

## RECOLLECTIONS OF EDGAR ALLEN POE.

*By Howard Paul.*

ONE of the earliest recollections of the writer's boyhood was of Edgar Allen Poe. He was on the staff of a literary weekly journal published in Philadelphia, called *The Saturday Museum*, which was owned and edited by my uncle, Thomas Cottrell Clarke.



EDGAR ALLEN POE.

Poe supplied the book reviews and occasional essays, and I often heard my uncle, who was an amiable man, expostulate with Poe on his needless severity in reviewing. His favorite expression was "I have scalped him!"—referring to the author under examination—and the critic protested that there were few books, especially by American writers, in those days, that merited praise. "Besides," Poe would say, "feeble puffing is not my forte. It will do these fellows good to hear the truth, and stimulate them

to worthier efforts. American literature, at present, is too diffuse and elementary. Most of our books are vulgar, invertebrate imitations of the English and French." And he dipped his pen in gall and proceeded calmly with his rasping analysis.

Poe in one particular was singularly conscientious. He really read the works he was called on to review. He did not follow the quaint dictum of Douglas Jerrold about cutting the leaves of a book, smelling the paper knife and then knocking off a notice.

He was a voracious reader, and possessed an exhaustive knowledge of French, Italian, and Spanish literature. He would quote entire passages from Tasso and Dante, Byron and Shelley, and he seemed to have the Koran at his fingers' ends.

Apropos of the Mohammedan Bible, my uncle once quoted a passage therefrom, "And the angel Israfael, whose heart strings are a lute, and who is the most musical of all of God's creatures," with the suggestion that the idea would make a telling poem. Poe reflected for a moment and agreed that it would.

"I should like it for the paper that goes to press this afternoon," urged my uncle.

"All right, I am in the mood. The fever is on me. You shall have fifty lines in less than two hours. Give me pen, ink and paper."

Poe retired into the editorial sanctum, and in less than an hour produced the little poem which he called "Israfael," beginning—

In Heaven a spirit doth dwell  
Whose heart strings are a lute ;  
None sing so wildly well  
As the angel Israfael,  
And the giddy stars (so legends tell).  
Ceasing their hymns, attend the spell  
Of his voice, all mute.

I fancy this lyric appears in his collected works; and though he wrote many finer and more sustained poems, there was the touch of the artist about it; and fifty lines in sixty minutes is pretty good going when one bestrides Pegasus. My uncle told me that, when he was "i' the vein," Poe worked with amazing rapidity. On other occasions he would spend days over his "copy."

Considering that he was himself a poet, it seems singular that Poe in his reviews was so hard on the young poets of his time. One of the satirists wrote of him :

Iambic Poe! of tyro bards the terror,  
Ego is he—the world his pocket mirror!

He handled the young men of his day in pitiless fashion, and of course made many enemies. He entertained a profound respect for Longfellow, and predicted that the late James Russell Lowell, who at that time had written little beyond fugitive pieces, would rise to distinction.

Poe admired Bulwer, and one day in a discussion with one of his friends he remarked that "Bulwer was rarely lucid and seldom profound. His intellect is comprehensive rather than penetrative, but his taste is exquisite." He went on to say that "he had the keenest appreciation of the beautiful and the true, and that his works were by no means as immoral as some would have it appear."

"Ernest Maltravers" was just then being extensively read and discussed, and I assume that Poe's remarks pointed to this particular romance.

It was a positive privilege to hear Poe talk. I have known times when at a dinner party, warmed with wine, and in a genial, glowing mood, he would pour out torrents of learning, and say hundreds of Rochefoucauld-like things apropos of literature and art, which, had they found their way into print, would have delighted cultivated society. It is a pity there was not in his audience a Boswell to take them down. Some of his utterances reminded one of the worldly wise sayings of Tacitus and Seneca.

One of his intimates was Captain Mayne Reid, and when these two

forgathered, as they frequently did, at my uncle's table, they would exchange opinions and argue in the most brilliant manner, the rest of the guests simply enacting the rôles of eager listeners. Mayne Reid was a fluent, inexhaustible *raconteur*, and shone to advantage when relating his adventures of travel. Poe was at his best when critical, and in giving the results of his metaphysical reflections. He regarded criticism as a science requiring elaborate study, which he proclaimed the most analytical of all mental operations.

"What a crowd of accomplishments not easily seen by the superficial belong to the character of a good critic," he would earnestly protest, and then he would quote Bolingbroke, Dr. Johnson, La Bruyère and Southey in support of his theory.

Poe's particular *bête noir* at that time was Samuel Warren the novelist. I heard him say at one of these monthly dinners that Warren's "Ten Thousand a Year" was written in slipshod English, and that the whole tone of the story was in the last degree tedious, mawkish, and inflated.

"But it was heralded with a flourish of trumpets," pleaded Mayne Reid, who had stood up for Warren.

"No doubt, but they were penny ones," was Poe's crushing retort.

One night Bulwer Lytton was on the *tapis*. Poe had just risen from reading "Zanoni," and though, as I have said, he admired the English novelist in many respects, this Rosicrucian romance did not quite capture his fancy.

Mayne Reid, who had read the book, pronounced it "a Titanic conflict between the intellect and the heart."

"It should have been a poem, not a—what do you call it, Reid?"

"A novel, certainly."

"It might have been put forth as a romance, a mystery, or the Lord knows what," continued Poe, "and by a man, too, who sets up to be the High Priest of the Synagogue. A novel in the true acceptance of the name is a picture of real life. The

plot may be involved, but it must not transcend probability. All the agencies introduced must belong to real life. Such were 'Gil Blas' and 'Tom Jones,' two of the best novels ever written, to my thinking. Whether the title was properly applied in the inception is not the question. Usage and common sense have affixed a definite meaning to the word. When authors cease to paint real life they cease to be novelists. The tales may be good of their kind, but they are no more novels than a sirloin is a mutton chop, or than Bulwer is the artist he pretends to be. Judged by this standard 'Zanoni' is not a novel. There are pictures of real life in it, but to paint society *as it is* was only collateral to the chief aim of the work."

In those days Mayne Reid had not won his spurs as a romantic writer. Beyond a few short stories he had published nothing of importance, so he listened with profound attention to the words of the critic.

"You must own, with all his merits," pursued Poe, "that Bulwer is often abominably bombastic, strains for effect, goes in for fine writing. His allegories are as abundant as Sancho Panza's proverbs or the ailments of a *malade imaginaire*. Through every line of 'Zanoni' the author looks out, eager, like Snug the joiner, to tell you he is there."

Reid was no match for his friend in these critical discussions, and Poe, right or wrong, generally silenced his opponent, who, perhaps to maintain peace, affected to agree.

"Now, Reid, give us one of your Mexican adventures," Poe would say, when he had worried his antagonist enough, "and keep as near the truth as you can."

Poe was of the opinion that Mayne Reid had an exuberantly inventive imagination when he talked of his own personal exploits, and I heard him assure my uncle, one evening, that Reid was "a colossal but most picturesque liar. He fibs on a surprising scale," he added, "but with the finish of an artist, and that's why I listen to him attentively."

I remember years after that the elder Alexandre Dumas, in speaking of Mayne Reid, uttered almost the same words. Alexandre was surely a capable judge of exaggeration, as all readers of the pages of the old pagan know full well. Dumas invented many stories about himself, and repeated them so often that he at last believed the incidents had really occurred. Leon Gozlan, who was one of his closest friends and fellow workers, assured me that he and Dumas one night, over a cutlet and a bottle of Burgundy, invented in hot haste a short tale for his paper, *Le Mousquetaire*. Two years after, the old romancer told Gozlan the identical story as a personal experience, quite forgetting that Gozlan had himself contrived the outline of what plot it contained.

Mayne Reid was tarred with the same brush. I heard him relate with circumstantial detail that he had "just been out West fighting Indians," when I happened to know that he had been boarding quietly at a farm house in New Jersey, where he retired to recruit his health, and to work at a story called "The Beautiful Creole; a Romance of the Crescent City," which was published in a Philadelphia periodical.

Poe had a strong fancy for autography, and thought that an analogy generally existed between a man's character and his chirography. Next to beholding in the flesh a distinguished man of letters he desired to see his portrait, and next to his portrait, his autograph. He said that in the latter there was something which seemed to bring out the individual in his true idiosyncrasy—in his character as a scribe. He collected autographs of nearly every literary man, artist, dramatist and actor in the United States, and in a magazine of the time of which I write he published a most amusing series of rapid sketches on the subject, accompanied by facsimiles of the autographs of noted men of the day.

I can only remember what he said of the chirography of Washington

Irving and Longfellow. Of the former he said there was little about it to indicate the genius of the writer. Of Longfellow's manuscript, on the other hand, the critic had an excellent opinion. He said it plainly indicated the force, vigor, and glowing richness of the poet's style—the delicate and unfailing finish of his compositions. Poe thought one of the main beauties of Longfellow's poetry was that of proportion, and its freedom from extraneous embellishment. His signature, like his verse, was simple and proportionate.

Poe's analytic mind disclosed itself in his explorations of secret writing. He spent days in examining examples of cryptography, which he maintained was invented by the Spartans. He roundly asserted that human ingenuity could not concoct a cipher which human ingenuity could not unravel. He was also of the opinion that the study of cryptographical solutions might with propriety be introduced into training schools and colleges as a means of giving tone to the most important of the powers of the mind.

He once addressed a note to several newspapers containing the suggestion that any one might send him a letter in cipher, the key phrase to be either in French, Italian, Spanish, German, Latin, or Greek, and he pledged himself to furnish a solution of the riddle. Curiously enough this challenge elicited but a single response. A most formidable jumble it looked when it arrived, the key phrase being partly in English, partly in Latin. Poe's ingenuity soon solved the matter, and he translated the confused, odd looking hotchpotch into plain intelligible English.

So interested was the great critic in cryptography that on one occasion he made a pilgrimage to the library of Harvard University to consult treatises by Trithemius, Vignere, and Niceron on his favorite theme.

In personal appearance Poe was a slight, small boned, delicate looking man, with a well developed head, which, at a glance, seemed out of

proportion to his slender body. His features were regular, his complexion pale; his nose was Grecian and well molded, his eyes large and luminous, and when excited, peculiarly vivid and penetrating. He dressed with neatness, and there was a suggestion of hauteur in his manner towards strangers. He was impatient of restraint or contradiction, and when his Southern blood was up, as the saying goes, he could be cuttingly rude and bitterly sarcastic.

In one respect he was his own terrible enemy, and when Bacchus got him in his toils, which occurred all too often, his habits were irregular and deplorable. There is no doubt that he shortened his life by the mad orgies which his physique could not sustain.

At one period he projected a magazine to be called *The Stylus*. Funds were forthcoming to bring out the first number, but Poe went off on what he playfully called a "frolic" to Washington, squandered the money in revelry, and the magazine never appeared. Towards the end of his career he wrote only at fitful intervals, and fell into poverty and neglect.

It is not generally known that Poe occasionally lectured in public, and he recited his own poems, "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee," with winning and admirable effect. His voice, though not especially melodious, possessed a peculiar charm, guided as it was by a dramatic instinct, and, of course, by rare intelligence. In his recital of "The Raven" there were weird, fantastic touches that remind me of some of Henry Irving's tones in his rendition of the part of *Mephistopheles*. It is not every author that can give dramatic effect to his own creations.

Poe was a playgoer and admired, within certain limitations, the drama. At one time he sketched out the scenario of a tragedy to be written in collaboration with Dr. Bird, the author of "Nick of the Woods," but the scheme never got beyond outlines and much talk. Poe held Junius Brutus Booth, the father of



Edwin Booth, in high estimation, and an anecdote—not a particularly creditable one—is told of the twain. One night, after the play was over, they adjourned to a convivial club and sat late over their cups. On returning home in the small hours of the morning they ran against a belated little Jew, and accidentally jostled him. The Hebrew turned on them, objurgated them copiously, and manifested a disposition to show fight. Thereupon Booth and Poe seized him and suspended him by his breeches on the spikes of a convenient area railing, where they left him kicking and howling while they pursued their tortuous way in gladsome mood. Poe frequently related with gusto his adventure of “spiking the Jew.”

Despite his serious, scholarly temperament, Poe occasionally permitted his pen to take a humorous flight, as all will agree who have read his sketch, “Never Bet Your Head,” which appeared in *Graham's Magazine* for September, 1841. It is a pity that this amusing story is not included in some of the editions of his collected works.

I will conclude these rambling recollections of an illustrious *litterateur* by an extract from a letter which Poe addressed to John Howard

Payne, the author of “Home, Sweet Home.” This letter has never before appeared in print:

Bocalini, in his “Advertisements from Parnassus,” tells us that a critic once presented Apollo with a severe censure upon an excellent poem. The god asked him for the beauties of the work. He replied that he only troubled himself about the errors. Apollo presented him with a sack of unwinnowed wheat, and bade him pick out all the chaff for his pains. Now, I have not fully made up my mind that the god was in the right. I am not sure that the limit of critical duty is not very generally misapprehended. Excellence may be considered an axiom, or a proposition which becomes self evident, just in proportion to the clearness or the precision with which it is put. If it fairly exists in this sense it requires no farther elucidation. It is not excellence if it need to be demonstrated as such. To point out too particularly the beauties of a work is to admit, tacitly, that these beauties are not wholly admirable. Regarding, then, excellence as that which is capable of self manifestation, it but remains for the critic to show when, where, and how it fails in becoming manifest; and, in this showing, it will be the fault of the book itself, if what of beauty it contains be not at least placed in the fairest light. In a word, I assume, notwithstanding a vast deal of cant upon this topic, that in pointing out frankly the errors of a work. I do nearly all that is critically necessary in displaying its merits. In teaching what perfection *is*, how, in fact, shall we more rationally proceed than in specifying what it is *not*?