

Sir Henry Irving

and Miss Ellen Terry

Rubens  
Merchant of Venice  
The Bull

Name Oldfield  
The Anchor Heart  
Warrick, Fla.

Drawn by Pamela Colman Smith  
HCCCLXXXV









## SIR HENRY IRVING

**T**HE practical cause of Henry Irving's success has, after his gifts as an actor, been his constant, unwearied and single-minded devotion to his chosen work. When in 1856, then a boy of eighteen, he took the final plunge from clerkship, which he began at thirteen years of age, into art, he had already behind him several years of steady toil rigorously given in the leisure hours of his daily working life. In those days, as now, the working hours of a London clerk were as long as the work was poorly paid, and it needed a very fixed resolution to keep a young man constant to the self-imposed task of studying an exacting and endless art. Early and late he was at work, studying plays and parts, and half starving himself to pay for the few lessons kindly given to him at an hour in the morning so early as to be inconvenient to himself by an old actor who believed in his future and who predicted for him great



things. This devotion to his aim, however, bore good fruit; and in the earlier years of his stage work at Sunderland and Edinburgh, when the bill was changed so often that it was necessary for a young actor to learn sometimes three or four new parts in a week, he was always able to keep ahead of his work by means of the reserve of some hundred stock parts in which he was in stage language "letter-perfect." This was not only a saving of exhausting labour and a spurning of the prompter's assistance—always a thing to be feared—but it enabled him to give to each part which he undertook something of the necessary care of elaboration. To act a part it is not sufficient to know the words. Dress has to be considered, as well as bearing, manner, intonation, the time suitable to the true setting forth of the phases of the character—in short, all those aids and accessories which go to the convincing of the spectator as to the *vraisemblance* of the character. This artistic exactness, added to his undoubted genius, at once told in his favour, and he began very soon to creep up the ladder of success. Material prosperity is not the measure of a young actor's success. Such, no doubt, follows in due course, but in early days the standard of advancement is in the growing importance of the parts entrusted to him. Young Irving found his possibilities of ultimate success multiplying fast. To-day when the work of the stage is more highly elaborated,







when the length of runs makes a sufficiently lengthy preparation possible and even advisable, when the life of a single drama runs at times into years of continuous existence, when actors are well paid, hold a worthy position in society and have fair prospect of sharing in the good fortune of their time, it is hard to realize the difficulties of a young actor forty years ago. There were then comparatively few theatres in the great cities of Great Britain; none at all in the small ones. In the middle-sized communities the demand for the drama had its only satisfaction in the visits of "Circuit" companies, that moved from place to place in sequence at regular periods of the year. There were few, if any, plays which went touring as the great metropolitan successes do nowadays, with First, Second, Third, or even Fourth Provincial Companies. Though the great actors were received and made much of wherever they went, the small fry had few friends beyond their own circle, and few chances of making any except the chance meetings in lodging-houses and places of refreshment. The meagre salaries of those days were insufficient to allow the recipients to indulge much in the graces of life; and the long vacations, during which they had no opportunity of earning anything at all, made it almost impossible to save against a rainy day. There is a general impression in the great world





outside the circle of theatrical life that actors are improvident folk. This is entirely erroneous; in no other degree of life are earners of weekly wage more thrifty. Beyond this, in no other degree of life are wage earners so good and helpful toward friends and relatives outside their immediate families.

The class of life in which young Irving found himself was not full of seductive luxuriousness, but it was full of endless and laborious work, of exasperating monotony of daily routine, of anxieties—material and artistic. In such a life it is easy to give way in purpose, to lose ambition, to seek and often to find some duodecimo Capua in which to sink into comparatively luxurious ease. But genius always, if it be true to itself, finds some expression for itself and some way for its manifestation. Irving never faltered, never despaired, never lost hope. Through good times and bad he kept true to his own instinct, always studying. His studies were not merely in the daily routine of the parts he had to learn or which he wished ultimately to play; he took much wider ground than this. As he studied new characters he made himself thoroughly acquainted with all that surrounded them, historically and artistically; so that he came in time to have an instinctive knowledge of the atmosphere and surroundings in which each of his histrionic creations moved. In these days the student who aims high lives in easy places; for everywhere he finds works of









reference in every branch of human thought and endeavour ready to his hand. Forty years ago, however, there were no public libraries in the modern sense. Only in a few of the great cities were there libraries at all; and learning had to be achieved in an uphill manner. Sometimes we hear sneers at self-educated men. Of all baseless scoffing, this is the very worst, for self-education implies not only success already achieved, but an indomitable character exhibited steadfastly in the winning of it. Men who are really learned, who know the value and the difficulty and the rarity of self-culture, are ever the warmest admirers of those who have won such distinction for and by themselves. To-day the very highest of Henry Irving's distinctions is that he has been granted degrees *honoris causa* by three of the greatest universities of the world. In fact, there are few men who hold Doctorships given in such a way by England, Ireland, and Scotland.



Is it any wonder that a man who all his life has exhibited so unfailing a belief in, and a devotion to, his chosen art, who has so wide an experience of its difficulties and its trials, and so thorough an understanding of its possibilities, finds so keen a pleasure in the vast and growing importance of the drama as a factor in national and social life? Whenever he lays the foundation stone of a new theatre—and this is a function which he is often called on to fulfill—he says that he feels it an added joy to life. Life to



## S I R H E N R Y I R V I N G

---

him, if it has been full of work, has also been, for now very many years, full of honours and rewards. His portion has indeed been "love and honour and troops of friends," and he has the satisfaction of knowing that all he has has been honestly and honourably won. Two continents have showed him in continuous and in unmistakable manner their full appreciation of his work as an artist, a scholar and a man; and have recognised to the full that he has in his own chosen work upheld the name and fame of his native land. Any man would be proud to carry the honours bestowed on him, all worthily won by hard and earnest work — genius directed skilfully and consistently toward a goodly aim. He is not only a Knight in England, but is a member of the illustrious House Order of Combined Saxe-Coburg Gotha and Saxe Meiningen — for learned and cultured Germany loves to honour genius and great work. He is Doctor of Letters of Dublin University, Doctor of Letters of Cambridge University and Doctor of Laws of the University of Glasgow. This is truly a recognition by scholars of a scholar's work and a tribute to the advancement of his chosen art which he has so nobly furthered. It may truly be said of him with regard to the art of the stage that he "found it brick and made it marble."

For more than twenty years his artistic home at the Lyceum Theatre in London became one of the great centres of thought and art. His work there was



*Waterloo.*





## S I R H E N R Y I R V I N G

recognised as a standard by which other players and other managers in his own and other countries were to measure their achievements. Every stranger coming to London could not consider his survey of British life and effort complete without a visit to the Lyceum Theatre. When he was given by Her Majesty the honour of Knighthood, thus winning for the first time in his own or any other country a place for his art in the Court and Governmental purview, the whole of the members of his own craft united in presenting him with a magnificent casket of gold and crystal, in which was a great volume containing an address and all their signatures. Such a thing was alone unique in the history of the stage.

The latest of the many plays which Henry Irving produced at the Lyceum broke in a certain way new ground. For the first time a great French author wrote a play manifestly and ostensibly for an Englishman to act. Irving had for a long time had a wish to portray the character of Robespierre. Victorien Sardou also had a wish that Irving should render some piece of his. The ideas of the two men were exchanged through friends and by letter—for Sardou has never crossed the English channel—and in due time the play was written.

It was a difficult task which the great dramatist had set himself, for the life of Robespierre is so well



## SIR HENRY IRVING

known that there were endless limitations to dramatic possibility. The knowledge of the master of stagecraft, however, is very vast on all subjects connected with the French Revolution; and from hints and inferences regarding Robespierre's life and motives he built up a great drama which, when put upon the stage by Irving, has proved to have created an extraordinary interest in two great nations. Of course, as is necessary in all historical plays, certain changes had to be effected. It is not possible



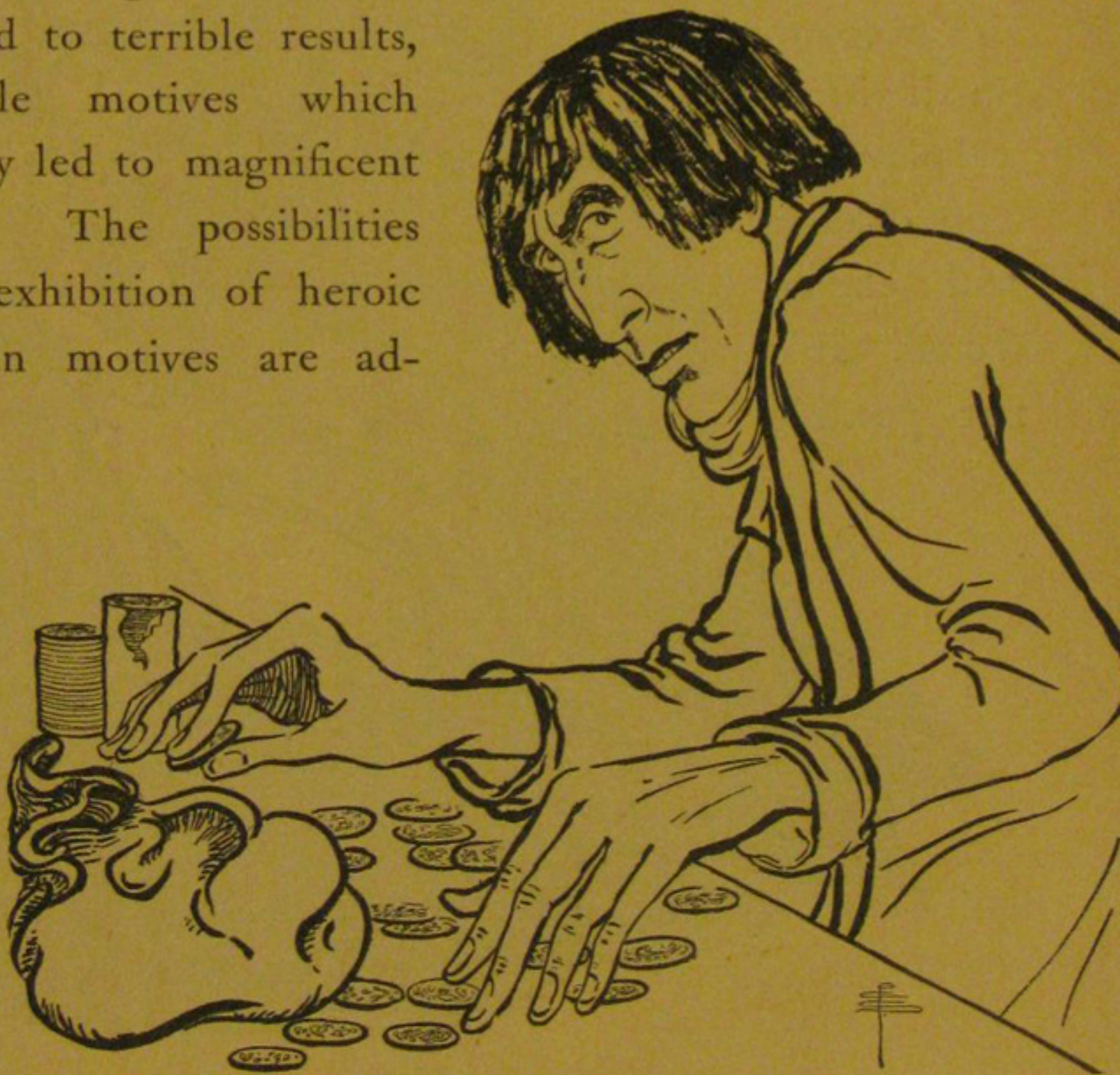
*Robespierre*  
*Act iv, Scene i.*





## SIR HENRY IRVING

to give in the "two hours traffic of the stage" all the series of events and changes which have led up to great achievements or catastrophes. It is sufficient if the myriad motives of many people are crystallised or concentrated into the motives and purposes and actions of a few. This is the keynote of dramatic excellence, and the master-hand of Sardou has struck it in this great drama which shows in little the mighty upheaval which marked the end of the eighteenth century. In this stormy time there were great men who were heard for only a passing hour and little men who seemed great in their momentary poise amidst the whirling throng. There were great motives which led to terrible results, and little motives which eventually led to magnificent endings. The possibilities for the exhibition of heroic and mean motives are ad-



*The Bells*

*Act ii*







## SIR HENRY IRVING

mirably shown in the prison scene which serves as a background to individual action of the dramatic characters. Here are grouped many moving incidents, every one of which, from the gruesome "game of the guillotine" to the self-sacrifice of friend for friend and stranger for stranger, are recorded in history, though not all taking place at once within the narrow bounds of a single prison within the space of half an hour. The reality or the realism of such scenes shows how great and manifold were the opportunities of one steadfast purpose, though such had not its origin in the loftiest aims, and enables the spectator to realize how it was that such a man as Robespierre could have done so much for good or ill. Through it all—through ambition, pride, vanity, the remorseless logic and action of a pedant—shines the softening touch of nature, which, when it warms the father's heart, brings an irresistible pathos to draw the hearts of the spectators closer to his own. There is a note of pity through all the overwhelming clamour which marks the struggle and downfall of Robespierre in the Convention.

BRAM STOKER.



THAT'S WORTH EIGHTEEN  
PENCE TO ME

*Nance Oldfield*



"We'll coal together!"

Henry Irving:

Christmas Day. 1895.

FROM SIR HENRY IRVING'S SPEECH AT THE LOTOS CLUB DINNER IN NEW YORK.

"Since I was last in this country there has been a gratifying development of that good will which all Englishmen and Americans who understand one another as we do have always been anxious to see permanently established between the two nations. (Applause.) I think, under the circumstances, I may tell you of a little incident which occurred to me in your Navy Yard on the banks of the Delaware in 1895. It was on Christmas Day. The yard was closed, as it was a general holiday, and I was the only visitor. An officer in charge was very courteously pointing out to me many interesting objects, after, I may add, he had asked me to share his dinner, and I was admiring, as one could but do, a magnificent battleship which was lying in the river, and wondering at her mighty power. 'Yes,' said the officer, 'she is a great creature, isn't she? But I am sorry to say that at times even her power has its limits.' 'Indeed,' said I, 'how's that?' 'Well,' said he, 'she must go great distances sometimes, and we can't always coal her.' 'Ah,' said I, 'but surely that's no limit. There ought to be no difficulty about that.' 'But there is,' said he; 'that's the great trouble with battleships. They have to be coaled.' 'Ah, well,' said I, 'my friend, why can't we coal together?'"



