

# THE GHOST OF GRISWOLD

By George Douglas

THE ghost of Griswold is at the banquet of every new book on Edgar Allan Poe. But for "the unfaithful servant who betrayed his trust," Poeana had been much less voluminous—and perhaps more intelligent. Certainly it had been less concerned with the unpleasant irrelevancies of personal habit.

A German has said that the English do not deserve Shakespeare because they do not understand him. Another German, Hanns Ewers, has said much the same about America and Poe.

"He drank," hisses one.  
"Oh, no, he really did not drink," pipes another.

I would like to knock their heads together.

He drank—he did not drink. That is the way the Anglo-Saxons dispute about their poets.

Ewers himself has much of the wine cup in his own small volume—mostly to the effect that Poe could not have written that sort of work unless he had been that sort of man. However, it was not of such a writer as Dr. J. W. Robertson, that Ewers was thinking when he spoke with such Teutonic scorn of people too obsessed with morals to deserve great poets. The veteran San Francisco psychologist neither hisses nor pipes, is neither defamer nor apologist—he merely studies the "case" and presents his diagnosis. Unfortunately that is the word—"diagnosis". A manifestly fine analysis of a perplexing psychopathic problem is marred by lapses into the clinical manner.

But why bother to look a coroner's verdict too closely in the syntax? The verdict is the thing, and Dr. Robertson appears to have found one strictly in accordance with the facts. He comes nearer than any other to the qualifications outlined by Harrison: "Poe's case has never been scientifically diagnosed by a competent neurologist who possessed combined pathological and literary equipment and freedom from prejudice necessary to render his case intelligible to the reading world." Robertson is a competent neurologist; he has scientifically diagnosed the case and has made it intelligible to the reading world. His literary equipment leaves something to be desired, though at times he attains the force and grace and always the clearness of good literature. The denunciation of Griswold is as finely

turned as one could wish, and it is more eloquent than most other denunciations because it follows a convincing analysis of the facts and a complete exposure of the malice that inspired the infamous obituary and the scurrilous memoir.

Poe, according to the Robertson diagnosis, was not an habitual user of drugs, nor an habitual drunkard, but a dipsomaniac with no delight in drinking, no craving for drink, and rather an aversion from it between attacks. The state of his brain was such that comparatively little alcohol had a great effect upon him, and as he advanced in years his resistance became less and less. His brain was diseased. Poe himself had a very clear idea of what was the matter when he wrote:

I became insane with long periods of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God only knows how much or how long. As a matter of course my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity.

Dr. Robertson has had more than thirty years' specialization in nervous cases, and a considerable experience with literary victims. He is emphatic in denying that Poe had any form of epilepsy, and he stands in direct opposition to Baudelaire, Ewers, and others when saying: "It is not possible that any of Poe's work, whether prose or poetry, was the product of either opium or alcohol." Ewers says that Hoffman, Baudelaire and Poe were the first artists to work understandingly with intoxicants.

He [Poe] got drunk. But he got drunk purposely in order to get the drunkard's understanding, from which he later on, perhaps years later, could create new art values.

Solemn nonsense—he drank because

he could not help himself. There was no eighteenth amendment to stop him. No man ever got drunk in order to get art values, though many artists have turned their delirium to creative account. Shakespeare could never have given us either Falstaff's laughter or Clarence's dream on half of one per cent.

The peculiar nature of Poe's work was no more the result of drink than it was of education or experience. Experience was out of the question for his earlier flights of prose fancy, while his mathematical genius and his logical faculties were those of the prodigy and not a development due to education. Once out of the juvenile period Poe was not an improving but a deteriorating writer, though deterioration did not manifest itself until it could be well explained as the product of "a decaying intellect no longer under the domination of a strong and directing intelligence".

The first part of the Robertson study is devoted to the psychopathic problem; the second is mainly bibliographic, though with frequent references to the "case". In both there is a manifest desire to get at the truth and to dispense with theories and apologetics.

A book of fearless criticism, it faces the biggest reputations with the courage of a surgeon operating upon an anæsthetized patient. The knife that dissects Griswold is used only a little less freely on Dr. Moran who gave that foolishly amended testimony as to Poe's last hours. Biographer George Woodberry is operated on to prove that when writing of Poe he was entirely without the sympathetic gland. Lauvrière, the great French authority, is shown to have been an amateur psychologist with few of the qualifications necessary for the diag-

nosis he attempted. All things considered, the pages on Lauvrière are the severest. The distinguished French writer had a better literary equipment than has Dr. Robertson, but he went beyond his depth when he went beyond purely literary analysis.

It may seem strange that such a work as this should have been produced on the Pacific coast, but it is no stranger than the fact that some of the most notable books about Poe were written across the Atlantic. Dr. Robertson has a splendid collection of Poeana and he has had a lifetime of specialist training in mental cases. He has assembled a wealth of new material and has given a new meaning to many more or less familiar facts. The volume does not restore Poe's reputation to one for sobriety, but it brings his moral character a little nearer to normalcy, and substitutes intelligent sympathy for unintelligent criticism. In brief, it brings out the truth long since reached by common sense: that Poe could not possibly have produced so much work of such excellent quality if he had been the chronic inebriate described by Griswold and others who have taken his lead. Habitual drunkenness produces nothing worth while, but great work has been done in the intervals of sanity granted to some dipsomaniacs.

"The English are now permitted to appreciate Edgar Allan Poe, since it is officially attested that he was a moral being." In a new edition Ewers may amend that sneer to read: "Americans are now permitted to appreciate Edgar Allan Poe since the Eighteenth Commandment has made it too expensive to follow his example."

---

Edgar A. Poe, A Study. By John W. Robertson, M. D. Printed in San Francisco by Bruce Brough.