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Miscellaneous.

EDGAR A. POE AS A PROPHET OF SCIENCE.

The discovery by Professor Ramsay in a terrestrial mineral of the gaseous element helium, hitherto believed to exist only on the Sun, and known only by its spectrum, was recently described by *The Literary Digest*. *The Lancet*, London, April 13, notes a curious passage in one of Poe's tales that seems almost to point to the possibility that its author knew of the existence of this gas. Whether he did or not, the passage is certainly worthy of quotation, and we give it with *The Lancet's* introduction and conclusion.

"In our issue of two weeks ago we announced the discovery, by Professor Ramsay, of another new gas, when, in company with argon, he obtained from the mineral cleveite, by merely acting upon it with sulfuric acid. This new constituent proved to give the spectroscopic characters of an element hitherto supposed to exist only in the Sun, to which therefore the name helium was given. Professor Ramsay has obtained a considerable quantity of this mixture, we learn, and hopes soon to be able to report upon its properties; and since helium has been regarded as much lighter even than hydrogen the determination of its actual density promises to be of unusual interest. If helium could be obtained in tolerable quantity, what an important bearing it might have in aeronautics. Thus, if it be much lighter than hydrogen, its lifting power would be much greater, and the cumbersome and clumsy dimensions of our present balloon, it is easy to see, could be reduced with very great advantage. Was this wish father to the thought, we wonder, when, more than fifty years ago, Edgar Allan Poe, in his narrative of the adventures of Hans Pfaal, referred to the use of a gas much lighter than hydrogen for inflating the balloon in which he undertook his thrilling journey. The passage referring to the preparations for the balloon voyage is so remarkable in connection with recent chemical discoveries that we reproduce it in its entirety. Thus, after referring to the purchase of numerous instruments and materials for experiments in the upper regions of the atmosphere, Hans goes on to write:

"I then took opportunities of conveying by night, to a retired situation, east of Rotterdam, five ironbound casks, to contain fifty gallons each, and one of a larger size; six tin tubes, three inches in diameter, properly shaped, and ten feet in length; a quantity of a particular metallic substance, or semi-metal, which I shall not name, and a dozen demi-johns of a very common acid. The gas to be formed from these latter materials is a gas never yet generated by any other person than myself—or at least never applied to any similar purpose. I can only venture to say here that it is a constituent of azote, so long considered irreducible, and that its density is about 37.4 times less than that of hydrogen. It is tasteless, but not odorless; burns when pure, with a greenish flame; and is instantaneously fatal to animal life. Its full secret I would make no difficulty in disclosing but that it of right belongs (as I have before hinted) to a citizen of Nantz, in France, by whom it was conditionally communicated to myself. The same individual submitted to me, without being at all aware of my intentions, a method of constructing balloons from the membrane of a certain animal, through which substance any escape of gas was nearly impossibility. I found it, however, altogether too expensive, and was not sure, upon the whole, whether cambric muslin with a coating of gum caoutchouc was not equally as good. I mention this circumstance because I think it probable that hereafter the individual in question may attempt a balloon ascension with the novel gas and material I have spoken of, and I do not wish to deprive him of the honour of a very singular invention."

"The italics, which are not ours, might well have been at the present juncture. Could it possibly have been the conception purely of a highly imaginative and poetic mind, or had Edgar Allan Poe really learned from a friendly philosopher of the existence of a gas lighter than hydrogen, and whose discoveries may not have reached us for a host of conceivable causes? Perhaps Professor Ramsay or Lord Rayleigh will explain."

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