Edgar Allan Poe.

Stedman, Edmund Clarence, 1833-1908.
Cedar Rapids, Iowa, privately printed, 1909.

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BY

EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN

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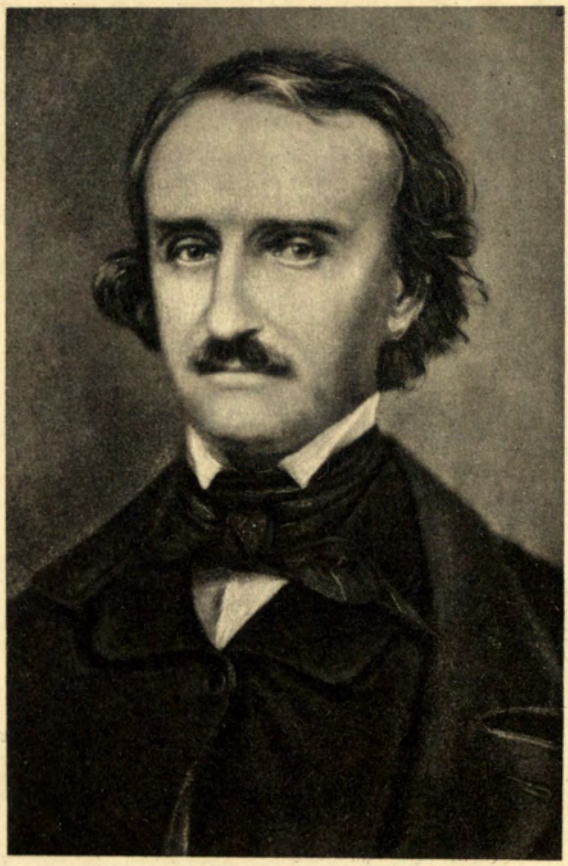

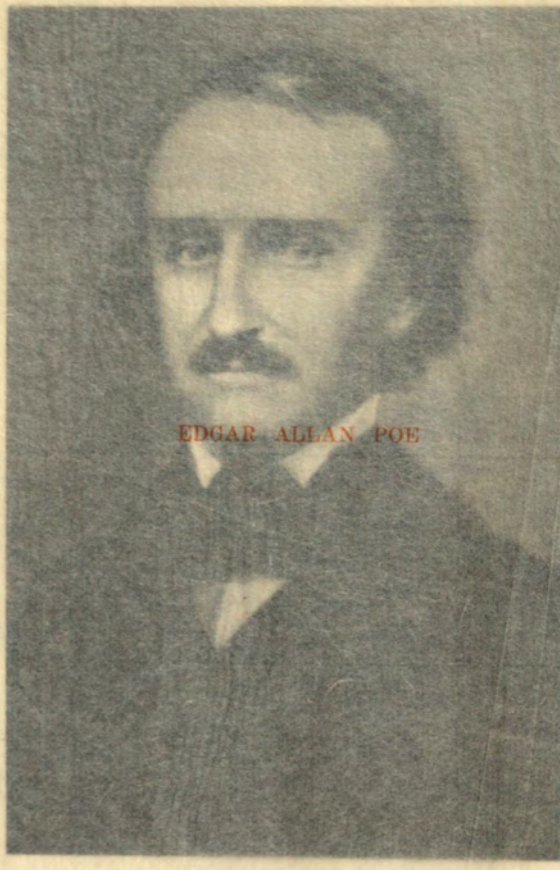

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PRIVATELY PRINTED
CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA
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FOREWORD

This reprint of the late Edmund Clarence Stedman's admirable essay on Edgar Allan Poe is from a recent impression of his *Poets of America*, and is republished in this form by permission of his publishers, Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Company. This permission was given heartily at the kindly suggestion of the author himself a few months before he died. The essay was published first in *Scribners' Monthly* for May, 1880. It was issued in small octavo form that same year by Houghton, Mifflin & Company, though the title page bears the date 1881. The covers of the little volume were of genuine vellum, and the book was the first one so brought out in America. The *format* was in imitation of a series started in London by Kegan Paul with *The Vicar of Wakefield* at the suggestion of Mr. Stedman. The essay was revised and extended

by the author in 1886 and made the Poe chapter in his book of criticism, *Poets of America.*

It is felt no apology is needed for this reprint of that appreciative essay. It is a model of its kind, and is fitly representative of the genial, sympathetic nature of its author. Mr. Stedman was a friendly man. In his critical work he aimed to build, not to destroy. Lovers of that erratic genius, Edgar Allan Poe, feel grateful to our author for the kindly and the sympathetic touch every portion of the essay evidences.

A few brief words as to Mr. Stedman are not inappropriate here. He was born in Hartford, Connecticut, October 8, 1833. When still a child he lost his father, and his mother soon afterwards married and went to Italy to live. The future poet and critic was placed in charge of an uncle in Norwich, where he lived from the age of five to sixteen, and where he fitted himself for college. He entered Yale in 1849 as

a member of the class of 1853. He did not complete the course, a student prank having brought his college career to an abrupt close. Long years afterwards his alma mater repented of her previous action and made up for the degree then withheld by bestowing upon him her highest academic distinctions.

For the next four years he was a country journalist. He then joined the staff of the New York *Tribune*, and did some magazine work. During the Civil War he served for two years as special correspondent of the New York *World*. He next studied law, and in 1864 became connected with the work of the Union Pacific Railroad. In 1869 he became a member of the New York Stock Exchange, and for more than thirty years his activities were devoted to banking. Throughout all these busy years he kept up his literary activities, doing editorial, critical, and original work. With Professor Woodberry he edited an edition of Poe, and in collaboration with

Miss Hutchison the *Library of American Literature*. His most serious work was in the field of criticism. His *Victorian Poets, Poets of America, Victorian Anthology, American Anthology*, and *Nature and Elements of Poetry* are performances that cannot be bettered. As a poet Mr. Stedman takes high rank.

A sudden failure of the heart on January 18, 1908, and

"Dead he lay among his books."

LUTHER A. BREWER

Cedar Rapids, Iowa
July 1, 1909

EDGAR ALLAN POE

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I

Distinctive reputations.

UPON the roll of American authors a few names are written apart from the many. With each of these is associated some accident of condition, some memory of original or eccentric genius, through which it arrests attention and claims our special wonder. The light of none among these few has been more fervid and recurrent than that of Edgar Allan Poe. But, as I in turn pronounce his name, and in my turn would estimate the man and his writings, I am at once confronted by the question, Is this poet, as now remembered, as now portrayed to us, the real Poe who lived and sang and suffered, and who died but little more than a quarter-century ago?

The witchery of Time.

The great heart of the world throbs warmly over the struggles of our kind; the imagination of the world dwells upon and

enlarges the glory and the shame of human action in the past. Year after year, the heart-beats are more warm, the conception grows more distinct with light and shade. The person that was is made the framework of an image to which the tender, the romantic, the thoughtful, the simple, and the wise add each his own folly or wisdom, his own joy and sorrow and uttermost yearning. Thus, not only true heroes and poets, but many who have been conspicuous through force of circumstances, become idealized as time goes by. The critic's first labor often is the task of distinguishing between men, as history and their works display them, and the ideals which one and another have conspired to urge upon his acceptance.

A twofold ideal.

The difficulty is increased when, as in the case of Poe, a twofold ideal exists, of whose opposite sides many that have written upon him seem to observe but one. In the opinion of some people, even now, his life was not only pitiful, but odious, and his writ-

ings are false and insincere. They speak of his morbid genius, his unjust criticisms, his weakness and ingratitude, and scarcely can endure the mention of his name. Others recount his history as that of a sensitive, gifted being, most sorely beset and environed, who was tried beyond his strength and prematurely yielded, but still uttered not a few undying strains. As a new generation has arisen, and those of his own who knew him are passing away, the latter class of his reviewers seems to outnumber the former. A chorus of indiscriminate praise has grown so loud as really to be an ill omen for his fame; yet, on the whole, the wisest modern estimate of his character and writings has not lessened the interest long ago felt in them at home and abroad.

Postulates.

It seems to me that two things at least are certain. First, and although his life has been the subject of the research which is awarded only to strange and suggestive careers, he was, after all, a man of like

passions with ourselves, — one who, if weaker in his weaknesses than many, and stronger in his strength, may not have been so bad, nor yet so good, as one and another have painted him. Thousands have gone as far toward both extremes, and the world never has heard of them. Only the gift of genius has made the temperament of Poe a common theme. And thus, I also think, we are sure, in once more calling up his shade, that we invoke the manes of a poet. Of his right to this much-abused title there can be little dispute, nor of the claim that, whatever he lacked in compass, he was unique among his fellows, — so different from any other writer that America has produced as really to stand alone. He must have had genius to furnish even the basis for an ideal which excites this persistent interest. Yes, we are on firm ground with relation to his genuineness as a poet. But his narrowness of range, and the slender body of his poetic remains, of themselves should make writers hesitate to

Unique quality of Poe's genius.

pronounce him our greatest one. His verse is as conspicuous for what it shows he could not do as for that which he did. He is another of those poets, outside the New England school, of whom each has made his mark in a separate way, — among them all, none more decisively than Poe. So far as the judgment of a few rare spirits in foreign lands may be counted the verdict of "posterity," an estimate of him is not to be lightly and flippantly made. Nor is it long since a group of his contemporaries and successors, in his own country, spoke of him as a poet whose works are a lasting monument, and of his "imperishable" fame.

After every allowance, it seems difficult for one not utterly jaded to read his poetry and tales without yielding to their original and haunting spell. Even as we drive out of mind the popular conceptions of his nature, and look only at the portraits of him in the flesh, we needs must pause and contemplate, thoughtfully and with re-

Personal aspect.

newed feeling, one of the marked ideal faces that seem — like those of Byron, De Musset, Heine — to fulfil all the traditions of genius, of picturesqueness, of literary and romantic effect.

Halpin's likeness of Poe, in the complete American edition.

Halpin's engraving of Poe, in which the draughtsman was no servile copyist, but strove to express the sitter at his best, makes it possible to recall the poet delineated by those who knew and admired him in his nobler seasons. We see one they describe as slight but erect of figure, athletic and well molded, of middle height, but so proportioned as to seem every inch a man; his head finely modeled, with a forehead and temples large and not unlike those of Bonaparte; his hands fair as a woman's, — in all, a graceful, well-dressed gentleman, — one, even in the garb of poverty, "with gentleman written all over him." We see the handsome, intellectual face, the dark and clustering hair, the clear and sad gray-violet eyes, — large, lustrous, glowing with expression, — the

mouth, whose smile at least was sweet and winning. We imagine the soft, musical voice (a delicate thing in man or woman), the easy, quiet movement, the bearing that no failure could humble. And this man had not only the gift of beauty, but the passionate love of beauty,—either of which may be as great a blessing or peril as can befall a human being stretched upon the rack of this tough world.

Later portraits.

But look at some daguerreotype taken shortly before his death, and it is like an inauspicious mirror, that shows all too clearly the ravage made by a vexed spirit within, and loses the qualities which only a living artist could feel and capture. Here is the dramatic, defiant bearing, but with it the bitterness of scorn. The disdain of an habitual sneer has found an abode on the mouth, yet scarcely can hide the tremor of irresolution. In Bendann's likeness, indubitably faithful, we find those hardened lines of the chin and neck that are often visible in men who have gambled

Reproduced in the "Memorial Volume," Balt., 1877.

heavily, which Poe did not in his mature years, or who have lived loosely and slept ill. The face tells of battling, of conquering external enemies, of many a defeat when the man was at war with his meaner self.

Among the pen-portraits of Poe, at his best and his worst, none seem more striking in their juxtaposition, none less affected by friendship or hatred, than those left to us by C. F. Briggs, the poet's early associate. These were made but a short time before the writer's death,—after the lapse of years had softened the prejudices of a man prejudiced indeed, yet of a kindly heart, and had rendered the critical habit of the journalist almost a rule of action.

Reprinted in the New York "Independent," June 24, 1880.

If these external aspects were the signs of character within, we can understand why those who saw them should have believed of Poe — and in a different sense than of Hawthorne — that

> "Two natures in him strove
> Like day with night, his sunshine and his gloom."

The recorded facts of his life serve to enhance this feeling. My object here is not biography, yet let us note the brief annals of a wayward, time-tossed critic, romancer, poet. Their purport and outline, seen through a cloud of obscurities, and the veil thrown over them by his own love of mystery and retreat,—made out from the various narratives of those who have contended in zeal to discover the minute affairs of this uncommon man,—the substance of them all, I say, may readily enough be told.

II

The law of chance, that has so much to do with the composition of a man, that makes no two alike, yet adjusts the most of us to a common average, brings about exceptional unions like the one from which the poet sprang. A well-born, dissolute Maryland boy, with a passion for the stage, marries an actress and adopts her profession,—taking up a life that was strolling, precarious, half-despised in the pioneer

Edgar Allan Poe: born in Boston, January 19, 1809.

times. Three children were the fruit of this love-match. The second, Edgar, was born in Boston, January 19, 1809. From his father he inherited Italian, French, and Irish blood; the Celtic pride of disposition and certain weaknesses that were his bane. His mother, Elizabeth Arnold, an actress of some talent, was as purely English as her name. Two years after his birth, the hapless parents, wearied and destitute, died at Richmond, both in the same week. The orphans "found kind friends," and were adopted—the oldest, William, by his grandfather Poe, of Baltimore; Edgar and Rosalie by citizens of Richmond. Edgar gained a protector in Mr. Allan, an English-born and wealthy merchant, who was married, but without a child. The boy's beauty and precocity won the heart of this gentleman, who gave him his name, and lavished upon him, in true southern style, all that perilous endearment which befits the son and heir of a generous house. Servants, horses, dogs, the finest clothes, a

His childhood.

purse well filled, all these were at his disposal from the outset. Great pains were taken with his education, the one element of moral discipline seemingly excepted. When eight years old he went with Mr. Allan to England, and was at the school in Stoke-Newington, to which it is thought his memory went back in after years, when he wrote the tale of "William Wilson." *Training.* At ten we find him at school in Richmond, proficient in classical studies but shirking his mathematics, already writing verse,—instinctively

> "Seeking with hand and heart
> The teacher whom he learned to love
> Before he knew 't was Art."

His grace and strength, his free, romantic, and ardent bearing, made him friends among old and young, and at this time he certainly was capable of the most passionate loyalty to those he loved. Traditions of all this—of his dreamy, fitful temperament, of his early sorrows and his midnight mournings over the grave of an af-

fectionate woman who had been his paragon—are carefully preserved. He was a schoolboy, here and there, until 1826, when he passed a winter at the University of Virginia. He ended his brief course in the school of ancient and modern languages with a successful examination, but after much dissipation and gambling which deeply involved him in debt. His thoughtlessness and practical ingratitude justly incensed an unwise but hitherto devoted guardian. A rupture followed between the two, Mr. Allan finally refusing to countenance Edgar's extravagances; and the young man betook himself to Boston, where, after a few months, he succeeded in finding a printer for his first little book, a revised collection of juvenile poems. But he was soon reduced to straits, and driven to enlistment, under a partly fictitious name, as a soldier; in which capacity, first a private and then by promotion a sergeant-major, he served his country for almost two years. In 1829 he was touched

College Life.

"Tamerlane and Other Poems," Boston, 1827. *Reprinted, with changes and omissions, Baltimore,* 1829.

Enlistment in the army.

by the news of the death of Mrs. Allan, who had always given him a sympathetic mother's love. He obtained a furlough, and effected a reconciliation with the widower in his hour of loneliness and sorrow. Poe's later and trustworthy biographer has spared no pains to give the true details of the youth's enlistment, service, and final discharge through the influence of his early protector.

"Edgar Allan Poe." By G. E. Woodberry: Boston, 1885.

About this time he visited his aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm, of Baltimore. Her daughter Virginia was then six years old, and Poe interested himself in the sweet and gentle child, who loved him from the first, and made his will her law through girlhood and their subsequent wedded life.

Poe now was asked to choose a profession; he selected that of arms, and his benefactor secured his admission to West Point. Here we find him in 1830, and find little good of him. Though now a man grown, he was unable to endure discipline. After a first success, he tired of the place

West Point.

and brought about his own expulsion and disgrace, to his patron's deep, and this time lasting, resentment. But here he also arranged for the issue, by subscription, of another edition of his poems, which was delivered to his classmates after his departure from the academy.

Subscription edition of his poems: New York, 1831.

A new personage now comes upon the scene. Mr. Allan, naturally desiring affection from some quarter, married again, and after a time heirs were born to the estate which Poe, had he been less reckless, might have inherited. The poet, returning in disgrace to Richmond, found no intercessor in the home of his youth. This change, and his manner of life thus far, render it needless to look for other causes of the final rupture between himself and his guardian. It was the just avenge of fate for his persistent folly, and a defeat was inevitable in his contest (if there was a contest) with a lady who, by every law of right, was stronger than he. Poe went out into the world with full permission to have the

Adrift.

one treasure he had seemed to value—his own way. Like a multitude of American youths, often the sons or grandsons of successful men, he found himself of age, without the means proportionate to the education, habits, and needs of a gentleman, and literally, in the place of an unfailing income, without a cent. Better off than many who have erred less, he had one strong ally—his pen. With this he was henceforth to earn his own bed and board, and lead the arduous life of a working man of letters.

His one ally.

For the struggle now begun his resources of tact, good sense, self-poise, were as deficient as his intellectual equipment was great. Soon after the loss of a home-right, which he forfeited more recklessly than Esau, his professional career may be said to have begun. It extended, with brief but frequent intermissions, from 1832 to 1849, the year of his untimely death. Its first noteworthy event was the celebrated introduction to Kennedy, Latrobe, and Miller,

A good start.

through his success in winning a literary prize with "A MS. Found in a Bottle." This brought him friends, work, and local reputation,—in all, a fair and well-earned start.

Summary of his career.

Seventeen years, thenceforward, of working life, in which no other American writer was more active and prominent. I have considered elsewhere the influence of journalism upon authorship. It enabled Poe to live. On the other hand, while he rarely made his lighter work commonplace, it limited the importance of his highest efforts, gave a paragraphic air to his criticisms, and left some of his most suggestive writings mere fragments of what they should be. He discovered the pretentious mediocrity of a host of scribblers, and when unbiased by personal feeling, and especially when doing imaginative work, was one of the few clear-headed writers of his day. He knew what he desired to produce, and how to produce it. We say of a man that his head may be wrong, but his heart is all

See Chap. XI, and cf. "Victorian Poets": pp. 81, 82.

Head and heart.

right. There were times enough when the reverse of this was true of Poe. I do not say there were not other times when his heart was as sound as his perceptions. What, after all, is the record of his years of work, and what is the significance of that record? We must consider the man in his environment, and the transient, uncertain character of the markets to which he brought his wares. His labors, then, were continually impeded, broken, changed; first, by the most trying and uncontrollable nature that ever poet possessed, that ever possessed a poet; by an unquiet, capricious temper, a childish enslavement to his own "Imp of the Perverse," a scornful pettiness that made him "hard to help," that drove him to quarrel with his patient, generous friends, and to wage ignoble conflict with enemies of his own making; by physical and moral lapses, partly the result of inherited taint, in which he resorted, more or less frequently, and usually at critical moments,—seasons when he needed all his

"The Imp of the Perverse."

resources, all his courage and manhood,—to stimulants which he knew would madden and besot him more than other men. None the less his genius was apparent, his power felt, his labor in demand wherever the means existed to pay for it. But here, again, his life was made precarious and shifting by the speculative, ill-requited nature of literary enterprises at that time. From various causes, therefore, his record—no matter how it is attacked or defended—is one of irregularity, of broken and renewed engagements. From 1832 to 1835 Poe had but himself to support, and a careless young fellow always gets on so long as he *is* young, with one success and the chance of a future. The next year his private marriage to his sweet cousin Virginia, still almost a child, was reaffirmed in public, and the two set up their home together. The time had come when Poe, with his sense of the fitness of things, could see that Bohemianism, the charm of youth, is a frame that poorly suits the portrait of

Precarious life of American authors at that time.

Marriage with Virginia Clemm, 1835.

a mature and able-handed man. So we are not surprised to find him engaged, for honest wages, upon "The Southern Literary Messenger." That his skilful touch and fantastic genius, whether devoted to realistic or psychological invention, were now at full command, is shown by his "Hans Pfaall," and by his first striking contribution to the "Messenger," the spectral and characteristic tale of "Berenice." In short, he did uncommon work, for that time, upon the famous Southern magazine, both as tale-writer and as critic, and increased its reputation and income. Yet he felt, with all the morbid sensitiveness of one spoilt by luxury and arrogance in youth, the difference between his present work-a-day life and the independence, the social standing, which if again at his command would enable him to indulge his finer tastes and finish at ease the work best suited to his powers. From this time he was subject to moods of brooding and despair, of crying out upon fate, that were

Journalism.

Mental suffering.

his pest and his ultimate destruction. And so we again are not surprised to find this good beginning no true omen of the fifteen years to come; and that these years are counted by flittings here and there between points that offered employment; by new engagements taken up before he was off with the old; by legends of his bearing and entanglements in the social world he entered; by alternate successes and disgraces, in Richmond, Philadelphia, Boston, New York; by friendships and fallings out with many of the editors who employed him,—the product, after all, with which we are chiefly concerned being his always distinctive writings for the "Quarterly," "The Gentleman's Magazine," "Graham's," "Godey's," "The Mirror," "The American Review," and various other fosterers and distributers of such literature as the current taste might demand. We begin to understand his spasmodic, versatile industry, his balks and breaks, his frequent poverty, despondency, self-abandonment,

Wanderings.

Work.

Misfortunes.

and almost to wonder that the sensitive feminine spirit — worshiping beauty and abhorrent of ugliness and pain, combating with pride, with inherited disease of appetite—did not sooner yield, was not utterly overcome almost at the outset of these experiences. So have I wondered at seeing a delicate forest-bird, leagues from the shore, keep itself on the wing above relentless waters into which it was sure to fall at last.[1] Poe had his good genius and his bad. Near the close of the struggle he made a brave effort, and never was so earnest and resolved, so much his own master, as just before the end. But a man is no stronger than his weakest part, and with the snap-

Death, in Baltimore, October 7, 1849.

[1] Finely paraphrased, since the original appearance of this chapter, by my friend, Mr. Winter:

"Far from the blooming field and fragrant wood
The shining songster of the summer sky,
O'er ocean's black and frightful solitude,
Driven on broken wing, must sink and die";

. . . . . .

Poem read at the Dedication of the Actor's Monument to Poe, May 4, 1885.

ping of that his chance is over. At the moment when the poet, rallying from the desolation caused by the loss of his wife, found new hope and purpose, and was on his way to marry a woman who possibly might have saved him, the tragedy of his life began again. Its final scene was as swift, irreparable, black with terror, as that of any drama ever written. His death was gloom. Men saw him no more; but the shadow of a veiled old woman, mourning for him, hovered here and there. After many years a laurelled tomb was placed above his ashes, and there remain to American literature the relics, so unequal in value, of the most isolated and exceptional of all its poets and pioneers.

Mrs. Maria Clemm.

Poe's misfortunes were less than those of some who have conquered misfortune. Others have been castaways in infancy and friendless in manhood, and have found no protectors such as came at his need. Still others have struggled and suffered, and have declined to wear their hearts upon

their sleeves. They have sought consolation in their work, and from their bitter experiences have gathered strength and glory. The essential part of an artist's life is that of his inspired moments. There were occasions when Poe was the master, when his criticism was true, when he composed such tales as "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," poems like "The Raven," "The Bells," "The City in the Sea." It must be acknowledged, moreover —and professional writers know what this implies—that Poe, in his wanderings, after all, *followed his market*. It gradually drifted to the North, until New York afforded the surest recompense to authors not snugly housed in the leafy coverts of New England. Nor did he ever resort to any mercantile employment for a livelihood. As we look around and see how authors accept this or that method of support, there seems to be something chivalrous in the attitude of one who never earned a dollar except by his pen. From first to last he was simply

The literary market.

A genuine man of letters.

a poet and man of letters, who rightly might claim to be judged by the literary product of his life. The life itself differed from that of any modern poet of equal genius, and partly because none other has found himself, in a new country, among such elements. Too much has been written about the man, too little of his times.

Interest excited by Poe's life and works.

His story has had a fascination for those who consider the infirmity of genius its natural outward sign. The peculiarity of his actions was their leaning toward what is called the melodramatic; of his work, that it aimed above the level of its time. What has been written of the former—of little value as compared with the analysis derivable from his literary remains—was for a long time the output of those who, if unable to produce a stanza which he would have acknowledged, at least felt within themselves the possibilities of his errant career. Yet, as I observe the marvels of his handicraft, I seem unjust to these enthusiasts. It was the kind which most impresses the

imagination of youth, and youth is a period at which the critical development of many biographers seems to be arrested. And who would not recall the zest with which he read, in school-boy days, and by the stolen candle, a legend so fearful in its beauty and so beautiful in its fear as "The Masque of the Red Death," for example, found in some stray number of a magazine, and making the printed trash that convoyed it seem so vapid and drear? Not long after, we had the collected series, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.* With what eagerness we caught them from hand to hand until many of us knew them almost by heart. In the East, at that time, Hawthorne was shyly putting out his "Mosses" and "Twice Told Tales," and it was not an unfruitful period that fostered, among its brood of chattering and aimless sentimentalists, two such spirits at once, each original in his kind. To-day we have a more consummate, realistic art. But where, now, the creative ardor, the power

"*Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque,*" 1840.

to touch the stops, if need be, of tragedy and superstition and remorse! Our taste is more refined, our faculties are under control; to produce the greatest art they must, at times, compel the artist. "Poetry," said Poe, "has been with me a passion, not a purpose,"—a remarkable sentence to be found in a boyish preface, and I believe that he wrote the truth. But here, again, he displays an opposite failing. If poetry had been with him no less a passion, and equally a purpose, we now should have had something more to represent his rhythmical genius than the few brief, occasional lyrics which are all that his thirty years of life as a poet—the life of his early choice—have left to us.

Poetry a passion with him.

III

In estimating him as a poet, the dates of these lyrics are of minor consequence. They make but a thin volume, smaller than one which might hold the verse of Collins or Gray. Their range is narrower still. It is a curious fact that Poe struck, in youth,

Lyrical remains.

the keynotes of a few themes, and that some of his best pieces, as we now have them, are but variations upon their earlier treatment.

Early books of verse: printed, respectively, in 1827, 1829, and 1831.

His first collection was made in his eighteenth year, revised in his twentieth, and again reprinted, with changes and omissions, just after he left West Point. The form of the longer poems is copied from Byron and Moore, while the spirit of the whole series vaguely reminds us of Shelley in his obscurer lyrical mood. Poe's originality can be found in them, but they would be valueless except for his after career. They have unusual significance as the shapeless germs of much that was to grow into form and beauty. Crude and wandering pieces, entitled "Fairy Land" and "Irene," "To ——," "A Pæan," etc., were the originals of "The Sleeper," "A Dream within a Dream," and "Lenore"; while "The Doomed City" and "The Valley Nis" reappear as "The City in the Sea" and "The Valley of Unrest." Others

Germs of his later poems.

were less thoroughly rewritten. Possibly he thus remodeled his juvenile verse to show that, however inchoate, it contained something worth a master's handling. Mr. Stoddard thinks, and not without reason, that he found it an easy way of making salable "copy." The poet himself intimates that circumstances beyond his control restricted his lyrical product. I scarcely remember another instance where a writer has so hoarded his early songs, and am in doubt whether to commend or deprecate their reproduction. It does not betoken affluence, but it was honest in Poe that he would not write in cold blood for the mere sake of composing. This he undoubtedly had the skill to do, and would have done, if his sole object had been creation of the beautiful, or art for art's sake. He used his lyrical gift mostly to express veritable feelings and moods — I might almost say a single feeling or mood — to which he could not otherwise give utterance, resorting to melody when prose was

His use of poesy.

insufficient. Herein he was true to the cardinal, antique conception of poesy, and in keeping it distinct from his main literary work he confirmed his own avowal that it was to him a passion, and neither a purpose nor a pursuit.

A few poems, just as they stood in his early volumes, are admirable in thought or finish. One is the sonnet, "To Science," which is striking, not as a sonnet, but for its premonition of attitudes which poetry and science have now more clearly assumed. Another is the exquisite lyric, "To Helen," which every critic longs to cite. Its confusion of imagery is wholly forgotten in the delight afforded by melody, lyrical perfection, sweet and classic grace. I do not understand why he omitted this charming trifle from the juvenile poems which he added to the collection of 1845. Although it first appeared in his edition of 1831, he claimed to have written it when fourteen, and nothing more fresh and delicate came from his pen in maturer years.

Precocity.

The instant success of "The Raven"—and this was within a few years of his death—first made him popular as a poet, and resulted in a new collection of his verses. The lyrics which it contained, and a few written afterward,—"Ulalume," "The Bells," "For Annie," etc.,—now comprise the whole of his poetry as retained in the standard editions. The most glaring faults of "Al Aaraaf" and "Tamerlane" have been selected by eulogists for special praise. Turning from this practice-work to the poems which made his reputation, we come at once to the most widely known of all.

"The Raven and Other Poems," 1845.

Poe could not have written "The Raven" in youth. It exhibits a method so positive as almost to compel us to accept, against the denial of his associates, his own account of its building. The maker *does* keep a firm hand on it throughout, and for once seems to set his purpose above his passion. This appears in the gravely quaint diction, and in the contrast between the reality of

"The Raven."

every-day manners and the profounder reality of a spiritual shadow upon the human heart. The grimness of fate is suggested by phrases which it requires a masterly hand to subdue to the meaning of the poem. "'Sir,' said I, 'or madam,'" "this ungainly fowl," and the like, sustain the air of grotesqueness, and become a foil to the pathos, an approach to the tragical climax, of this unique production. Only genius can deal so closely with the grotesque, and make it add to the solemn beauty of structure an effect like that of the gargoyles seen by moonlight on the facade of Notre Dame.

Not his subtlest poem.

In no other lyric is Poe so self-possessed. No other is so determinate in its repetends and alliterations. Hence I am far from deeming it his most poetical poem. Its artificial qualities are those which catch the fancy of the general reader; and it is of all his ballads, if not the most imaginative, the most peculiar. His more ethereal productions seem to me those in which there

is the appearance, at least, of spontaneity, —in which he yields to his feelings, while dying falls and cadences most musical, most melancholy, come from him unawares. Literal criticisms of "The Raven" are of small account. If the shadow of the bird could not fall upon the mourner, the shadows of its evil presence could brood upon his soul; the seraphim whose footfalls tinkle upon the tufted floor may be regarded as seraphim of the Orient, their anklets hung with celestial bells. At all events, Poe's raven is the very genius of the Night's Plutonian shore, different from other ravens, entirely his own, and none other can take its place. It is an emblem of the Irreparable, the guardian of pitiless memories, whose burden ever recalls to us the days that are no more.

As a new creation, then, "The Raven" is entitled to a place in literature, and keeps it. But how much more imaginative is such a poem as "The City in the Sea!" As a picture, this reminds us of Turner,

"The City in the Sea."

and, again, of that sublime madman, John Martin. Here is a strange city where Death has raised a throne. Its

> "shrines and palaces and towers
> (Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)
> Resemble nothing that is ours.
> Around, by lifting winds forgot,
> Resignedly beneath the sky
> The melancholy waters lie."

This mystical town is aglow with light, not from heaven, but from out the lurid sea,—light which streams up the turrets and pinnacles and domes,—

> "Up many and many a marvelous shrine,
> Whose wreathed friezes intertwine
> The viol, the violet, and the vine.
> . . . . . .
> While, from a proud tower in the town,
> Death looks gigantically down."

The sea about is hideously serene, but at last there is a movement; the towers seem slightly to sink; the dull tide has a redder glow,—

> "And when, amid no earthly moans,
> Down, down that town shall settle hence,

Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
Shall do it reverence.''

This poem, notwithstanding its sombreness and terror, depends upon effects which made Poe the forerunner of our chief experts in form and sound, and both the language and the conception are suggestive in a high degree.

"*The Sleeper.*"

''The Sleeper'' is even more poetic. It distills, like drops from the opiate vapor of the swooning moonlit night, all the melody, the fantasy, the exaltation, that befit the vision of a beautiful woman lying in her shroud, silent in her length of tress, waiting to exchange her death chamber

''for one more holy,
This bed, for one more melancholy.''

Poe's ideality cannot be gainsaid, but it aided him with few, very few, images, and those seemed to haunt his brain perpetually. Such an image is that of the beings who lend their menace to the tone of the funeral bells: —

"And the people, — ah, the people, —
They that dwell up in the steeple
All alone,
And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,
In that muffled monotone,
Feel a glory in so rolling
On the human heart a stone, —
They are neither man nor woman,
They are neither brute nor human,
They are Ghouls."

In the same remarkable fantasia the bells themselves become human, and it is a master-stroke that makes us hear them shriek out of tune, "*The Bells.*"

"In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,"

and forces us to the very madness with which they are

"Leaping higher, higher, higher,
With a desperate desire,
And a resolute endeavor
Now — now to sit, or never,
By the side of the pale-faced moon."

Clearly this extravagance was suggested by the picture and the rhyme. But it so car-

ries us with it that we think not of its meaning; we share in the delirium of the bells, and nothing can be too extreme for the abandon to which we yield ourselves, led by the faith and frenzy of the poet.

The hinting, intermittent qualities of a few lyrics remind us of Shelley and Coleridge, with whom Poe always was in sympathy. The conception of "The Raven" was new, but in method it bears a likeness to "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," so closely, in fact, that the rhythm of the one probably was suggested by that of the other. In motive they are so different that neither Poe nor Mrs. Browning could feel aggrieved. After an examination of dates, and of other matters relating to the genesis of each poem, I have satisfied myself, against much reasoning to the contrary, that Poe derived his use of the refrain and repetend, here and elsewhere, from the English sibyl, by whom they were employed to the verge of mannerism in her earliest lyrics.

Use of the refrain and repetend, by Mrs. Browning and by Poe. Cf. "Victorian Poets": p. 145.

"The Conqueror Worm" expresses in a single moan the hopelessness of the poet's vigils among the tombs, where he demanded of silence and the night some tidings of the dead. All he knew was that *"The Conqueror Worm."*

"No voice from that sublimer world hath ever
To sage or poet these responses given."

The most he dared to ask for "The Sleeper" was oblivion; that her sleep might be as deep as it was lasting. We lay the dead "in the cold ground" or in the warm, flower-springing bosom of dear Earth, as best may fit the hearts of those who mourn them. But the tomb, the end of mortality, is voiceless still. If you would find the beginning of immortality, seek some other oracle. "The Conqueror Worm" is the most despairing of lyrics, yet quite essential to the mystical purpose of the tale "Ligeia." But to brood upon men as mimes, ironically cast "in the form of God on high,"—mere puppets, where

"the play is the tragedy, 'Man,'
And its hero the Conqueror Worm,"

—that way madness lies, indeed. In the lyric, "For Annie," death is a trance; the soul lingers, calm and at rest, for the fever, called living, is conquered. Human love remains, and its last kiss is still a balm. Something may be hereafter,—but what, who knows? For repose, and for delicate and unstudied melody, it is one of Poe's truest poems, and his tenderest. During the brief period in which he survived his wife, he seemed to have a vision of rest in death, and not of horror. Two lyrics, widely different, and one of them of a most singular nature, are thought to be requiems for his lost companion. It is from no baseness, but from a divine instinct, that genuine artists are compelled to go on with their work and to make their own misery, no less than their joy, promote its uses. Their most sacred experiences become, not of their volition, its themes and illustrations. Every man as an individual is secondary to what he is as a worker for the

Requiems.

Art's strong compulsion.

progress of his kind and the glory of the gift allotted to him.

Therefore, whether Poe adored his wife or not, her image became the ideal of these poems. I shall add little here to all that has been written of "Ulalume." It is so strange, so unlike anything that preceded it, so vague and yet so full of meaning, that of itself it might establish a new method. To me it seems an improvisation, such as a violinist might play upon the instrument which had become his one thing of worth after the death of a companion had left him alone with his own soul. Poe remodeled and made the most of his first broken draft, and had the grace not to analyze the process. I have accepted his analysis of "The Raven" as more than half true. Poets know that an entire poem often is suggested by one of its lines, even by a refrain or a bit of rhythm. From this it builds itself. The last or any other stanza may be written first; and what at first is without form is not void,—for ultimately

"Ulalume."

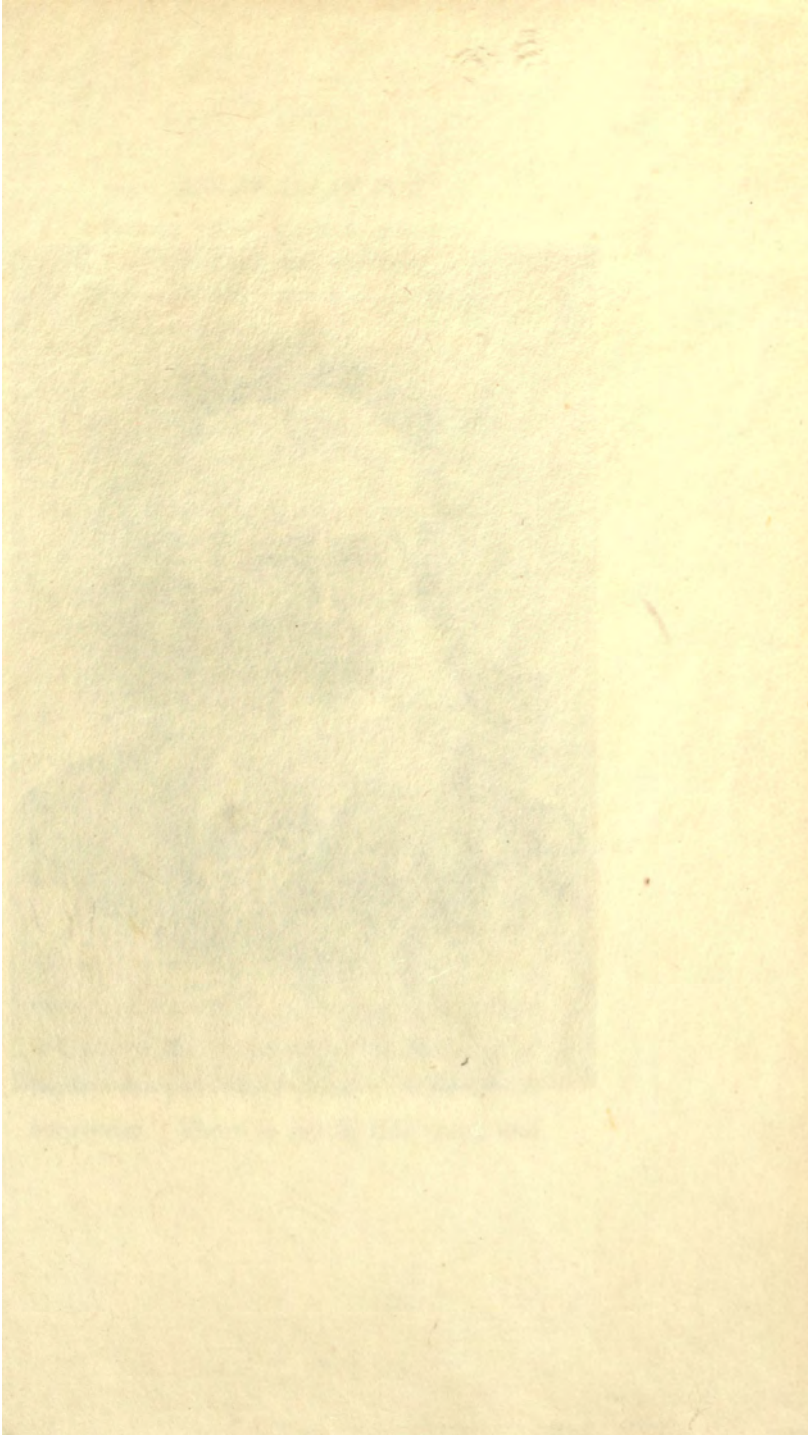
it will be perfected into shape and meaning. If "Ulalume" may be termed a requiem, "Annabel Lee" is a tuneful dirge, the simplest of Poe's melodies, and the most likely to please the common ear. It is said to have been his last lyric, and was written, I think, with more spontaneity than others. The theme is carried along skilfully, the movement hastened and heightened to the end and there dwelt upon, as often in a piece of music. Before considering the poet's method of song, I will mention the two poems which seem to me to represent his highest range, and sufficient in themselves to preserve the memory of a lyrist.

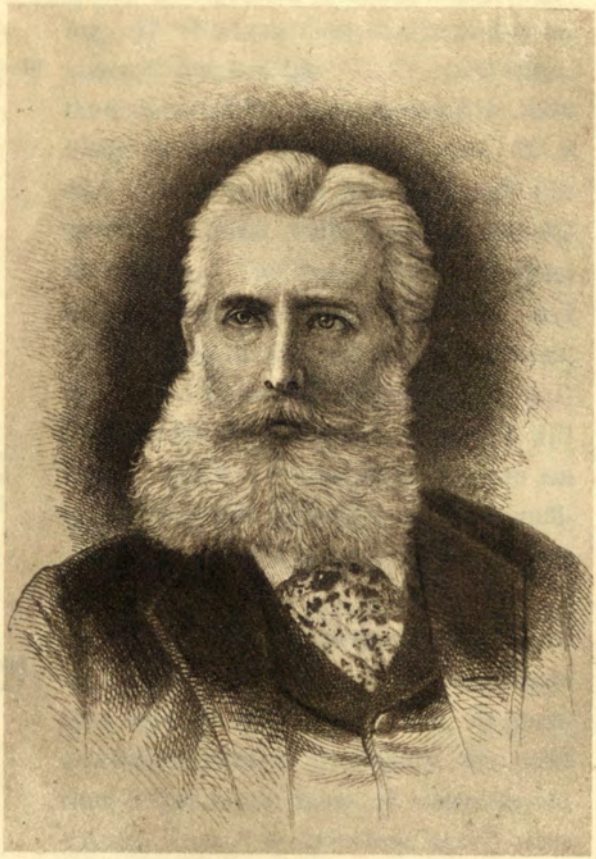
"Annabel Lee."

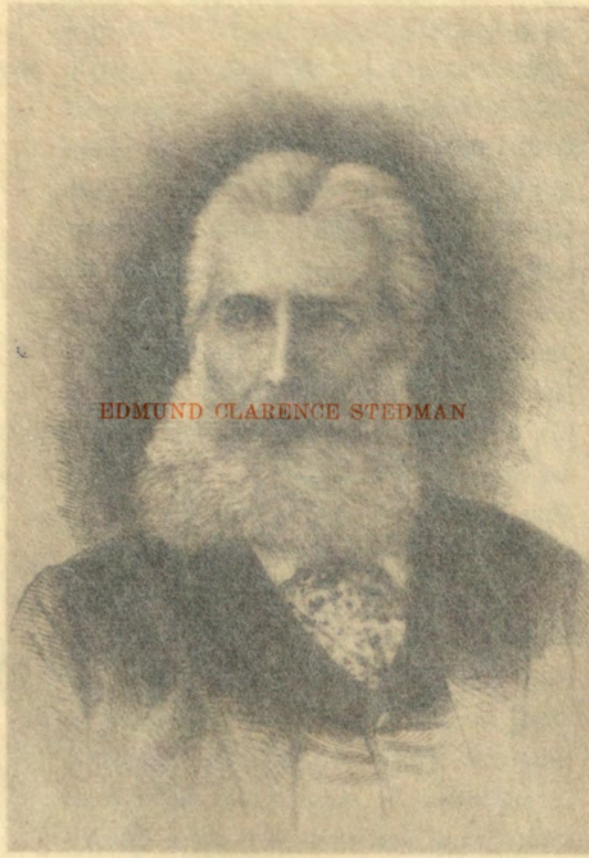
Poe's highest lyrical range.

We overlook the allegory of "The Haunted Palace," until it has been read more than once; we think of the sound, the phantasmagoric picture, the beauty, the lurid close. The magic muse of Coleridge, in "Kubla Khan," or elsewhere, hardly went beyond such lines as these:—

"The Haunted Palace."







EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN

"Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow,
(This — all this — was in the olden
Time long ago;)
And every gentle air that dallied,
In that sweet day,
Along the ramparts, plumed and pallid,
A winged odor went away."

The conception of a "Lost Mind" never has been so imaginatively treated, whether by poet or by painter. Questioning Poe's own mental state, look at this poem and see how sane, as an artist, he was that made it. "Do you act best when you forget yourself in the part?" "No, for then I forget to perfect the part." Even more striking is the song of "Israfel," whose heart-strings are a lute. Of all these lyrics is not this the most lyrical, — not only charged with music, but with light? For once, and in his freest hour of youth, Poe got above the sepulchres and mists, even beyond the pale-faced moon, and visited the empyrean. There is joy in this carol, and

"*Israfel.*"

the radiance of the skies, and ecstatic possession of the gift of song:—

> "If I could dwell
> Where Israfel
> Hath dwelt, and he where I,
> He might not sing so wildly well
> A mortal melody,
> While a bolder note than this might swell
> From my lyre within the sky!"

All this, with the rapturous harmony of the first and third stanzas, is awakened in the poet's soul by a line from a discourse on the Koran, and the result is even finer than the theme. If I had any claim to make up a "Parnassus," not perhaps of the most famous English lyrics, but of those which appeal strongly to my own poetic sense, and could select but one of Poe's, I confess that I should choose "Israfel," for pure music, for exaltation, and for its original, satisfying quality of rhythmic art.

IV

Few and brief are these *reliquiæ* which determine his fame as a poet. What do

they tell us of his lyrical genius and method? Clearly enough, that he possessed an exquisite faculty, which he exercised within definite bounds. It may be that within those bounds he would have done more if events had not hindered him, as he declared, "from making any serious effort" in the field of his choice. In boyhood he had decided views as to the province of song, and he never afterward changed them. The preface to his West Point edition, rambling and conceited as it is,—affording such a contrast to the proud humility of Keats's preface to "Endymion,"—gives us the gist of his creed, and shows that the instinct of the young poet was scarcely less delicate than that of his nobler kinsman. Poe thought the object of poetry was pleasure, not truth; the pleasure must not be definite, but subtile, and therefore poetry is opposed to romance; music is an *essential,* "since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception." Metaphysics in verse he hated, pro-

An exquisite but limited faculty.

Poe's theory of poetry.

Cf. "*Victorian Poets*": *p.* 127.

nouncing the Lake theory a new form of didacticism that had injured even the tuneful Coleridge. For a neophyte this was not bad, and after certain reservations few will disagree with him. Eighteen years later, in his charming lecture, "The Poetic Principle," he offered simply an extension of these ideas, with reasons why a long poem "cannot exist." One is tempted to rejoin that the standard of length in a poem, as in a piece of music, is relative, depending upon the power of the maker and the recipient to prolong their exalted moods. We might, also, quote Landor's "Pentameron," concerning the greatness of a poet, or even Beecher's saying that "pint measures are soon filled." The lecture justly denounces the "heresy of the didactic," and then declares poetry to be the child of Taste,—devoted solely to the Rhythmical Creation of Beauty, as it is in music that the soul most nearly attains the supernal end for which it struggles. In fine, Poe, with "the mad pride of intellectuality," refused to

"*The Poetic Principle*," 1845.

The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty.

look beyond the scope of his own gift, and would restrict the poet to one method and even to a single theme. In his *ex post facto* analysis of "The Raven" he conceives the highest tone of beauty to be sadness, caused by the pathos of existence and our inability to grasp the unknown. Of all beauty that of a beautiful woman is the supremest, her death is the saddest loss—and therefore "the most poetical topic in the world." He would treat this musically by application of the refrain, increasing the sorrowful loveliness of his poem by contrast of something homely, fantastic, or quaint.

Poe's own range was quite within his theory. His juvenile versions of what afterward became poems were so very "indefinite" as to express almost nothing; they resembled those marvelous stanzas of Dr. Chivers, that sound magnificently,—I have heard Bayard Taylor and Swinburne rehearse them with shouts of delight—and that have no meaning at all.

A melodist.

Poe could not remain a Chivers, but sound always was his forte. We rarely find his highest imagination in his verse, or the creation of poetic phrases such as came to the lips of Keats without a summons. He lacked the dramatic power of combination, and produced no symphony in rhythm, —was strictly a melodist, who achieved wonders in a single strain. Neither Mrs. Browning nor any other poet had "applied" the refrain in Poe's fashion, nor so effectively. In "The Bells" its use is limited almost to one word, the only English word, perhaps, that could be repeated incessantly as the burden of such a poem. In "The Raven," "Lenore," and elsewhere, he employed the repetend also, and with still more novel results:—

The refrain and repetend.

"An anthem for the queenliest dead that ever
died so young,
A dirge for her, the doubly dead, in that she died
so young."

"Our talk had been serious and sober,
But our thoughts they were palsied and sere,
Our memories were treacherous and sere."

One thing profitably may be noted by latter-day poets. Poe used none but elementary English measures, relying upon his music and atmosphere for their effect. This is true of those which seem most intricate, as in "The Bells" and "Ulalume." "Lenore" and "For Annie" are the simplest of ballad forms. I have a fancy that our Southern poet's ear caught the music of "Annabel Lee" and "Eulalie," if not their special quality, from the plaintive, melodious negro songs utilized by those early writers of "minstrelsy" who have been denominated the only composers of a genuine American school. This suggestion may be scouted, but an expert might suspect the one to be a patrican refinement upon the melody, feeling and humble charm of the other.

Use of simple ballad forms.

Poe was not a single-poem poet, but the poet of a single mood. His materials were seemingly a small stock in trade, chiefly of Angels and Demons, with an attendance of Dreams, Echoes, Ghouls, Gnomes and

Effects of sound.

Mimes, ready at hand. He selected or coined, for use and re-use, a number of what have been called "beautiful words," —"albatross," "halcyon," "scintillant," "Ligeia," "Weir," "Yaanek," "Auber," "D'Elormie," and the like. Everything was subordinate to sound. But his poetry, as it places us under the spell of the senses, enables us to enter, through their reaction upon the spirit, his indefinable mood; nor should we forget that Coleridge owes his specific rank as a poet, not to his philosophic verse, but to melodious fragments, and greatly to the rhythm of "The Ancient Mariner" and of "Christabel." Poe's melodies lure us to the point where we seem to hear angelic lutes and citherns, or elfin instruments that make music in "the land east of the sun and west of the moon." The enchantment may not be that of Israfel, nor of the harper who exorcised the evil genius of Saul, but it is at least that of some plumed being of the middle air, of a charmer charming so sweetly that

his numbers are the burden of mystic dreams.

V

Poe most eminent as a romancer.

If Poe's standing depended chiefly upon these few poems, notable as they are, his name would be recalled less frequently. His intellectual strength and rarest imagination are to be found in his *Tales*. To them, and to literary criticism, his main labors were devoted.

The limits of this chapter constrain me to say less than I have in mind concerning his prose writings. As with his poems, so with the "Tales,"—their dates are of little importance. His irregular life forced him to alternate good work with bad, and some of his best stories were written early. He was an apostle of the art that refuses to take its color from a given time or country, and of the revolt against commonplace, and his inventions partook of the romantic and the wonderful. He added to a Greek perception of form the Oriental passion for decoration. All the materials of the wiz-

Revolt against the commonplace.

ard's craft were at his command. He was not a pupil of Beckford, Godwin, Maturin, Hoffman, or Fouqué; and yet if these writers were to be grouped we should think also of Poe, and give him no second place among them. "The young fellow is highly imaginative, and a little given to the terrific," said Kennedy, in his honest way. Poe could not have written a novel, as we term it, as well as the feeblest of Harper's or Roberts's yearlings. He vibrated between two points, the realistic and the mystic, and made no attempt to combine people or situations in ordinary life, though he knew how to lead up to a dramatic tableau or crisis. His studies of character were not made from observation, but from acquaintance with himself; and this subjectivity, or egoism, crippled his invention and made his "Tales" little better than prose poems. He could imagine a series of adventures—the experience of a single narrator—like "Arthur Gordon Pym," and might have been, not Le Sage nor De Foe, but an

Realism and mysticism.

eminent raconteur in his own field. His strength is unquestionable in those clever pieces of ratiocination, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," "The Purloined Letter"; in some of a more fantastic type, "The Gold Bug" and "Hans Pfaall"; and especially in those with elements of terror and morbid psychology added, such as "The Descent into the Maelstrom," "The Black Cat," "The Tell-tale Heart," and the mesmeric sketches. When composing these he delighted in the exercise of his dexterous intellect, like a workman testing his skill. No poet is of a low grade who possesses, besides an ear for rhythm, the resources of a brain so fine and active. Technical gifts being equal, the more intellectual of two poets is the greater. "Best bard, because the wisest."

Psychologic analysis.

His artistic contempt for metaphysics is seen even in those tales which appear most transcendental. They are charged with a feeling that in the realms of psychology we

Contempt for metaphysics.

are dealing with something ethereal, which is none the less substance if we might but capture it. They are his resolute attempts to find a clew to the invisible world. Were he living now, how much he would make of our discoveries in light and sound, of the correlation of forces! He strove by a kind of divination to put his hand upon the links of mind and matter, and reach the hiding-places of the soul. It galled him that anything should lie outside the domain of human intelligence. His imperious intellect rebelled against the bounds that shut us in, and found passionate expression in works of which "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "William Wilson" are the best types. The tales in which lyrics are introduced are full of complex beauty, the choicest products of his genius. They are the offspring of yearnings that lifted him so far above himself as to make us forget his failings and think of him only as a creative artist, a man of noble gifts.

Masterpieces.

In these short, purely ideal efforts—finished as an artist finishes a portrait, or a poet his poem—Poe had few equals in recent times. That he lacked sustained power of invention is proved, not by his failure to complete an extended work, but by his under-estimation of its value. Such a man measures everything by his personal ability, and finds plausible grounds for the resulting standard. Hawthorne had the growing power and the staying power that gave us "The Scarlet Letter" and "The House of the Seven Gables." Poe and Hawthorne were the last of the romancers. Each was a master in his way, and that of Poe was the more obvious and material. He was expert in much that concerns the structure of works, and the modeling touches of the poet left beauty-marks upon his prose. Yet in spiritual meaning his tales were less poetic than those of Hawthorne. He relied upon his externals, making the utmost of their gorgeousness of color, their splendor and

Poe and Hawthorne.

gloom of light and shade. Hawthorne found the secret meaning of common things, and knew how to capture, from the plainest aspects of life, an essence of evasive beauty which the senses of Poe often were unable to perceive. It was Hawthorne who heard the melodies too fine for mortal ear. Hawthorne was wholly masculine, with the great tenderness and gentleness which belong to virile souls. Poe had, with the delicacy, the sophistry and weakness of a nature more or less effeminate. He opposed to Hawthorne the fire, the richness, the instability of the tropics, as against the abiding strength and passion of the North. His own conceptions astonished him, and he often presents himself "with hair on end, at his own wonders." Of these two artists and seers, the New Englander had the profounder insight; the Southerner's magic was that of the necromancer who resorts to spells and devices, and, when some apparition by chance re-

sponds to his incantations, is bewildered by the phantom himself has raised.

Poe failed to see that the Puritanism by which Hawthorne's strength was tempered was also the source from which it sprang; and in his general criticism did not pay full tribute to a genius he must have felt. In some of his sketches, such as "The Man of the Crowd," he used Hawthorne's method, and with inferior results. His reviews of other authors and his occasional literary notes have been so carefully preserved as to show his nature by a mental and moral photograph. His *Marginalia*, scrappy and written for effect, are the notes of a thinking man of letters. The criticisms raised a hubbub in their day, and made Poe the bogy of his generation—the unruly censor whom weaklings not only had cause to fear, but often regarded with a sense of cruel injustice. I acknowledge their frequent dishonesty, vulgarity, prejudice, but do not, therefore, hold them to be worthless. Even a scourge, a pestilence, has its

"Marginalia."

uses; before it the puny and frail go down, the fittest survive. And so it was in Poe's foray. Better that a time of unproductiveness should follow such a thinning out than that false and feeble things should continue. I suspect that *The Literati* made room for a new movement, sure though long delayed, in American authorship. Mr. Higginson, however, is entirely right when he intimates that Margaret Fuller, by her independent reviews in "The Tribune," sustained her full and early part in the chase against "such small deer." The shafts of Diana were more surely sped, and much less vindictively, than the spear of her brother-huntsman. Poe's sketches are a prose Dunciad, waspish and unfair, yet not without touches of magnanimity. He had small respect for the feeling that it is well for a critic to discover beauties, since any one can point out faults. When, as in the cases of Tennyson, Mrs. Browning, Taylor, and others, he pronounced favorably upon the talents of a claimant,

"*The Literati*," 1846.

and was uninfluenced by personal motives, his judgments not seldom have been justified by the after-career. Besides, what a cartoon he drew of the writers of his time, —the corrective of Griswold's optimistic delineations! In the description of a man's personal appearance he had the art of placing the subject before us with a single touch. His tender mercies were cruel; he never forgot to prod the one sore spot of the author he most approved,—was especially intolerant of his own faults in others, and naturally detected these at once. When meting out punishment to a pretentious writer, he reveled in his task, and often made short work, as if the pleasure was too great to be endurable. The keenness of his satire, just or unjust, is mitigated by its obvious ferocity: one instinctively takes part with the victim. Nothing in journalistic criticism, even at that time, was more scathing and ludicrous than his conceit of a popular bookwright in the act of confabulation with the Universe. But

Satire.

he marred the work by coarseness, telling one man that he was by no means a fool, although he did write "De Vere," and heading a paper on the gentlest and most forbearing of poets—"Mr. Longfellow and other Plagiarists." In short, he constantly dulled the edge and temper of his rapier, and resorted to the broad-axe, using the latter even in his deprecation of its use by Kit North. Perhaps it was needed in those salad days by offenders who could be put down in no other wise; but I hold it a sign of progress that criticism by force of arms would now be less effective.

Broad-axe criticism.

VI

Poe's equipment and genius.

Some analysis of Poe's general equipment will not be out of place. Only in the most perfect tales can his English style be called excellent, however significant his thought. His mannerisms — constant employment of the *dash* for suggestiveness, and a habit of italicizing to make a point or strengthen an illusion—are wearisome, and betray a lack of confidence in his skill

to use plain methods. While asserting the power of words to convey absolutely any idea of the human mind, he relied on sound, quaintness, surprise, and other artificial aids. His prose is inferior to Hawthorne's; but sometimes he excels Hawthorne in qualities of form and proportion which are specially at the service of authors who are also poets. The abrupt beginnings of his stories often are artistic:—

"We had now reached the summit of the loftiest crag. For some minutes the old man seemed too much exhausted to speak." ("Descent into the Maelstrom.")

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." ("The Cask of Amontillado.")

His endings were equally good, when he had a clear knowledge of his own purpose, and some of his conceptions terminate at a dramatic crisis. The tone, also, of his masterpieces is well sustained throughout. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the approach to the fated spot, the air, the

"The Fall of the House of Usher."

landscape, the tarn, the mansion itself, are a perfect study, equal to the ride of Childe Roland,—and here Poe excels Browning: we not only come with him to the dark tower, but we enter and partake its mystery, and alone know the secret of its accursed fate. The poet's analytic faculty has been compared to that of Balzac, but a parallel goes no farther than the material side. In condensation he surpassed either Balzac or Hawthorne.

Balzac.

His imagination was not of the highest order, for he never dared to trust to it implicitly; certainly not in his poetry, since he could do nothing with a measure like blank verse, which is barren in the hands of a mere songster, but the glory of English metrical forms when employed by one commanding the strength of diction, the beauty and grandeur of thought, and all the resources of a strongly imaginative poet. Neither in verse nor in prose did he cut loose from his minor devices, and for results of sublimity and awe he always

Poe's imagination.

depends upon that which is grotesque or out of nature. Beauty of the fantastic or grotesque is not the highest beauty. Art, like nature, must be fantastic, not in her frequent, but in her exceptional moods. The rarest ideal dwells in a realm beyond that which fascinates us by its strangeness or terror, and the votaries of the latter have masters above them as high as Raphael is above Doré.

The fantastic.

In genuine humor Poe seemed utterly wanting. He also had little of the mother-wit that comes in flashes and at once; but his powers of irony and satire were so great as to make his frequent lapses into invective the more humiliating. The command of humor has distinguished men whose genius was both high and broad. If inessential to exalted poetical work, its absence is hurtful to the critical and polemic essay. Poe knew this as well as any one, but a measureless self-esteem would not acknowledge the flaw in his armor. Hence efforts which involved the delusion that

Deficient in humor

Quality of the great humorists. Cf. "Victorian Poets": pp. 73, 77.

humor may come by works and not by inborn gift. Humor is congenital and rare, the fruit of natural mellowness, of sensitiveness to the light and humane phases of life. It is, moreover, set in action by an unselfish heart. Such is the mirth of Thackeray, of Cervantes and Molière, and of the one master of English song. Poe's consciousness of his defect, and his refusal to believe it incurable, are manifest in trashy sketches for which he had a market, and which are humorous only to one who sees the ludicrous side of their failure. He analyzed mirth as the product of incongruity, and went to work upon a theory to produce it. The result is seen not only in the extravaganzas to which I refer,—and it is a pity that these should have been hunted up so laboriously,—but in the use of what he thought was humor to barb his criticisms, and as a contrast to the exciting passages of his analytical tales. One of his sketches, "The Duc de l'Omelette," after the lighter French manner, has grace

and jaunty persiflage, but most of his whimsical "pot-boilers" are deplorably absurd. There is something akin to humor in the sub-handling of his favorite themes,—such as the awe and mystery of death, the terrors of pestilence, insanity, or remorse. The grotesque and nether side of these matters presents itself to him, and then his irony, with its repulsive fancies, is as near humor as he ever approaches. That is to say, it is grave-yard humor, the kind which sends a chill down our backs, and implies a contempt for our bodies and souls, for the perils, helplessness, and meanness of the stricken human race.

The grotesque.

Poe is sometimes called a man of extraordinary learning. Upon a first acquaintance, one might receive the impression that his scholarship was not only varied, but thorough. A study of his works has satisfied me that he possessed literary resources and knew how to make the most of them. In this he resembled Bulwer, and, with far less abundant materials than the latter re-

Character of his scholarship.

Affectation of learning.

quired, employed them as speciously. He easily threw a glamour of erudition about his work, by the use of phrases from old authors he had read, or among whose treatises he had foraged with special design. It was his knack to cull sentences which, taken by themselves, produce a weird or impressive effect, and to reframe them skilfully. This plan was clever, and resulted in something that could best be muttered "darkly, at dead of night"; but it partook of trickery, even in its art. He had little exact scholarship, nor needed it, dealing, as he did, not with the processes of learning, but with results that could subserve the play of his imagination. Shakespeare's anachronisms and illusions were made as he required them, and with a fine disdain. Poe resorted to them of malice aforethought, and under pretence of correctness. Still, the work of a romancer and poet is not that of a book-worm. What he needs is a good reference-knowledge, and this Poe had. His irregular school-boy

A good reference knowledge.

training was not likely to give him the scholastic habit, nor would his impatient manhood otherwise have confirmed it. I am sure that we may consider that portion of his youth to have been of most worth which was devoted, as in the case of many a born writer, to the unconscious education obtained from the reading, for the mere love of it, of *all* books to which he had access. This training served him well. It enabled him to give his romance an alchemic air, by citation from writers like Chapman, Thomas, More, Bishop King, etc., and from Latin and French authors in profusion. His French tendencies were natural, and he learned enough of the language to read much of its current literature and get hold of modes unknown to many of his fellow-writers. I have said that his stock in trade was narrow, but for the adroit display of it examine any of his tales and sketches, — for example, "Berenice," or "The Assignation."

His materials.

In knowledge of what may be called the properties of his romance, he was more honestly grounded. He had the good fortune to utilize the Southern life and scenery which he knew in youth. It chanced, also, that during some years of his boyhood—that formative period whose impressions are indelible—he lived in a characteristic part of England. He had seen with his own eyes castles, abbeys, the hangings and tapestries and other by-gone trappings of ancient rooms, and remembered effects of decoration and color which always came to his aid. These he used as if he were born to them; never, certainly, with the surprise at their richness which vulgarizes Disraeli's "Lothair." In some way, known to genius, he also caught the romance of France, of Italy, of the Orient, and one tale or another is transfused with their atmosphere; while the central figure, however disguised, is always the image of the romancer himself. His equipment, on the whole, was not a pedant's, much less that of a searcher after

truth; it was that of a poet and a literary workman. Yet he had the hunger which animates the imaginative student, and, had he been led to devote himself to science, would have contributed to the sum of knowledge. In writing *Eureka* he was unquestionably sincere, and forgot himself more nearly than in any other act of his professional life. But here his inexact learning betrayed him. What was begun in conviction—a swift generalization from scientific theories of the universe—grew to be so far beyond the data at his command, or so inconsistent with them, that he finally saw he had written little else than a prose poem, and desired that it should be so regarded. Of all sciences, astronomy appeals most to the imagination. What is rational in "Eureka" mostly is a re-statement of accepted theories: otherwise the treatise is vague and nebulous,—a light dimmed by its own vapor. The work is curiously saturated with our modern Pantheism; and although in many portions it

"*Eureka: a Prose Poem,*" 1848.

shows the author's weariness, yet it was a notable production for a layman venturing within the precincts of the savant. The poetic instinct hits upon truths which the science of the future confirms; but as often, perhaps, it glorifies some error sprung from a too ardent generalization. Poe's inexactness was shown in frequent slips,—sometimes made unconsciously, sometimes in reliance upon the dullness of his rivals to save him from detection. He was on the alert for other people's errors; for his own facts, were he now alive, he could not call so lightly upon his imagination. Even our younger authors, here and abroad, now are so well equipped that their learning seems to handicap their winged steeds. Poe had, above all, the gift of poetic induction. He would have divined the nature of an unknown world from a specimen of its flora, a fragment of its art. He felt himself something more than a bookman. He was a creator of the beautiful, and hence the conscious struggle of his spirit for the

A layman's imaginative venture. Cf. "Victorian Poets": pp. 19, 20.

Poetic induction.

sustenance it craved. Even when he was most in error, he labored as an artist, and it is idle criticism that judges him upon any other ground.

Accept him, then, whether as poet or romancer, as a pioneer of the art feeling in American literature. So far as he was devoted to art for art's sake, it was for her sake as the exponent of beauty. No man ever lived in whom the passion for loveliness more plainly governed the emotions and convictions. His service of the beautiful was idolatry, and he would have kneeled with Heine at the feet of Our Lady of Milo, and believed that she yearned to help him. This consecration to absolute beauty made him abhor the mixture of sentimentalism, metaphysics, and morals, in its presentation. It was a foregone conclusion that neither Longfellow, Emerson, Lowell, nor Hawthorne should wholly satisfy him. The question of "moral" tendency concerned him not in the least. He did not feel with Keats that "Beauty is

Poe's absolute love of beauty.

truth, truth beauty," and that a divine perfection may be reached by either road. This deficiency narrowed his range both as a poet and as a critic. His sense of justice was a sense of the fitness of things, and—strange to say—when he put it aside he forgot that he was doing an unseemly thing. Otherwise, he represents, or was one of the first to lead, a rebellion against formalism, commonplace, the spirit of the bourgeois. In this movement Whitman is his counter-type at the pole opposite from that of art; and hence they justly are picked out from the rest of us and associated in foreign minds. Taste was Poe's supreme faculty. Beauty, to him, was a definite and logical reality, and he would have scouted Véron's claim that it has no fixed objective laws, and exists only in the nature of the observer. Although the brakes of art were on his imagination, his taste was not wholly pure; he vacillated between the classic forms and those allied with color, splendor, Oriental decoration; between his love for

His protest against didacticism.

Taste.

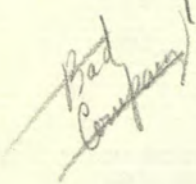
the antique and his impressions of the mystical and grotesque. But he was almost without confraternity. An artist in an unartistic period, he had to grope his way, to contend with stupidity and coarseness. Again, his imagination, gloating upon the possibilities of taste, violated its simplicity. Poe longed for the lamp of Aladdin, for the riches of the Gnomes. Had unbounded wealth been his, he would have outvied Beckford, Landor, Dumas, in barbaric extravagance of architecture. His efforts to apply the laws of the beautiful to imaginary decoration, architecture, landscape, are very fascinating as seen in "The Philosophy of Furniture," "Landscape Gardening," and "Landor's Cottage." "The Domain of Arnheim" is a marvelous dream of an earthly paradise, and the close is a piece of word-painting as effective as the language contains. Regarding this sensitive artist, this original poet, it seems indeed a tragedy that a man so ideal in either realm, so unfit for contact with ugliness,

Isolation.

Decorative feeling.

A tragedy.

dulness, brutality, should have come to eat husks with the swine, to be misused by their human counterparts, and to die the death of a drunkard, in the refuge which society offers to the most forlorn and hopeless of its castaways.



VII

A singular and pathetic career.

Seeking our illustrations of the poetic life, we find no career of more touching and peculiar interest than that of Poe. It is said that disaster followed him even after death, in the vicious memoir which Griswold prefixed to his collected works; and doubtless the poet should have had for his biographer a man of kind and healthy discernment, like Kennedy, his townsman and generous friend. Yet Poe showed tact in choosing Griswold, and builded better than he knew. He could select no more indefatigable bookwright to bring together his scattered writings, and he counted upon Death's paying all debts.

Griswold's memoir.

In this Poe was mistaken. For once Griswold wrote as he thought and felt, and his

memoir, however spiteful and unchivalrous, was more sincere than many of the sycophantic sketches in the bulky volumes of his "Poets and Poetry." Malice made him eloquent, and an off-hand obituary notice of the poet was the most nervous piece of work that ever came from his pen. It was heartless, and, in some respects, inaccurate. It brought so much wrath upon him that he became vindictive, and followed it up with a memoir, which, as an exhibition of the ignoble nature of its author, scarcely has a parallel. Did this in the end affect Poe's fame injuriously? Far otherwise; it moved a host of writers, beginning with Willis and Graham, to recall his habit of life, and reveal the good side of it. Some have gone as far in eulogy as Griswold went toward the opposite extreme. It seemed a cruel irony of fate that Poe's own biographer should plant thorns upon his grave, but he also planted laurels. He paid an unstinted tribute to the poet's genius, and this was the only concession which Poe himself

Effect upon Poe's fame.

would care to demand. With sterner irony, Time brings in his revenges! In a familiar edition of the poet's works, for which Griswold laid the groundwork, the memoir by Ingram is devoted largely to correcting the errors of the Doctor's long-since excluded sketch, and to exposing every act of malice against Poe which Griswold committed, either before or after his foeman's death.

Poe's habits and temperaments.

After years of censure and defence, and in the light of his own writings, the poet's character is not "beyond all conjecture." Here was a man of letters who fulfilled the traditions of a past century in this western world and modern time; one over-possessed and hampered by the very temperament that made him a poet—and this, too, when he thought himself deliberate and calculating. His head was superbly developed, his brain-power too great for its resources of supply and control. The testimony of some who knew his home-life is that he was tender and lovable. Graham and

Willis aver that he was patient and regular in work, and scrupulous to return a just amount of labor for value received. But many who knew and befriended him have spoken, more in sorrow than in anger, of his treachery and thanklessness, of his injustice to himself, and of the degrading excesses which plunged him into depths from which it grew more and more difficult to lift him.

Love of the ideal a restraint upon sensuality.

Nevertheless, Poe was not a man of immoral habits. I assert that scholars, writers, and artists, in spite of a tradition to the contrary, are less given, as a class, to forbidden pleasures than business-men and idle men of the world. Study and a love of the ideal protect them against the sensuality by which too many dull the zest of their appetites. Poe was no exception to the rule. He was not a libertine. Woman was to him the impersonation of celestial beauty, her influence soothed and elevated him, and in her presence he was gentle, winning, and subdued. There is not an

Chastity of Poe's writings.

unchaste suggestion in the whole course of his writings,—a remarkable fact, in view of his acquaintance with the various schools of French literature. His works are almost too spiritual. Not of the earth, earthy, their personages meet with the rapture and co-absorption of disembodied souls. His verse and prose express devotion to Beauty in her most ethereal guise, and he justly might cry out with Shelley:—

"I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
To thee and thine; have I not kept the vow?"

Not a scoffer nor an habitual drunkard.

Nor was he undevotional. His sense of the sublime and mystical filled him with thoughts of other worlds and existences than ours; if there is pride, there is reverence, in his bold imaginings. He felt a spark of the divine fire within him, and the pride of his intellectual disdain was, like the Titan's, a not inglorious sin. Finally, Poe was not an habitual drunkard. He had woful fits of drunkenness, varying in frequency, and sometimes of degradation; for a single glass

made him the easy prey of any coarse and pitiless hands into which he might fall. He was a man inebriate when sober, his brain surging with emotion, and a stimulant that only served to steady common men bewildered him. As with women, the least contamination was to him debasement. His mature years were a battle with inherited taint, and there were long periods in which he was the victor. This taint had been increased by drugging in infancy, and by the convivial usages of his guardian's household. Bearing in mind, also, the lack of self-control inherent in Celtic and Southern natures, I think he made a plucky fight. The duty of self-support was not one to which he had been trained, and was more than he could bear. Imagine Shelley, who made his paper boats of bank-notes, Byron and Landor, who had their old estates, forced to write by the column for their weekly board. "Poverty has this disease: through want it teaches a man evil." More, it limits the range of his

His hereditary taint.

Effects of poverty. Cf. "Victorian Poets": p. 81.

possibilities. Doudan has said, with truth and feeling, that he who is without security for the morrow can neither meditate upon nor accomplish a lasting work. The delicate fancies of certain writers are not always at quick command, and the public is loath to wait and pay for quality. Poe, more than once, fell into disgrace by not being able to meet his literary engagements on time. His most absurd and outrageous articles, such as the one put forth after his Boston lecture, were the bluster of a man who strove to hide a sense of humiliation and failure. Doubtless, he secretly invoked the gods in his own behalf. He knew, like Chénier going to his death, that it was a pity — he was worth saving. Generous efforts, in truth, were made to save him, by strong and tender friends, but these were quite in vain. He carried a death-warrant within him. Well might he feel that a spell was on him, and in one tale and another try to make the world — which he affected to despise — comprehend its

fatality, and bespeak the sympathetic verdict of the future upon his defeat and doom.

His sensitive temperament.

It is just that well-balanced persons should rebuke the failings of genius. But let such an one imagine himself with a painfully sensitive organization, — "all touch, all eye, all ear"; with appetites almost resistless; with a frame in which health and success breed a dangerous rapture, disease and sorrow a fatal despair. Surmount all this with a powerful intelligence that does not so much rule the structure as it menaces it, and threatens to shake it asunder. Let him conceive himself as adrift, from the first, among adverse surroundings, now combating his environment, now struggling to adjust himself to it. He, too, might find his judgment a broken reed; his passions might get the upper hand; his perplexities bring him to shamelessness and ruin. It was thus the poet's curse came upon him, and the wings of his Psyche were sorrowfully trailed in

The priceless rarity of genius.

the dust. I have said to friends as they sneered at the ill-managed life of one whose special genius perhaps could not exist but in union with certain infirmities, that instead of recounting these, and deriding them, they should hedge him round with their protection. We can find more than one man of sense among a thousand, but how rarely a poet with such a gift! When he has gone his music will linger, and be precious to those who never have heard, like ourselves, the sweet bells jangled.

Lack of self-poise.

Making every allowance, Poe was terribly blamable. We all are misunderstood, and all condemned to toil. The sprites have their task-work, and cannot always be dancing in the moonlight. At times, we are told, they have to consort with what is ugly, and even take on its guise. Unhappily, Poe was the reverse of one who "fortune's buffets and rewards has ta'en with equal thanks." He stood good fortune more poorly than bad; any emotion would upset him, and his worst falls were after

successes, or with success just in sight. His devotion to beauty was eagerly selfish. He had a heart, and in youth was loyal to those he loved. In this respect he differed from the hero of "A Strange Story," born without affection or soul. But his dream was that of "The Palace of Art" — a lordly pleasure-house, where taste and love should have their fill, regardless of the outer world. It has been well said, that if not immoral, he was unmoral. With him an end justified the means, and he had no conception of the law and limitations of liberty, no practical sense of right or wrong. At the most, he ignored such matters as things irrelevant. Now it is not essential that one should have a creed; he may relegate theologies to the regions of the unknowable; but he must be just in order to fear not, and humane that he may be loved; he must be faithful to some moral standard of his own, otherwise his house, however beautiful and lordly, is founded in the sand.

Not immoral, but unmoral.

Is genius the product of neurotic disorder?

The question always will recur, whether, if Poe had been able to govern his life aright, he would not also have been conventional and tame, and so much the less a poet. Were it not for his excesses and neurotic crises, should we have had the peculiar quality of his art and the works it has left us? I cannot here discuss the theory that his genius was a frenzy, and that poetry is the product of abnormal nerve-vibrations. The claim, after all, is a scientific statement of the belief that great wits are sure to madness near allied. An examination of it involves the whole ground of fate, free will, and moral responsibility. I think that Poe was bounden for his acts. He never failed to resent infringements upon his own manor; and, however poor his self-control, it was not often with that the cord of self passed trembling out of sight. Possibly his most exquisite, as they were his most poetic, moments, were at those times when he seemed very wretched, and avowed himself oppressed by a sense of doom. He

loved his share of pain, and was an instance of the fact that man is the one being that takes keen delight in the tragedy of its own existence, and for whom

"Joy is deepest when it springs from woe."

Wandering among the graves of those he had cherished, invoking the spectral midnight skies, believing himself the Orestes of his race — in all this he was fulfilling his nature, deriving the supremest sensations, feeding on the plants of night from which such as he obtain their sustenance or go famished. They who do not perceive this never will comprehend the mysteries of art and song, of the heart from whose recesses these must be evoked. They err who commiserate Poe for such experiences. My own pity for him is of another kind; it is that which we ever must feel for one in whom the rarest possibilities were blighted by an inherent *lack of will.* In his sensitiveness to impressions like the foregoing, he had at once the mood and material for far greater results than he

Secret of Poe's disasters.

achieved. A violin cracks none the sooner for being played in a minor key. His instrument broke for want of a firm and even hand to use it — a virile, devoted master to prolong the strain.

Poe's demand for his present wish was always strong, yet it was the caprice of a child, and not the determination that stays and conquers. He was no more of an egoist than was Goethe; but self-absorption is the edged tool that maims a wavering hand. His will, in the primary sense, was weak from the beginning. It became more and more reduced by those habits which, of all the defences of a noble mind, attack this stronghold first. It was not able to preserve for him the sanity of true genius, and his product, therefore, was so much the less complete.

No real strength of will.

> "O well for him whose will is strong!
> He suffers, but he will not suffer long."

Poe suffered, in bitter truth, and the end came not through triumph, but in death. His fame is not what it might have been,

we say; yet it is greater than he — dying with a sense of incompleteness — probably expected it to be, and more than he could have asked. In spite, then, of the most reckless career, the work a man really accomplishes — both for what it is in itself and for what it reveals of the author's gift — in the end will be valued exactly at its worth. Does the poet, the artist, demand some promise that it also may be made to tell during our working life, and even that life be lengthened till the world shall learn to honor it? Let him recall the grave, exalted words which Poe took at hazard for his "Ligeia," and stayed not to dwell upon their spiritual meaning: "Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his own feeble will."

Fame waits on worth and work.