the play scene, *Hamlet* possesses himself of *Ophelia's* fan and retains it to the end, for the sake of giving pertinency to the words, "A very, very peacock." Other similar examples might be quoted, but these suffice to show the extraordinary care which the English actor bestows upon what less conscientious men would call insignificant details. It is by this patient forethought that he maintains the interest in his performances. Even so hackneyed a play as "Hamlet" is, under his management, transformed into something like a novelty.

It is this thought which is the key to the secret of his success. The stepping-stones to his triumph have been experience, study, taste, and resolution; to which qualities must be added a strange degree of personal fascination. In analyzing his different performances in this country, the intention has been to judge him in the most kind and liberal manner, but the result cannot be held to justify the claim of greatness which his friends make for his acting. It is plain now, not only that he cannot be included in the first

rank of living tragedians, but that he has scarcely any right to the name of tragedian at all, beyond the fact that he appears in tragic parts. Nature has opposed an insuperable bar to his progress in this direction by withholding almost every attribute necessary to tragic expression. His frame is slight, his voice is weak in volume and restricted in compass, and his features, although they are most refined, intelligent, and mobile, are cast in too delicate a mold to give full expression to the higher passions. Garrick and Edmund Kean were small men, to be sure, but their voices were of great flexibility and power, and both were filled with the might of genius. Of this most precious gift Mr. Irving has shown no trace here. His most fervent admirers declare that he has it; but if so, it is difficult to account for his failure to manifest it during the twenty years of constant acting which preceded his first successful engagement. Genius is not likely to remain hidden under a bushel or anywhere else, when it has every chance to declare itself. It may be a paradox, but it is nevertheless probable that Mr. Irving would never have attained his present undisputed pre-eminence in England had he possessed the genius which his worshipers are so ready to accord him; for, in that case, it is extremely unlikely that he would ever have acquired the fullness of culture which distinguishes him and has enabled him to win fame in a two-fold capacity. His career would not be half so interesting, instructive, and honorable as it is, were it not for the courage and resolution with which he has faced and overcome all obstacles. Throughout all the best years of early manhood, he acted in the provincial theaters in every variety of play known to the stage. It is a curious reflection that, not very many years ago, the present accepted representative of *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth* was only known in London as a player of eccentric light comedy and farce, who delighted by his grotesque portrayal of such characters as *Jeremy Diddler* and *Alfred Jingle*. All through these humble, laborious, and unremunerative days he was gradually acquiring that mastery of stage technique in which he probably has no superior. There is nothing unnatural in the supposition that he may have contracted some of his most curious mannerisms in those old days when he moved his audiences to uproarious laughter by the agility of his contortions and his representation of comic starvation. This sort of work could never have been congenial to so ambitious and intelligent a man, but he performed it with all the earnestness and care which he now expends upon his masterpieces of stage production.

Almost everything that he undertook was marked by originality and purpose. His execution was always bold, prompt, and precise, as if each mechanical detail had been carefully arranged beforehand, and nothing was left to chance or the inspiration of the moment. This mechanical precision is one of the most noteworthy features of his acting now, and is carried to such a pitch of perfection that it is almost impossible to detect any difference between two or more of his performances of the same part. Premeditation of this kind is an infallible safeguard against slovenly performances, but also tends to act as a clog to inspiration, and may possibly have had a bad effect in Mr. Irving's own case. Whether or not his persistence in certain ungainly gestures during this early period of his career, when he dealt largely in burlesque exaggeration, is the cause of the curious mannerisms which are such terrible disfigurements now, is a question which it would be interesting to settle. It is scarcely credible that any intelligent actor, especially with that keen artistic sense which Mr. Irving possesses, would ever deliberately adopt them as appropriate to every stage character. Charity, therefore, demands that his sins, in the way of walk and gesture, should be ascribed to unconscious habit. For his unaccountable system of elocution some other explanation must be invented. That it is not physical misfortune is happily demonstrated by the crisp and simple method of delivery which he employs when he chooses. Whatever his theory may be, it is a bad one. Nothing could be much more distressing to the ear than the gasping ejection of syllable by syllable in a dolorous monotone, which he tries to pass current for honest elocution, but which is fatal to rhythm, melody, and often to sense itself. But, after all, this is only one of the contradictions in which Mr. Irving's work abounds. His scholarly taste does not prevent him from violating the laws of proportion; he is a master of gesture, and yet descends to mere contortion; he is capable of creating the finest effects by the strength of artistic repose, and yet sometimes ruins a noble scene by inexcusable restlessness.

What is the charm which enabled this man, without genius and with all these faults, to outstrip all competitors? The puzzle is not insoluble. He first attracted public attention as *Digby Grant*, in "The Two Roses," by the originality and audacity of the conception and the brilliancy of his execution. This triumph made him the talk of the town and emboldened him and his manager to venture a step further and try *Mathias*. The success of this was immediate and splendid, and Mr. Irving, after twenty years of neglect, rose to

a pinnacle of fame. Presently he essayed another character, and the critics began to talk of mannerisms. The critics were right, but the battle was won. The mannerisms counted for little in "The Two Roses" or in "The Bells," and Mr. Irving, having reaped fame and fortune almost at a stroke, turned manager and began to reveal the extent of his abilities. The persons who abused him most went the oftenest to see him. His audacity excited sympathy, his sincerity and self-confidence compelled respectful attention, and the greatness of his technical skill challenged admiration. His enemies meanwhile increased his popularity by vehement abuse and insistence upon his faults; whereupon his friends, unwilling to admit and unable to defend them, decreed that his artistic vices were virtues and his whole system the product of genius. While the battle raged, Mr. Irving steadily pursued his course and began to show the fruits of his long and arduous apprenticeship. His stage soon became noted for the beauty and completeness of its appointments. Years before, he had been an admirer of that sterling actor and accomplished artist, Samuel Phelps, who for more than a quarter of a century made the lowly Sadler's Wells famous as the home of the legitimate drama. What Phelps, without influence, had accomplished in the East, Mr. Irving, already a favorite of fortune, resolved to do in the West. He had learned that the whole is greater than the part, and that if one good actor can bring prosperity to a theater, twenty good actors are likely to bring still more. He collected the best company in London, and became his own stage-manager. His varied experience was applied to every detail. Where his knowledge failed, he applied to the best available authority. Famous archæologists, antiquaries, royal academicians were sought out, that every detail of scenery and properties might be correct. Where there was a good precedent, he copied it; where there was none, he set the example. The critics still assailed his mannerisms and weaknesses, and most justly, but his reputation as an actor was no longer his one bulwark. As actor and manager, he had achieved a position never occupied before by any theatrical personage; and in raising himself from obscurity to fame, he had elevated the art and the profession to which he had faithfully devoted the energies of his life.

When it is said, therefore, that Mr. Irving is not a tragedian, as he assuredly is not, that he failed in the only pure melodrama which he produced in this city, and that his proper sphere is eccentric comedy and character-acting generally, so long as no display of genuine passion is involved, there is no intimation

that he is occupying a position on false pretenses. He is, on the contrary, most justly entitled to the honors conferred upon him and to the gratitude of all lovers of the stage. It is said that he has profited by the labors of others; that he reproduces effects created long ago; that he has stolen lightning from Macready, thunder from Phelps, and other munitions elsewhere. It may be so, probably is; and the only comment necessary on the subject is, that the sooner American managers indulge in larceny of the same description, the better. They will be comforted, perhaps, by the assurance that Mr. Irving's system is a cheap one in the end. Judicious expenditure will generally insure profitable returns. But liberal management means a good deal more than the mere spending of money. Taste and knowledge are more potent even than the check-book. Within the last ten or fifteen years there have been a dozen productions or revivals in this city which cost more money than any of Mr. Irving's representations, but when or where have there been such vital and fascinating stage pictures as he has given us? Where, within the last ten years at least, has any Shaksperian play been produced with a cast in which it would be hypercritical to pick a flaw, except in the case of the chief actor? When has a legitimate actor in New York been surrounded by supernumeraries who behaved like sentient and intelligent human beings? When was it that a legitimate play was presented in which every detail of scenery, external or interior, every bit of property, every costume was absolutely correct? The scenery which Mr. Irving used here was old; after months of service in London, it had been shipped across the Atlantic, and was erected on a stage which it did not fit; and yet, in tone of color, in fidelity to fact, in quality of drawing, etc., it excelled anything of the kind seen here in recent days. The pictures in "The Merchant of Venice," with their wealth of color, wonderful movement, and general verisimilitude, were revelations in the arts of stage decoration and management. The scene at Hampton Court, in "Charles I.," was photographic in its accuracy, as were the interiors at Whitehall. The interiors of "Louis XI." were marvels of taste and correctness; and the night scene in the first act, with its massive towers standing out in relief against one broad band of light in a dark and stormy sky, was extraordinarily effective. The solidity of the masonry in the first act of "Hamlet," the weird landscape with its expanse of rock and sea, which forms a background for the *Ghost*, and many other instances of exquisite artistic taste, might be cited.

A reference to these matters is indispensable in any review which professes to estimate the true position and influence of Henry Irving. He is a reformer of the stage and an educator; and were his faults as an actor ten times more flagrant than they are, his advent here would be a fact of the highest importance. It will undoubtedly affect the whole tone of reputable and capable criticism, for it has set a standard which cannot be ignored. The more bitter the assaults upon Mr. Ir-

ing's abilities as an actor, the greater the rebuke to American managers. He has proved beyond dispute that fine plays will be popular if they are properly represented. If they cannot be made popular in New York, it is either because New York has no actors equal to Mr. Irving and his company, or no men capable of scholarly, tasteful, and liberal management. There is the dilemma; the choice of horns is free.

J. Ranken Towse.

THE IDEAL.

"Das Dort ist niemals hier."
(The There is never here.)

Schiller.

O DREAM of Beauty ever hovering round me—
Now almost mine, now far and far away;
My longing when the slumber-chain has bound me,
My day's intenser day!

So near—so far! now close beside me glistens
The white robe, and the breath has warmed my brow;
And now—it sweeps the immeasurable distance,
The deserts part us now.

The organ song, that through the aisle rejoices,
The star-isled midnight, shoreless sea serene,
Are forms that clothe the Formless—are the voices,
The whispers of the Unseen.

The mid-noon sunbeam, flooding earth with splendor,
Is but a veil that shrouds light more intense;
And wordless feeling, thrills of rapture tender,
They spring to being—whence?

O beauty infinite! the sparks are shaken
From off thy vesture of celestial fire;
They fall, they kindle in the soul, they waken
The unquenchable desire—

The yearning, and the restlessness that lonely
Seeks through Creation for thy face alone,
And in material loveliness sees only
Thy shadow downward thrown.

The finite to the infinite aspireth,
The unbounded ever stretcheth on before;
The spirit's white wing pauseth not nor tireth,
Nor draweth near the shore.

Constantina E. Brooks.