

# Edgar Allan Poe



THE "Virginia Edition" of the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe has appeared, and will be a joy to the lovers of this unique American poet. It is in seventeen small and daintily bound volumes, inclosed in a case, and illustrated with various portraits of the poet, his wife, and his relatives and friends. It contains, besides the complete works of Poe in prose and poetry, newspaper letters and private correspondence, and many more or less interesting documents never before



The Hulling Portrait.

printed. There is a biography, an autobiographical sketch, and an appreciative essay on "Poe's Place in American Literature," by Hamilton Wright Mabie, besides bibliography and index. In a word, it is a most complete little set of books.

It is hardly exact to compare Poe to either Keats or Shelley, although the comparison is almost inevitable. He had, perhaps, more in common with Keats in his love of pure sound and melody, and the almost sensuous imagery of some of his poems, but neither English writer has approached him in fiction, and even Hawthorne, his contemporary in the world of weird imagination, does not rival him in his own peculiar field. The weird tales of Hawthorne are apart, impersonal, and remote; they do not affect us personally; but in "The Gold Bug," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and others of Poe's gruesome fancies, the reader seems to be himself taking part in the scene which affects his imagination. The fact is that Poe was a figure alone and to some extent epoch-making, in American literature. He was the first to depart from the models of the older world, and strike out a form of his own, which was neither grotesque, crude, nor feeble, but of an exquisite, if fragmentary, perfection. He was the man who caught glimpses of a world of thought into which some poet of the New World, in a future age, will enter in full possession.

The genius of Poe is so separated from that of the Massachusetts school of poets, the only other literary group of the age, that he is almost never even mentioned in connection with them. For this reason, and also because he wrote little of a really popular character, his name has not been any such household word as that of Longfellow or Whittier. Although not a Virginian by birth or ancestry, his associations were almost all with the old South during the formative period of his life; he is often claimed as a Virginian poet, and his poetry has many of the characteristics of the literary thought of that section of the country, and much in common with that of its later representative, Sidney Lanier. While the irregularity of Lanier's metrical style was probably due



Illustration from "Hans Pfaal."

in part to the fact that he was a musician before he was a poet, it is also due, in all probability, to a certain spontaneity of impulse which has caused the poets of the South, and later those of the Middle West, to cut loose from the older models of verse and adopt a form as irregular, and, at its best, as charming, as the song of a bird. The daring freedom of form exhibited in Poe's "The Bells," which is one of the most admirable examples of onomatopoeia in the language, following absolutely the musical thought of the poet, has its later counterpart in Lanier's "Symphony," although Lanier's mind was wholly without the somber melancholy which

shadowed that of Poe. Henry Timmerman was another Southern poet who used the irregular meter in his nature poems and political songs, apparently for its superior musical effect and freedom from the hindrances of a set form of verse.

In fact, perhaps the great charm, as well as the strongest characteristic of the work of Poe is that it is not laborious or finished. Whatever in it is good is the result of irresistible impulse, not of long care and polishing. Not even in poems of such smooth and regular meter as "The Raven" is there evidence of careful work, for the simplicity of the meter would insure the ease of writing in it after the first few stanzas. In other poems of more complicated form effects have been secured by repetition, not consciously, perhaps—Poe was no trickster in words—but from the instinctive feeling that it was better to repeat the line than to spoil either sound or sense. With a formal meter like that of the sonnet, Poe could have done little. He would have been hampered, vexed, and uneasy. His genius demanded freedom of form, of language, of imagination, of conditions; and much of the imperfection of his work arose from his inability to secure an environment where he might work without daily care and harassment. With an independent income, a position which would have brought him friends, but not overburdening duties, and congenial society, Poe might have written the greatest poems in American literature. As it was, he has left us fragments of genius, and helped to lay the foundations of American literary thought, and whether he himself would have thought so or not, these are worthy achievements. It is extremely doubtful if Poe would have enjoyed the fact that he has been followed by more or less crude singers of the South and Middle West, who felt the charm of his music and the weirdness of his thought, which they could not imitate. But, nevertheless, they have kept the path which he blazed from being lost or overgrown, and some day, perhaps, some young genius will recognize the irregular meter, the perfection of sound, the spontaneity of feeling, the daring imagination, as characteristics of true American poetry, and will do the things of which Poe only dreamed. Even now one poet—Lanier—has brought one kind of verse to perfection, working along Poe's lines, and these lines have also been followed by James Whitcomb Riley in the Middle West, and by Edwin Markham in California. Poe is the dean of them all, and of the greater genius yet to come. One wonders whether Marlowe was not proud of Shakespeare. But it is a paradox that the work of which a man is not proud is often that which is most valuable to the world.



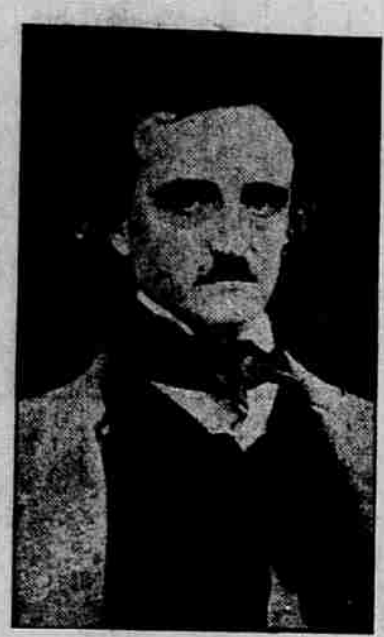
Virginia, Wife of Edgar Allan Poe.

At any rate, there is to be a Poe revival during the present season, and this new edition of the poet's works is early on the ground. It is appreciatively edited, and the new matter which it contains cannot fail to be interesting. There are passages in Mr. Mabie's essay on Poe which have almost a ring of prophecy. One of them is as follows: "One fact about our literature has not received adequate attention—the fact that it had no childhood. In its beginning it was the record of a people who had long passed the age of play and dreams, and were given over to pressing and exacting work. We are a young nation, but an old people, and our books, as distinguished from English books, are the products of a mature people in a new world. The world in which books are written has much to do with their quality, their themes, and their form; but the substance of the books of power is the deposit of experience in the hearts and minds of a race. In American literature we have a fresh field and an old race; we have new conditions, and an experience which antedates them. We were educated in the Old World, and a man carries his education with him. He cannot escape it, and would lose incalculably if he could.

"The kind of originality which inheres in a new race and runs into novel forms we do not and shall not possess; the kind of originality which issues out of the direct and hand-to-hand dealing with nature and life we may hope to develop on the scale of the Greeks or the English. A great literature must be waited for, and while we are waiting it is wise to be hopeful of the future; for expectation is often a kind of prophecy, and to believe in the possibility of doing the best things in the best way is itself a kind of preparation. To say that liter-

ature in this country, to the close of this century, is the product of an old race is not to charge it with lack of first-hand insight and force, but to explain some of its characteristics." Again, he says: "To the men who were young between 1830 and 1840, there was something in the air which broke up the deeps of feeling and set free the morbid imagination. For the first time in the New

World it became easy and natural for men to sing. Hitherto the imagination had been invoked to give wings and fire to high arguments for the rights of men; now the imagination began to speak, by virtue of its own inward impulse, of the things of its own life. In religion, in the social consciousness, in public life, there were stirrings of conscience which revealed a deeper life of the spirit among a new people. The age of provincialism, of submission to the judgment and acceptance of the taste of older and more cultivated communities, was coming to an end. . . .



From a Daguerreotype.

"Poe stood alone among his contemporaries by reason of the fact that, while his imagination was fertilized by the movement of the time, his work was not, in theme or sympathy, representative of the forces behind it. The group of gifted men, with whom he had for the most part only casual connections, reflected the age behind them, or the time in which they lived; Poe shared with them the creative impulse without sharing the specific interests and devotions of the period. He was primarily and distinctively the artist of his time, the man who cared for his art, not for what he could say through it, but for what it had to say through him. Emerson, Lowell, Holmes, Whittier, Bryant, Irving, and, in certain aspects of his genius, Hawthorne, might have been predicted; reading our early history in the light of our later development, their coming seems to have been foreordained by the conditions of life on the new continent; and, later, Whitman and Lanier stand for and are bound up in the fortunes of the New World, and its new order of political and social life. Poe alone, among men of his eminence, could not have been foreseen.

"This fact suggests his limitations, but it also brings into clear view the unique individuality of his genius and the originality of his work. His contemporaries are explicable; Poe is inexplicable. He remains the most sharply defined personality in our literary history. His verse and his imaginative prose stand out in bold relief against a background which neither suggests nor interprets them. One may go further, and affirm that both verse and prose have a place by themselves in the literature of the world." But after all, Mr. Mabie touches the secret of Poe's charm when he says: "Among the elements which go to the making of the true work of art, the demonic holds a first place. It is the essential and peculiar quality of gen-

erary writers who were less idealistic. It was not an age of commercialism. Curiously enough, this crept into our literature after the great struggle which brought out the best and the worst of national characteristics. Perhaps it was that the ante-bellum literary spirit was too vigorous to permit such a taint without detection; perhaps the wave of French influence which swept over the country had something to do with it; but, at any rate, the soul of the earlier American school was clean and unbridled. The same was true of many of the Victorian writers in England, where, probably, the influence of the Queen had swayed popular taste, and where, moreover, the violent reaction from the common morals of the Georges had led to a prejudice in favor of clean living, which naturally led to other such bourgeois virtues as conscientiousness and earnestness.



Illustration from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

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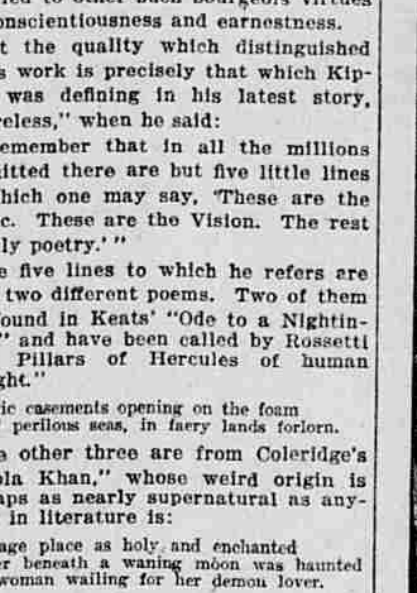


Illustration from "Words With a Mummy."

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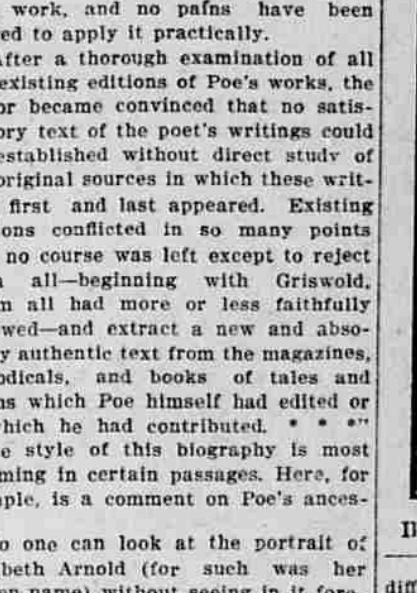


Illustration from "The Daguerotype."

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Zolnay's Bust of Poe.

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