

THE POET OF THE SHADOWS

By PADRAIC COLUM

"**N**OR was I indeed ignorant of the flowers and the vine, but the hemlock and the cypress overshadowed me night and day." So Poe wrote, giving a likely image of his life. *Israfel** is the first biography we have had that gives the effect that is in this sentence—the effect of a life shadowed by disaster, but never abject, and with occasions of realization and of glory.

Hervey Allen is a poet, and so has been able to understand what Poe had to do in order to realize himself as a poet. Fortunately circumstanced in that he knows the southern states and that, not being a Southerner, he has had no illusions as to what the South, in the thirties and forties, was able to do for a poet, he has conducted a real investigation into the life and times of Poe. His book is a moving and well-proportioned narrative, and it is also a sound piece of biography.

He makes us a contemporary of Poe's; we enter the strange America of the middle period with its total lack of any point of focus, with its domination by a merchant class, with its financial instability, its beginnings of rapid transportation and expansion toward the west. And becoming a contemporary in that inchoate America we understand why the publication of a book could bring Poe no financial returns, why Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York became successive places of sojourn for a man who wanted to make a living by doing editorial work, and why Edgar Allan Poe should have appeared to his contemporaries as a type to be discountenanced—as a Virginia "bad man."

The part of his life spent in Richmond with the Allans, the part extending from his early childhood until past his adolescence, formed Edgar Allan Poe. It gave him his southern bias, his attitude of being a "Virginian." It is only now, when all the papers have become accessible, that it is possible to make us realize what dramatic passages there were in it. John Allan, the Scotch merchant, held out against his wife's formally adopting the child of the strolling players. Edgar's position in the household, for that reason, was insecure. That was the beginning of the poet's misfortunes. After he had entered the University of Virginia, the break came that turned Poe away forever from a home, from the kindness of a foster-mother and the expectation of fortune and position. Edgar Poe was not to blame for the turn events took then; he had gambled a little at the university—that was all that could be brought against him. It would

be easy to claim that John Allan's stinginess brought about the disastrous break. But the new biographer, with an access to an extraordinarily complete set of documents and with a real power of interpreting them, does not see it in a light as simple as that. He has this to say:

Like all important and long-enduring human relationships, it was very, very complex. John Allan and Edgar Poe loved each other. In the inmost realm of the spirit they were father and son. Time and fate had made them so. That is the only satisfactory explanation of the enormous agitation behind their correspondence; the reason why, in spite of all, they could never quite break it off. Even on the last West Point letter, the older man endorses "He may do or act as he pleases though I would have saved him but on his own terms . . ." In the last analysis it was John Allan's sensuousness and obstinacy that ruined the two finest associations of his remarkable life. It killed Frances Allan and it blasted Poe. The strange, Scotch parsimony was only a concomitant.

What actually came between Edgar and John Allan, now that the papers are all available, can clearly be surmised. John Allan had illegitimate children.

Frances Allan seems to have become aware of her husband's unfaithfulness, and the knowledge which was then or afterwards shared by Edgar, brought the two together in an aggrieved compact that was inevitably against, and probably extremely exasperating to, John Allan.

And so the young poet, brought up under prosperous circumstances and with definite prospects, was cast upon the world. From that period until the day of his death his life was a tale of misfortune. Just as he was making a name for himself, just as he was regaining some health and sanity, came the terrible disaster of his life, when the girl-wife who was his cousin burst a blood-vessel and added hemorrhages to her tuberculosis, forcing a care and a terror upon him that took away the vitality and the sanity he possessed. When she died, he was only thirty-eight, but his creative life was over. Ill-luck followed him beyond the grave: his literary executor was a man who had a long-concealed hatred for Poe, and who took the grand opportunity given him by the task of editing and writing an introduction to his works to damn the poet as a drunkard and a man who did not pay his debts.

In spite of bad luck, semi-starvation, anxieties of every kind, Poe did his work and did it extensively. The reproach that the children of the market-place are so apt to bring against men of letters—the reproach of disinclination for work—cannot be made against Edgar Allan Poe. When we look through the body of work which he turned out in his eighteen years of productive life—poems, stories, essays—and when

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we consider that his kind of work involved study, intellectual construction, constant revision, we know that there could have been few people in the United States at the time more industrious than he. Poe's work meant not only labor—it meant heroism. For a man to have produced such work as he produced, in spite of illness, disappointment, lack of appreciation, great sorrow, and the debility brought on by indulgence in opium, required an effort as heroic as an air-flight from New York to Paris. And there were no prizes to be received, no crowds to cheer, when the effort had been accomplished.

To read this life of Poe—the only life of him that has been written with any humanity, with any sympathy—is to be constantly and deeply moved. Here is a man of surpassing gifts who only asks of the world that it give him an opportunity of doing his work in some other state than that of abject misery; here is his wife, a simple and pitiable girl; here is his aunt and mother-in-law, a woman who stands for everything that the world approves of—work, orderliness, devotedness to her family—and yet these three people have to know hunger, and cold, and uncheered illness. Poe and his wife Virginia might have perished of want had it not been for the exertions of Mrs. Clemm. She worked for them, begged for them, took turnips out of fields on moonlit nights so that there might be something in the pot for them. No one who reads certain poignant passages that are in this biography can ever forget Mrs. Clemm. We first meet her in Baltimore at a time when another destitute person is being added to her household in the person of Edgar Poe. His bed-ridden grandmother, his tubercular brother Henry and the little girl Virginia made up the household, and all were taken care of by Mrs. Clemm:

Fortunately for a great poet, Mrs. Clemm had a knack, a technique, indeed, which she soon acquired, of cutting under all intelligence and stabbing straight for the heart. She belonged in one part of her nature to that great, dark-garmented sisterhood that her own black widow's weeds recalled, those who are forever flitting from door to door reminding the conventionally prosperous that poverty, bastardy, and suffering are mysteriously present facts and that alms are in order. Much as, from innate respectability, she hated her rôle, Mrs. Clemm played it surpassingly well. She was in this respect a little half-sister of Saint Francis. Her lips, her gestures and her own sacrifices pleaded for starving old age, childhood and irresponsible genius. Only editors could resist, and even they did so with tears. On several occasions Mrs. Clemm actually borrowed money from anthropologists. Charity records no more signal triumph.

Poe composed his prose poem about the universe, *Eureka*, walking up and down with Mrs. Clemm, his arm around her, hers around him.

He would stop every few minutes and explain his ideas to me, and ask if I understood them. [This was during the woeful period that followed Virginia's death.] I

always sat up with him when he was writing, and gave him a cup of hot coffee every hour or two.

Israfil is sound biography for the sound reason that it projects a character to whom we can refer *Ligeia* and *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *William Wilson* and *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Raven* and *Annabel Lee*, *Eureka* and *The Philosophy of Composition*. When we read this book we understand the depths that these creations came out of: behind all the ingenuity of the stories there is an experience, a moral element, that leaves them superior to stories by the accomplished writers who have used Poe's methods and his material. *William Wilson*, for all its bombast and melodrama, has a significance that *Robert Louis Stevenson* and *Oscar Wilde* were unable to give their stories of a divided life, and it has that significance because Poe really knew what it was to have a divided life. He writes agonizingly about haunted men because he himself had had reason to feel haunted. He can make us feel the terror of the descent into the maelstrom, because he knew what it was to have the waters of a whirlpool close over him. He writes powerfully about torments because he himself was a tormented man. He projects finely the character of a reasoner, because he had to prove to himself that he was rational and not getting near to madness. Finally, and this is very clearly shown by *Hervey Allen*, the stories of terrible revenges of which the greatest is *The Cask of Amontillado*, are dramatizations of his notion of his own shrewdness in dealing with a persecuting world. His method can never be acquired by way of study: many of his stories owe their genesis to opium; and the method itself, as *Hervey Allen* says, is simply the rationalization of a dream.

And so he can report with extraordinary literalness and lucidity the last swoon of the nerves as in the passage describing the sensations of one who has just been sentenced to death by the Inquisition:

But then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fibre in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless spectres, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no help.

His mentality was a rare synthesis; he had elements in him that corresponded with the indefiniteness of music and the exactitude of mathematics.

He had a deep knowledge of the mental movements connected with fear:

There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition . . . served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis.

So he writes in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and the statement reads like a pronouncement from

a chair of psychology. In Arthur Gordon Pym he has an observation on the effect of a ghostly apparition:

Usually, in cases of similar nature, there is left in the mind of the spectator some glimmering of a doubt as to the reality of the vision before his eyes; a degree of hope, however feeble, that he is the victim of chicanery, and that the apparition is not actually a visitant from the old world of shadows. It is not too much to say that such remnants of doubt have been at the bottom of almost every such visitation, and that the appalling horror which has sometimes been brought about is to be attributed, even in cases most in point, and where most suffering has been experienced, more to a kind of anticipative horror, lest the apparition might possibly be real, than to any unwavering belief in its reality.

This passage gives us a clue to one of the holds that Poe has upon us. He is, first of all, a teller of ghost stories. The ordinary ghost story has become crude and mechanical for us about the time we begin to read his stories: then we come upon William Wilson, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *Ligeia*—superfine ghost stories. And it is not in these stories only—stories where there is definitely a supernatural element—that we get the chill and thrill of ghostliness: we get it out of stories of his that have no supernatural element, stories like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Pit and the Pendulum*. The thrill of the ghost story comes from the fact that we are brought shudderingly to the verge of a discovery. There is the “anticipative horror” that Poe has spoken of. When, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Dupin leads the teller of the tale to see the killer of Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter is not a human being; and

when, in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the teller of the tale finds that

My chin rested upon the floor of my prison, but my lips, and the upper portion of my head, although seemingly at less elevation than the chin, touched nothing,

we feel something of the “anticipative horror” that belongs to a ghost story. And of course we feel it even more fully when, in *Ligeia*, the teller of the story sees the shadow of an invisible presence upon the carpet, and when, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, we hear the sounds in the vault below that lead up to the return of the Lady Madeline.

After we have known Poe as a teller of ghost stories and detective stories we come to know him as the poet of *The Bells* and *The Raven*—poems that excite us by their technical mastery, by the exuberance of their rhymes and chimes. Later on we come to see that poems like *Helen*, *Annabel Lee*, *The Haunted Palace* and *The Conquering Worm* are unique creations. About the same time we begin to understand the implications of *The Philosophy of Composition*, and to recognize the daring imagination and the astonishing knowledge that has been lavished upon the impossible theme of *Eureka*. Poe, then, is not only a story-teller like Robert Louis Stevenson; he is not only a poet such as Robert Bridges. He is one of those men whose ideas have modified a conception of the arts and have created new tendencies in the intellectual life of a part of the human race. Our minds have really been altered by the fact that this man, in spite of endless difficulties, put into rhythm and into words a significant part of his own inner life.

STOWAWAYS

By MARY FAGIN

WHO are they? Where do they come from and why? We have heard of them, we have read about them—a dreaded lot, the scum of the earth, yet romantic figures for all that. Nomads of the sea, people without a country, unwanted in any port. And then one chance to see them, to meet them, to know them.

At Ellis Island they arrive cumbrously accompanied, as though they were under age limit, or of royal blood, or ridiculously rich. But those who accompany them are not of the usual kind—mild, subservient and fawning. Instead they are big, calloused men, specially chosen because they know how to swing a club. Stowaways are dangerous creatures and must be carefully guarded.

Their very appearance is dangerous. Uncombed, unwashed, ragged, very ragged, at times even barefooted, they come following one another in a row, in pairs if hand-cuffed. They come wobbling between two guards who, frequently, overshadow them. For

the guards are always bigger and even more dangerous-looking than the stowaways. A wise precaution, for who can tell what a string of such creatures are apt to do at an impulse? Irrespective of race and nationality they almost always appear black, coal-black. They come from the stoke-hold where they have fed the steamer and, as compensation, have been fed in return, and then, upon landing, given over to the immigration authorities.

Ellis Island has no use for stowaways. “They are all alike, good for nothing,” runs the saying about them. Yet are they all alike? For each one looks different and each one has a different story to tell when called upon to testify before the Board of Special Inquiry.

“Don’t ask me why!” a stowaway says to the Board. Yet in his answers to various questions he tells his story. A disconnected story. His eyes are wide open, clear and frank; he speaks with firm and fearless lips and there is no guilt in his voice. Yes, he has always