"The Vision of Esther."*

THE scene of this highly dramatic poem is near Babylon, the time at first modern, but with the appearance of the shade of Queen Esther it is set back to a remote antiquity. The Persian reformers Ali Mohammed and Gourred-oul-Ayn, are on their way to meet the ghost of Nimrod. Three other persons are with them. After various discourse, the five, being in some danger, take refuge in the ruins of the palace of Esther, the queen of Nimrod. There suddenly a gate opens in the side of a large mound, and in a hall well-lighted and warm, wrapped in odors that appeal to all the senses, is discovered the form of the queen, tricked out into something like her ancient beauty.

> Along her crow's-wing hair
> A red-gold pair
> Of serpents lay in garlands, and the arches
> Of sandalled feet were bright with gems accurst—
> Gems for which slaves had perished on long marches
> By day and night across the Land of Thirst.

Once in a hundred years she is permitted to see the light, and to tell her story. Now she forces the five to listen while she unfolds the history of her fall—her early maiden beauty and pureness, her love for the King's prime-minister, Ahram, the intrigues in the palace and the revolts in the city when Nimrod is absent. Three times she tempts Ahram to usurp the throne, and take her as Queen. But Ahram, who represents the lofty virtues of the good counsellor and great general, with something of the vision of prophecy, is steadfast in his allegiance to the King. The Queen in despair twice turns against him, but is drawn back by a passionate, sensuous longing. Anne, the Vestal, whose dark skin prefigures Africa, and whose simple faith and purity inspire in the mind of the upright Ahram a high reverence, incurs thereby the jealous displeasure of the Queen, and is once nearly destroyed in consequence. Belshamas, the King's son, rebels, in his father's absence, and is for a time in possession of half the city. Pressed to the wall by Ahram, he half wins over the Queen, who in a fit of jealousy and despair entraps Ahram; but the latter escapes, and she again returns to her duties as Queen. The King returns, for the second time made insane. His chief eunuch plots against him; the priests take sides, and there are wars without and within. But Babylon is doomed. The King is mad, the Queen unfaithful, dissension spreading, when Ahram, seeing the futility of further effort, withdraws with his following, and marches over the Arabian desert to the coast of Phœnicia, where he has purchased ships, and proposes to embark for the shores of the Hesperides. Nimrod, still mad, is carried in pursuit; and Esther, angry and fond by turns, leads the forces of Babylon on to the catastrophe.

This is the substance of the story, but the relation is inwoven with many episodes, religious feuds, and priestly wrangles. The whole is told with much dramatic energy, and holds the attention well throughout. There are in it scenes of great vigor and almost lurid fire, while many bits of description are brilliant in effect. The tale aims to be allegorical, but the dramatic interest soon burns away what allegory there is, and we find at the end no very definite results in that direction. If it were not set down in the Preface, we should at

* The Vision of Esther. By Charles de Kay. $1.50. New York: Appleton.

the most discover only the march of the Aryan people across the Plateau of Iran, their rest in Babylon, and their more vigorous onward movement after a fruitless attempt to revivify the worn-out capital of the East. The whole interest centres in the beautiful Queen, maddened by love, and in her futile efforts to entangle the faithful, high-minded Prime-Minister.

While the work shows abundant evidence of a real and powerful imagination, the latter is untrained, uncurbed. It works unevenly, and too often needs the restraining hand of taste and judgment. These are qualities which may come with time. The smaller errors in words and expressions, the frequent lapses from the lofty to the commonplace, the unequal artistic workmanship, the somewhat confused intermingling of Greek with Eastern customs—these may easily be the result of inexperience. Time and the bung left out are sure to bring on fermentation in good wine. The ear, however, finds harsh, and good taste resents such expressions as 'I egg you on to shamefulness,' 'priestess to boot,' when it is a queen who speaks; '*Dompted* by her own whelp,' 'at the evening's *umbring*,' 'wherefore *complected* swarthier,' 'until they seem to grow *candid* like snow'—these may be good Latin, but they are strange English. 'Not one was so *heart-harded*,' 'smote the wall and *yearned* thereon his venom,' these are vivid and forceful, but doubtfully elegant. 'Generous to a blunder' is curiously modern for Queen Esther's mouth, even though she had had opportunity to pick it up in her ghostly wanderings. 'A plot is by that subtle eunuch fathered,' 'I worship you with every nerve and drop of blood my faithful veins that rinses,' 'an empress are you, and a live man's wife,' 'of casks and arms a muddle'—all these are bad. But against these we may set some really fine lines, luminous with imagination, as:

> 'A leaden grief was anchored in the eyes,
> Set in the smile that round about them wavered';

and this description of icebergs:

> 'Cliffs of clear ice, in radiant files that go
> Stalking in glittering silence down the ocean';

> 'The bats that marry on the noiseless wing
> Whirled by their heads with quick and amorous chatter,
> And seemed, in swift and risky flight, to fling
> Spots on the sky above the mound';

and many longer passages which we cannot quote—such as the hiding of the purses (p. 6), the picture of Winter descending from the northlands (p. 115), and the glaciers, two pages further on; the advance of Ahram (p. 137), the appearance of Anne (p. 192), and further on the description of the approaching storm; the vampire (p. 241), and Ahram's prayer (p. 249). In all these passages, however, the imaginative force is better than the artistic expression.