

POE'S COSMOPOLITAN FAME

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

AMID the chorus of eulogy which arose around Poe when the centenary of his birth was celebrated, here and elsewhere, we cannot help recalling the echo of many a harsh and bitter judgment. Half a century ago the honored chief of the New England group of authors contemptuously dismissed Poe as "the jingle-man." A quarter of a century ago one of the subtlest of American critics casually referred to Poe's "very valueless verses." And only a few months ago a master of acute literary analysis called Poe a conjurer in literature, only a charlatan.

Over against the adverse opinions of these American writers we may set the estimate of not a few foreigners. Tennyson, for one, held Poe highest among American poets, waving aside certain others more popular with us as mere pygmies compared with him, and declaring him "not unworthy to stand beside Catullus, the most melodious of the Latins, and Heine, the most tuneful of the Germans." And the general opinion of the French is not lower than that of the British poet-laureate, if we may judge by the fact that in a recent list of the hundred foremost figures in literature, Poe is the only American. There is wisdom in the assertion made three centuries ago by an earlier poet-laureate, Ben Jonson, when he said that "Men, and almost all sorts of creatures, have their reputation by distance; rivers, the farther they run and the more from their spring, the broader they are, and greater."

Notwithstanding the natural desire of a young nation to make the most of all its native authors, Poe has his reputation by distance. And this raises a series of interesting questions. Why is it that Poe's position as a poet and as a writer of fiction is still in dispute in his own country? Why is it that American critics have been far less cordial than foreign critics? Why is it that Poe's cosmopolitan fame is more

wide-spread and more solidly established than his repute here in the land of his birth? Why is it that we Americans seem to hold Poe inferior to Longfellow as a poet and inferior to Hawthorne as a teller of tales, in spite of the fact that he has won acceptance among the French and the Italians and the Spaniards who have never cared to make acquaintance with Longfellow and with Hawthorne? These are questions easier to put than to answer; and yet, if satisfactory responses can be found, they will help to explain Poe's true position in American literature.

If the significance of an author is to be measured by the extent of the attention he has aroused in other writers, there is no denying the high importance of Poe, since no American man of letters has been the subject of so many biographies and the object of so many critical essays, both at home and abroad. This is not a final test of his value, of course, since much of this unusual interest is due to his ill-starred career and to his enigmatic character. He is the only representative here in America of the type to which Villon and Musset belong,—the poets of curious quality who make shipwreck of their lives from weakness of will,—who hear opportunity knock at the portal and who hold the door ajar for a moment only to shut it at last in the face of the gift-bearing visitor. Poe's personality was not engaging and he was a friendless man, although in his need many men befriended him. Unfortunate disaster followed fast and followed faster this child of grief, the disinherited heir of many a weakness, born out of time and out of place. His life began in somber gloom and it flickered out in ultimate tragedy. To his contemporaries of three-score years ago, in the thick of the struggles political and economic which were to culminate in the Civil War, Poe must have seemed almost a disembodied spirit,

living apart in lonely pride. An exotic with no roots in the soil of his nativity, he belonged to another clime than ours in those distant days when the delicacies of pure art could hope for little recognition here. He had to breathe an alien atmosphere; and in all our literary annals, otherwise so prosperous, his is the saddest figure, as it is the strangest.

His fate extorted pity, but it could not compel liking; and this lack of the warmer regard that went out freely to others of our writers may have been due in part to the disquieting reports of his occasional lapses from the social standards which a provincial community feels called upon to support severely. One thing, at least, is admitted by his sharpest censors,—that whatever Poe's failings as a man, he was not lazy or shirking as an artist; he toiled unceasingly and he did his work in manful fashion, never relaxing into sloth. With the energy of our race, he had also its abundant productivity; and in the scant seventeen years of his literary labors, he brought forth the ample prose and verse which is now collected in ten solid tomes. This we can count to his credit now, even if his immediate associates were excusable for not perceiving it before his scattered writings had been set in order.

As we turn the pages of these volumes we can spy out another reason why he failed to win the cordial liking of his contemporaries. He was no hypocrite; and if he fell from grace now and again, he did not extenuate this by lip-service to the social laws he had broken. He never preached; and there is no moral purpose, explicit or implicit, to be discovered in his poetry or in his fiction. Indeed, he did not hide a haughty and scornful disdain for the overt didacticism which then dominated American letters. He eschewed ethics and strove to remain outside all morals. He was never immoral, for he was no more sensual than he was sensuous. Questions of conduct did not tempt him to deal with them; and he stood aloof when they were discussed. He was as solitary in literature as he was in life. The men of his own time in his own country had troubles of their own and struggles of their own; but Poe took his place afar off as though he had no interest in these issues. In his lilting lyrics there is no call to arms; and his prose does not

nerve a man for the battle of life. Poe is not a large genius; and his appeal, intense as it may be to those who respond to it, is indisputably narrow. His lyre was all his own, but it had only a few chords.

His endowment is as rare as it is restricted; and his individuality is pitifully isolated. Perhaps this is one reason why he has been so contemptuously brushed aside by not a few American critics, otherwise broad-minded. His genius, unquestionable as it may be, does not touch mankind at many points. What he has to say to us, he can utter with direct mastery; but he has very little to communicate. Not only is he without the deeper conception of truth and of duty which has sustained and inspired the greater poets in their greatest works, but he has absolutely nothing to offer to all those who look to literature for a rich expression of the realities of life. His spirit dwelt apart, as though it inhabited an ivory tower, hung with purple curtains and topped with banners, yellow, glorious, golden. His soul was remote; and it was alien to this workaday world, peopled with hurrying citizens, athirst for the actual. He had no message for mankind, but only melody for youthful melancholy. His poems and his brief tales lack not only moral purpose, but also spiritual meaning. He was the least myriad-minded of literary artists. He had no sweep of intellectual outlook, no interest in the world of ideas, as he had no interest in the world of affairs. He had no relish for the every-day aspects of life, the very stuff out of which vital literature is made. He turned away from the sturdy creators of character, caring little for Shakspeare and less for Molière; indeed, he even boasted that he would give fifty Molières for one De La Mothe Fouqué.

Mr. Andrew Lang has suggested one reason why Poe failed to be taken to the hearts of the American people, when he declared that Poe lacked as a man what his poetry also lacked,—humanity. His poetry is not a criticism of life; indeed, it is often a criticism of death, as the same critic has suggested. Death and disease of the body and of the mind, these were the themes he chose. He did not find his material in mankind in its normal moods. Rather did he seek out the abnormal, the morbid, the singular, the unprecedented. He is not fairly to be termed inhuman,

but he was not quite human in the limitation of his sympathies. It is not the ordinary he enjoyed, but the extraordinary. He did not tell men about themselves; he brought from afar reports of startling happenings and of marvelous mysteries in haunted mansions long ago. Moreover he was devoid of humor, that searching interpreter of humanity; he had no mirth, no laughter to mingle with his tears.

These are Poe's limitations, frankly stated; and they are sufficient to account fully for his failure to impress widely and deeply the American public, which is healthy-minded and enamoured of the realities of life. Yet Poe is what he is, in spite of these limitations—and perhaps in part because of them, since they compelled him to concentrate his energy on what was within his reach. No author is without his limitations, even if Poe's are stricter than those of any other writer of equal rank. Within his contracted range he reigns by divine right, a monarch whose rule there is none to dispute. His domain may be only an island; but it is all his own, and what he has therein accomplished is unique. If art means a mastery of form and proportion, of harmony and color, of design and execution, then Poe is assuredly a true artist with few rivals in dexterity of achievement. If an artist is one who knows what he wants to do and who knows also how to do it with unfailing certainty, then Poe's position is undeniable. He stands forward as one of the most skilful artists of his language and of his century.

Moreover, his art was not accidental or intuitive, as Hawthorne's seems to have been; it was deliberate and conscious. He had a body of literary doctrine, due largely, of course, to his own idiosyncrasies; and these principles he applied continuously. He held that poetry was its own excuse for being, and that it was the rhythmical creation of beauty. He looked on literature as an art only, as an art and little more, demanding a form as perfect as possible even if its content lacked universality. He had ideas about literary art, even if he had few about anything else; and he delighted in his skilful application of these ideas. Art for art's sake is a principle that is likely at times to relax into artifice for the sake of artifice; and this is a defect from which Poe is not wholly

free. But when he is at his best he hides his tools; and he works his magic by intricate spells of which he alone has the secret.

Even those who are deaf to the witchery of his rimes and to the sorcery of his rhythms, who find no fascination in the pallid glances and in the ashen draperies of his spectral muse, ought to be able to admire the architecture of his larger lyrics, the solidity of the framework, and the assured ease with which the manifold effects are controlled and coördinated. By complicated devices he is sometimes able to attain a final simplicity. Lowell said of one of Poe's poems, that "it seems simple, like a Greek column, because of its perfection." He had at his command all the resources of metrical technic, pause and cadence, assonance and alliteration, refrain and repetend; and these he weaved at will, subtly varying them to bring us strains of ethereal melody, ravishing our ears even if rarely nourishing our minds.

The finest of his lyrics throb with a single and sustained emotion voicing itself in song. His poetry may not be of the highest order; it is not fairly to be compared with that of Spenser or of Hugo, still less with that of mightier masters like Dante and Milton; it has none of their austere inevitability; but it is true poetry of its kind nevertheless. Even if it is not so broad in its appeal, so deep and so poignant, it is to be classed with the poetry of Coleridge and of Heine and of Musset. It may have been but a scanty plot that Poe was able to cultivate along the steep slopes of twin-peaked Parnassus, but he grew in this little garden flowers of his own, unknown before and soon transplanted into many a distant soil,—*fleurs du mal*, some of them, no doubt, sensitive plants, and marvelous orchids. All can grow the flower now, for all have got the seed. The note of liquid melody that he had caught from Coleridge and also in some measure from Shelley, he transmitted in his turn to others. Rossetti acknowledged his influence; and Swinburne has felt it even more avowedly. Baudelaire was his disciple, and Mallarmé also. He is one link of a long chain, and not the least significant.

His prose-tales may display the lesser invention rather than the larger imagination; and he may not be happy always in his choice of theme, sometimes attaining

only to horror, without achieving terror, and racking our nerves when he had hoped to grip our hearts. But even when his subject is not really worthy of his effort, he reveals the same mastery of method, the same power of bathing his narrative in its appropriate atmosphere. He is able always to bestow on a short-story the severity of form and the harmony of color, the unity of effect, the totality, as he termed it himself, which Hawthorne and Gautier conquered only occasionally and almost accidentally. With resourceful ingenuity Poe centers the reader's attention on a single overpowering situation; and thus he is compelled to simplify character and to present it in monochrome outline, subdued to the chosen tone of this special tale. What Lowell called the "serene and somber beauty" of the "Fall of the House of Usher" must be ascribed largely to its logical construction, to its irresistible march along the dusky path the author has prescribed. It is due also not a little to the adroit exclusion of every suggestion, and even of every word, not in keeping with the end to be attained at last.

There is in the best of his brief tales a constructive skill, a command of design, and a gift of decoration, rare in any literature and almost unknown in English, which is ever unduly negligent of form. And no one need wonder that Poe's short-stories wandered swiftly out of our language into French and Italian and Spanish, into German and Scandinavian and Bohemian, into strange tongues where no other American author, except Fenimore Cooper, had ever before penetrated. His weird psychologic studies have influenced later writers as unlike as Maupassant and Richépin, Fitzjames O'Brien, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Rudyard Kipling. His tales of a mystery solved at last by observation and deduction have been imitated by Dumas and Sardou, by Gaboriau and Boigobey, by Wilkie Collins and Conan Doyle. And Sherlock Holmes, the only fictitious character to win international recognition in the final years of the nineteenth century, is the reincarnation of a figure first projected by Poe.

Perhaps we may be better able now to answer the questions which seemed puzzling a little earlier. Here in America Longfellow was taken to our hearts because he brought to us the tradition of the

Old World our forefathers had left long ago, because he was friendly and consoling, because he was the poet of the domestic affections, as Emerson was the poet of national aspirations. We failed to perceive that Poe was less the heir of the ages than Longfellow, that he was more original and more individual, that he had a stranger and perhaps a stronger note of his own, destined to echo in distant lands. In like manner we cherished Hawthorne, because he had a power of sustained narrative, a gift of creating character, a piercing insight into hidden crannies of the human conscience; and we were not annoyed that his "Puritan preoccupation with the moral forces invalidates his purely esthetic appeal"—to borrow an apt phrase from Mr. Brownell. Here again we have failed to see that Poe had a keener intellect and that he had a firmer mastery of narrative.

We have dumbly recoiled from the result of Poe's withdrawal beyond the realm of morality. Matthew Arnold insisted that conduct was three fourths of life; and Poe's refusal to deal with conduct contracted his vision even if it did not vitiate it. Morality is not to be sought deliberately, but it can be excluded only at the peril of the author himself. Poe's writings have not the richness of substance which comes from an understanding of ethical problems; and this is due partly to his temperament and partly to his resentment against the uninspired didacticism prevalent in American literature half a century ago. Poe did not deal with conduct and he had therefore only a very restricted section of life to present,—a section far too restricted for us Americans who look to literature for an explanation of the problems of existence. What Poe had to offer us was what we sorely needed then—and what we did not know that we needed—art. He gave us an invaluable example of technical dexterity; and he called attention to the abiding value of perfection of form, adroitness of structure, harmony of detail, and certainty of execution.

Poe's appeal to his own people was limited by his aloofness, by his inability to create character, by his lack of humor,—in a word, by his lack of humanity. And the special qualities of art by which he excelled were precisely what his own people were then least prepared to appreciate.

For a full recognition of these artistic excellences, the Latins are always apter than the Teutons; and the Latins were early in admiration of Poe's skill. But there is this also to be said, that perhaps not a little of the welcome which Poe has won among the French and the Italians and the Spaniards has been due to those very aspects of his genius which have most prevented his winning a warmer recognition in his own country. He was devoid of humor, but humor is rarely exportable; it is likely to be local in its flavor, and only imperfectly can it be transplanted to another language. He lacked humanity; but a narrative of the deeds of dim figures can be transferred easily to distant climes, since these shadows are as much at home in another hemisphere as in ours. He chose often to deal with the abnormal and the morbid, which are less relished by the direct Americans than by the more sophisticated Europeans. He eschewed overt morality and projected ethereal emanations dwelling in an immaterial world; and this would be more pleasing to the inheritors of the Greek preference for beauty above duty. He shrank from the themes which moved the men of his own country in his own time; and foreigners may have found him easier of approach because he seemed to them unrelated to his native land, unrepresentative of its strenuous aggressiveness.

And now the time has come at last when his own people can afford to learn from foreign nations how to value Poe aright. His deficiencies need not be hidden or diminished,—there is no profit in denying them,—but his individual achievement is equally indisputable. He performed a most useful service to American letters in setting a standard of faithful workmanship and of consummate craftsmanship. His position in the American branch of English literature may not be the highest of all, but it is lofty enough; and it is secure.

"THE BRAVEST DEED I EVER KNEW"

I. THE WOMEN AND THE GIANT-POWDER

BY JAMES BARNES

UNDER this title THE CENTURY will print from time to time brief accounts of specially courageous actions which may have come under the notice of the narrator. Some of these have already been engaged, and we shall be glad to consider the publication of any others that may be submitted by our readers.—THE EDITOR.

IT was in 1886, on the construction work of the Council Grove, Osage City & Ottawa Railroad, not far from the little town of Quenemo, Kansas, that the bravest deed I ever saw took place, and it was done by women, while a hundred men looked on, and not one of them moved a hand.

The whole occurrence was so surrounded by dramatic features that every little detail is impressed upon my mind to-day. I was a level-man on the engineering staff of the road and was located on the Quenemo subdivision. One day after breakfast I had started down the dump, carrying the level over my shoulder when I passed by a little house partly built of sod and wood, with, back of it, a corral, some sheep pens, and a small stable. In-

side the corral were six large haystacks. The house was used by an Irish sub-contractor as a boarding-house, where his wife, her aged mother, and a widowed sister prepared three meals a day for a hundred men.

As I walked along I was overtaken by the contractor, whose name, if I recollect rightly, was Brady. He was driving an open wagon, filled with newly sharpened drills that he was taking down to the rock cutting. Pulling up his horses, he offered me a ride. I climbed into the seat beside him, holding the level across my knees. The jangling of the drills as the wagon bumped over the uneven prairie prevented us from indulging in much conversation, but I made out that one of his children was ill and that he had sent into town for