Amy Levy.

By Miss Beth Zion Lask.

Paper read before the Jewish Historical Society of England, June 22, 1926.

It is my object, as far as is within my power, to dwell this evening on the work of a much-neglected Jewess, Amy Levy, and to pay a tribute of homage to her memory. In undertaking the writing of this paper I was actuated by the wilful neglect on the part of her co-religionists of one whose writings, for pure literary worth, have transcended those of any other English Jewess. It is the object of this paper to bring before this Society, representative of intellectual Anglo-Jewry, a writer whose merited fame has been dimmed by years of obscurity; one whose name should be prominent in the annals of Jewry, in the achievements of the daughters of Israel in this land. Anglo-Jewish history can boast but few women of genius, with the result that its lamentably sparse list of creative literary artists is praised entirely out of proportion to the value of their work. It is, therefore, the more surprising that one who has contributed six poems to the Book of Women's Verse, edited by Mr. J. C. Squire, three to The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse, and two of whose sonnets were included during her lifetime in Mrs. William Sharp's anthology, Voices of Women, the only outstanding Jewess represented in these works, should have suffered such neglect that her name is hardly known to the generation that followed her. Indeed, the extent of this neglect may be gauged from the fact that at a recent lecture on "Jewish Women Writers in England," the name of our greatest contributor to English literature was not even mentioned, while other writers, less able, less poetic, rather inclined to the prosiness that makes the early Victorian novel such a nightmare to the present generation, were praised.

If the true perspective is desirable in the study of a formative period in Anglo-Jewish history, the name of Amy Levy is not one to be ignored. Her achievements in literature, the direct bearing of her work on Jewish themes and Judaism, her impression on her contemporaries—know-
ledge of all this is necessary to the study of the Jews in England. If this task, which should before now have been the lot of more able hands than mine, has fallen to my share, I must crave the indulgence of the audience before whom I appear this evening for the first time, and say that my object is best served by letting Amy Levy plead for herself in the unfolding of this paper.

The daughter of Mrs. and the late Lewis Levy, Amy Levy was born at Clapham on November 10, 1861. She was a child of exceptional promise and early shewed an aptitude for rhyme. She began her schooling at Brighton. Her first published verse appeared in The Pelican, a short-lived quarterly devoted to the interests of women's suffrage. The first half of this poem, "Ida Grey," was in the last number of The Pelican, that of January 1875, and was to have ended in the next quarter's issue, which never saw the light of day. "Ida Grey," written at the age of thirteen years, is an effusion modelled on the ancient ballad subject of knight and lady, and has a true running metre distinctly that of Heine's "Donna Clara." Apart from its facility of rhyme and expression, surely exceptional in one so young, "Ida Grey" has little merit in either subject-matter or treatment.

This poem was followed during the next few years by others, some of which have been preserved in magazines of the period. "Run to Death," a powerfully worded, graphic description of the hounding to death of a gipsy woman and her baby by some nobles of pre-revolutionary France while they were out hunting, appeared in The Victoria Magazine for July 1879, when Amy Levy had taken up residence at Newnham College, Cambridge. It is a distinct advance on "Ida Grey." The versification of a fairy play, "The Unhappy Princess," originally written for home production, was published through the offices of a friend of the family. The treatment is passionate, the theme is more grandiose, the whole is promising of the work to follow.

In June 1880 "Mrs. Pierrepoint," a tale of a wealthy widow whose advances are spurned by the lover, a clergyman in Whitechapel, whom she had jilted in her desire for worldly wealth a year before, appeared in Temple Bar. The writing is terse and fresh, with no superfluity of words. In the August number of The Victoria Magazine for 1880 appeared the first half of "Euphemia, a Sketch," a tale important in shewing the tendency, later to be more apparent, towards revolt against
the accepted standards. Though there is no specific Jewish treatment of the characters, Euphemia, a thwarted, sensitive girl who outgrows her early histrionic talents, is the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father. Amy Levy makes this no ground for psychological treatment; she is concerned only with the disappointment that the world brings. "Don't we all come into the world with fine healthy appetites for happiness, and aren't we nearly all sent out of it unsatisfied, like hungry children going supperless to bed?"

The first collection of verse by Amy Levy appeared in 1881, a small paper-bound booklet of thirty pages, published by E. Johnson of Trinity Street, Cambridge, and entitled Xantippe, and Other Verse. "Xantippe," had appeared in the Dublin University Magazine, May 1880. The construction is powerful, the theme original: a defence of Socrates' wife and her version of her life with the philosopher. It bears the impress of the Feminist movement, the ideals of which were then agitating so many women of intellect. A note of passion surges through the poem, touches of tragic intensity, of the thwarting of youth's dreams. The treatment is strong, the versification finished—a mature production that is indeed surprising when one remembers she was yet in her teens. It is a scholarly, masterly, and humane defence of Xantippe drawn with rare sympathy. A few extracts will shew the work of the poet and the attitude of mind which later was to manifest that quality which is universally designated Weltschmerz.

"... there rose
No darker fount to mar or stain the joy
Which sprang ecstatic in my maiden breast
Than just those vague desires, those hopes and fears,
Those eager longings, strong, though undefined,
Whose very sadness makes them seem so sweet.
What cared I for the merry mockeries
Of other maidens sitting at the loom?
Or for sharp voices, bidding me return
To maiden labour? Were we not apart—
I and my high thoughts, and my golden dreams,
My soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue
That should proclaim the stately mysteries
Of this fair world, and of the holy gods?"
When at the age of seventeen Xantippe was wedded to Socrates, after the first revulsion of feeling against the ugly, swart philosopher, she dreamed,

"I, guided by his wisdom and his love,  
Led by his words, and counselled by his care,  
Should lift the shrouding veil from things which be,  
And at the flowing fountain of his soul  
Refresh my thirsting spirit."

But the marriage was

"... the incomplete, imperfect dream  
Of early summers, with their light and shade,  
Their blossom-hopes, whose fruit was never ripe."

And with the realisation of the barrenness of their spiritual union the young Xantippe laments:

"Then, as all youthful spirits are, was I  
Wholly incredulous that Nature meant  
So little, who had promised me so much."

Following this we have the graphic picture of Socrates, Plato, and the beautiful Alkibiades in Socrates' arbour on a summer's eve. Socrates discourses on Aspasia and belittles womankind, to the anger of his wife, who stands on the threshold, half-concealed by foliage. She breaks into a passionate outburst which serves to amuse Plato, with "narrow eyes and niggard mouth," and young Alkibiades,

"... with laughing lips  
And half-shut eyes, contemptuous shrugging up  
Soft, snowy shoulders, till he brought the gold  
Of flowing ringlets round about his breasts."

Socrates receives the outburst with cold contempt. After this, for Xantippe

"... hope died out;  
A huge despair was stealing on my soul,  
A sort of fierce acceptance of my fate,  
He wished a household vessel. ..."
"I spun until, methinks, I spun away
The soul from out my body, the high thoughts
From out my spirit; till at last I grew
As ye have known me."

The other verses in this small collection consisted of "Run to Death," which had appeared in *The Victoria Magazine*, and some sonnets. Two of these sonnets, shewing her peculiar fear of living and of dying, were included by Mrs. William Sharp in her anthology.

Indispensable to any study of the work of Amy Levy is the article from her pen, "James Thomson: A Minor Poet," which appeared in February numbers of the *Cambridge Review*, 1883, some months after his death and the publication of his collected verse. James Thomson is best known as the author of "The City of Dreadful Night"; he is the poet of that phase of life which in its morbid mental suffering, in its "pain inane," resultant of modern life and conditions acting adversely on a hypersensitive being, makes him cry aloud for "the pain insane."

To healthy, normal human beings such feelings are no more than passing experiences.

To Amy Levy, already conscious and resentful of that unevenness of life which helps to preserve the world's balance, James Thomson appeared as a martyr to his unhappy lot, a moody being at the mercy of his temperament, "... a passionate subjective being, with intense eyes fixed on one side of the solid polygon of truth, and realising that one side with a fervour and intensity to which the philosopher with his bird's-eye view rarely attains." Despite her keen partisanship and that sympathy of which she was conscious as existing between them, Amy Levy mourned the more that he did not rise above being "a minor poet." Common to both was "... one note, one cry, muffled sometimes, but always there; a passionate, hungry cry for life, for the things of this human, flesh and blood life; for love and praise, for more sunlight and sun's warmth." In her estimate of him she reveals the mental attitude which made appreciation and influence of James Thomson's works possible.

"The Diary of a Plain Girl," an easy romance of the plain sister who wins the handsome lover, appeared in *London Society* of September 1883.

Clearly shewing the morbid influence of Thomson is the next
story from her pen, "Socrates in the Strand," in a February number of the *Cambridge Review*, 1884. In this tale suicide is ably discussed and defended; and ends with the realistic touch: "... the newsboys were calling out the latest news with a grim emulation of horrors: 'Terrible Railway Accident,' bawled *Globe*; 'Double Murder in Mile End,' yelled *Echo." The latter headline was later employed in "The Ballade of a Special Edition," which appeared in the collection of verse, *A London Plane Tree*.

Later in the same year several holiday sketches appeared in *London Society*, written in the form of letters describing the holiday experiences of "Psyche" and "Melissa" to Blanche, a friend who has remained in town. These sketches—they may scarcely be termed tales—are light in treatment and belong to those writings of Amy Levy particularly suitable for girls' magazines; for here there is no rebelling against the wrongs of the world, no consciousness of the City of Dreadful Night so persistent in those other works written in a more serious vein. In reviewing the complete work of Amy Levy there are two clearly marked divisions: the lighter, more conventional tales and poems, obviously written to fit in with the requirements of certain periodicals, and the intenser, sad, evidently autobiographical, subject poems and tales which are of great literary worth and interest.

In 1884 a second collection of verse was published by T. Fisher Unwin, its title *A Minor Poet*. This volume included many of the earlier poems of the first, besides others that had appeared in magazines during the three years which had elapsed. The note is lyrical, while the tone of sadness is even more pronounced: the cry of protest is lifted up against the shattering of youth's illusions by the relentless march of circumstances that go to make up each individual life. It is the cry of the impotent soul.

"I'm not resigned, not patient, not school'd in
To take my starveling's portion and pretend
I'm grateful for it. I want all, all, all;
I've appetite for all. I want the best:
Love, beauty, sunlight, nameless joy of life."

"To a Dead Poet," the first poem in the volume, is written to the memory of James Thomson.
"I sat and sat, I did not stir;
They talked and talked away.
I was as mute as any stone,
I had no word to say.

They talked and talked; like to a stone
My heart grew in my breast—
I, who had never seen your face,
Perhaps I knew you best."

For strength of treatment, "Medea, a Fragment of Drama after Euripides," in the same volume, like "Xantippe" a classical theme, is remarkable. Here again there is the passionate treatment; but the action is on a larger, altogether grander, more tragic scale: Medea torn by the strength of her own passions in conflict with the circumstances that have made this drama possible. "Medea" is the misunderstanding of a nature rich in possibilities of good and love which life has worsted. Because of its fragmentary form it misses greatness.

Medea has fled the city, and at night, without the gate, soliloquises:

"How cold the air blows; how the night grows dark,
Wrapping me round in blackness. Darker too
Grows the deep night within. I cannot see;
I grope with weary hands; my hands are sore
With fruitless striving. I have fought the Fates
And am vanquished utterly. The Fates
Yield not to strife; nay, nor to many prayers."

Earlier:

"...I have poured the sap
Of all my being, my life's very life,
Before a thankless godhead; and am grown
No woman, but a monster. What avail
Charms, spells, and potions, all my hard-won arts,
My mystic workings, seeing they cannot win
One little common spark of human love?
O gods, gods, ye have cursed me in this gift!
More should ye have withheld or more have giv'n;
Have fashioned me more weak or else more strong."
It is indeed a bitter soliloquy which muses,

"One climbs the tree and grasps
A handful of dead leaves; another walks,
Heedless, beneath the branches, and the fruit
Falls mellow at his feet."

Further on the cry is more bitter:

"I have dash’d my heart against a rock; the blood
Is drain’d and flows no more; and all my breast
Is emptied of its tears."

In the poem "A Minor Poet," which gives its name to the collection, and shews the conscious striving of a minor writer after the greatness which he feels can never be his, comes the realisation that

"This rage is idle: what avails to curse
The nameless forces, the vast silences
That work in all things?"

March of the same year, 1884, saw an article, "The New School of American Novelists," in the Temple Bar.

The following year produced but a single contribution, that of "Eastertide in Tunbridge Wells," in the May number of London Society. This is in the form of a letter, gossipy and full of literary tit-bits, from "Melissa" to "Psyche."

Thus far there had been no treatment of Jewish subjects by Amy Levy. The year 1886, which found her touring the Continent, for she had left Cambridge, was the one that also gives us her first contribution to the Jewish press, and first publication on a Jewish theme. This was impressions of the Italian Ghettos, which appeared in the Jewish Chronicle. Though not orthodox in the accepted sense of the word, Amy Levy was deeply moved by the scenes that evoked historic memories, and the associations inseparable from such thoughts. From the Ghetto of Venice she writes, March 19, 1886:

"There are a great many Jews here to-night, evidently quite undisturbed by 'inherited memory.' A sprightly, if unhandsome, son of Shem urges us, in correct cockney, to take shares in a lottery; another, with his wife on his arm, trips gaily from booth to booth; the repressed energy, the stored exuberance of centuries is venting itself with its wonted force. We ourselves,
it is to be feared, are not very good Jews; is it by way of Judgement that the throng of tribal ghosts haunts us so persistently to-night? That white-bearded old man peering round the corner, surely it was he that Mantegna chose for the model of his famous Circumcision? . . ."

Other impressions appeared in the Jewish Chronicle of April 30 and May 28 of the same year.

In the very next number, that of June 4, "The Jew in Fiction," an article from the same pen, appeared. Bearing in mind that two years later she was to write a novel of London Jewish life which was to arouse the controversy that has resulted in her ostracism from among those who are the pride of Anglo-Jewry, it is of the deepest interest to learn what Amy Levy had to contribute to the subject she was yet to try and with such sore effects. Though the position of the Jew in fiction has since changed and advanced, most of her statements are still pertinent. She wrote:

". . . It is only in the novel, with one notable exception, that his (the Jew's) claims to consideration have been almost entirely overlooked. Rebecca of York, with her helpless love for the gentle knight, and Isaac of York, divided, like Shylock, between his ducats and his daughter, remain to-day the typical Hebrews of fiction. Dickens, as might be expected, places himself on the crudely popular side, but tries to compensate for his having affixed the label 'Jew' to one of his bad fairies by creating the good fairy Riah. Thackeray in less romantic guise has reproduced Jews as Mr. and Miss Moss of the sponging houses, and to-day Mr. Baring Gould . . . slavishly follows the old Jew-baiting traditions in his absurd portrait of Emmanuel Lazarus in 'Count Royal.'

"In Daniel Deronda, it is true, a sincere and respectful attempt was made to portray the features of modern Judaism. But which of us will not acknowledge, with a sigh, that the noble spirit which conceived Mirah, Daniel, and Ezra, was more royal than the king. It was, alas! no picture of Jewish contemporary life, that of the little group of enthusiasts, with their yearnings after the Holy Land, and dreams of a separate nation. Nor can we derive much satisfaction from the superficial sweetness of such sketches as that of Jacob Alexander Cohen and his family. As a novel treating of modern Jews, Daniel Deronda cannot be regarded as a success; although every Jew must be touched by, and feel grateful for, the spirit which breathes throughout the book; perhaps even spurred by its influence to nobler effort, and taught a lesson, sadly needed, to hold himself and his people in greater respect.

". . . There has been no serious attempt at serious treatment of the subject; at grappling in its entirety with the complex problems of Jewish
life and Jewish character. The Jew, as we know him to-day, with his curious mingling of diametrically opposed qualities; his surprising virtues, and no less surprising vices; leading his eager, intricate life; living, moving, and having his being both within and without the tribal limits; this deeply interesting product of our civilisation has been found worthy of none but the most superficial observation.

"No picture of English 19th-century life and manners can be considered complete without an adequate representation of the modern sons of Shem.

"It is in the throng of aspirants to fame that there must be sought a writer able and willing to do justice to the Jewish question in its social and psychological aspects."

Amy Levy then had given serious thought to the subject of the Jew in English fiction; and two years later her contributions to this vexed subject had corporate existence in the novel Reuben Sachs, published by Macmillan & Co. But before this novel saw the light of day many more of her writings appeared in the magazines, while her poems found ready acceptance in journals of high standing, and two more articles appeared in the Jewish Chronicle: "Jewish Humour," August 28, 1886, and "Jewish Children," by "A Maiden Aunt," November 5 of the same year. The latter article, dealing with the pride of Jewish parents in their children and the spoiling of them by too lavish affection, is whimsically humorous; the former is a serious attempt at defining that elusive, piquant, staining quality that goes to hall-mark a joke, a witticism, a phrase even, as Jewish humour. Heine is employed to personify "the very spirit of Jewish humour."

"... The poet stretched on his couch of pain; the nation whose shoulders are sore with the yoke of oppression; both can look up with rueful humorous eyes and crack their jests, as it were, in the face of Fortune. Heaven knows what would have become of them, people and poet alike, had it not been for this happy knack, or shall we say, this tough persistence in joke-making under every conceivable circumstance; this blessed power of seeing the comic side of things, when a side by no means comic was insisting so forcibly on their notice. True humour, we are told, has its roots in pathos; there is pathos, and to spare, we think, in the laughter that comes from the Paris lodging, or which surges up to us through the barred gates of the Ghetto.

"As far as we can judge we should say that only one Jew perceives to the full the humour of another; but it is a humour so fine, so peculiar, so distinct in flavour, that we believe it impossible to impart its perception to
anyone not born a Jew. The most hardened agnostic deserter from the synagogue enjoys its pungency, where the zealous alien convert to Judaism tastes nothing but a little bitterness."

Interesting as giving the then current views of intellectual Anglo-Jewry besides those of Amy Levy are the lines which follow and end the article—views which may be tolerantly borne by those members of the community who read them now—after a lapse of forty years in which their falsity has been proved.

"In these days, indeed, of slackening bonds, of growing carelessness as to long-cherished traditions; when the old order is changing, giving place to new with startling rapidity, it is, perhaps, our sense of humour as much as anything else, which keeps alive the family feeling of the Jewish race. The old words, the old customs, are disappearing, soon to be forgotten by all save the student of such matters. There is no shutting our eyes to this fact. The trappings and the suits of our humour must vanish with the rest; but that is no reason why what is essential of it should not remain to us as a heritage of the ages too precious to be lightly lost; a defence and a weapon wrought for us long ago by hands that ceased not from their labours. If we leave off saying Shibboleth let us at least employ its equivalent in the purest university English. Nor for all Aristophanes can we yield up our national freemasonry of wit; our family joke, our Jewish humour."

The logical, ruthlessly simple cutting of the racial knot which binds Jew to Jew and to the heritage of Jewish history, was not to be contemplated lightly, even if the natural sequence of events seemed to give no other alternative than the disintegration of Anglo-Jewry.

Other sketches and tales, some based on experiences of the tour abroad, appeared in the same year, 1886, mostly in London Society. As before, "Melissa" is the narrator. In "Out of the World," which appeared in the first month of the year, a sketch in letter form to "Psyche" from "Melissa," written before the Continental tour, was addressed from "The Vale of Laherne, Cornwall." It opens with a description of village life: "... nothing could have been more peaceful or rustic, but do you know what happened to me? I thought I heard a distant newsboy calling out 'Special editions and terrible catastrophes!'" This is the authentic voice of Amy Levy, intimately autobiographical, town-born and dweller, just as clearly heard in her later writings. The sketch continued:
AMY LEVY.

"Much as I admire the superior peace, simplicity, and beauty of a country life, I know that my own place is among the struggling crowd of dwellers in cities. I am like Browning's 'icy fish' in 'Caliban,' who

"'Longed to 'scape the rock stream where she lived
   And throw herself within the lukewarm brine. . . .
   Only she ever sickened, found repulse
   At the other kind of water. . . ."

The year 1887 was a barren one; but the following year was fruitful. About this time The Woman's World, edited by Oscar Wilde, found in Amy Levy a regular contributor of poems, short stories, and articles as diverse as "The Poetry of Christina Rossetti" and "Women and Club Life." The short stories in this journal are of real merit for the style of writing, beautiful in its conciseness and precision, while the themes are not confined to the "eternal triangle." In each tale there is the motive, the moral, the intense desire for the greater and higher things of life; while throughout is that despairing cry against the agonies of the soul and the dulling of the best emotions and hopes, deemed inevitable experience, that every young heart must feel—if it is to be worthy of the best and highest endeavours of which that divine spark encased in our earthly habits, the soul, is capable. Where another writer less able might have dwelt at length on one theme, enlarging the motive with conversation and description, Amy Levy succeeds simply, unaffectedly, by virtue of her very bareness in conveying in her message a feeling of unusual earnestness. In all her writings there is rare beauty of expression, urging that though life is disappointing and due reward never sure, living is heartbreaking, for justice should be universal and the commonplace of existence.

In January 1889 Amy Levy's greatest contribution to Anglo-Jewish literature appeared in the form of Reuben Sachs, a novel that took Jewry as well as the general public by surprise. Already the work of Amy Levy was known to the critics and literary journals. Her first novel, The Romance of a Shop, had made its appearance in October of the previous year, and had received some favourable notice. The tale deals with the fortunes of four sisters who, on the death of their father, decide to set up in business as photographers. The writing is light and easy; the theme does not impress itself on the
reader as convincing. It is original in conception, but otherwise the least interesting of Amy Levy's books.

It was Reuben Sachs, an immense advance on The Romance of a Shop, that came to prove Amy Levy a novelist of unusual power and grace. It will be remembered that in her article written more than two years previously she had regretted that "there had been no serious attempt at serious treatment of the subject; at grappling in its entirety with the complex problem of Jewish life and Jewish character." Amy Levy sought to grapple with it, but succeeded only in grappling with one portion of Jewry, one side of the polygon, surely the only one that she knew—that of Kensington and Bayswater Jewry, who in their own material success had ceased to care for the spiritual welfare, or even the material welfare, of their less fortunate brethren. It is matter for the deepest regret that she did not know that section of Jewry which, despite its worldly poverty, was imbued then and now with the ideals of Judaism that make every thinking Jew proud of his spiritual heritage.

Amy Levy chose to give a truthful representation of Jewish life as she knew it, and gave it with the daring that is the hallmark of the true artist bent on truth, that quality which nothing can transcend. Reuben Sachs reveals to us the attitude of mind of that section of Jewry which needed a stimulant to rouse it from its dross-bound existence. It is not a malicious representation. It is a story, historic surely in its value to the community, of that portion of Anglo-Jewry that had set up Mammon in place of the God of Israel. Amy Levy was a person of exceptional sensitiveness, possessor of an innate longing and yearning for the ideals in real life which she expressed in all her writings, be they poems, stories, or mere articles on miscellaneous subjects. She knew the Jewry of her day; she was aware, inherently, subconsciously if you will, of the qualities that had gone to make up the glorious traditions of the Jewish people. She saw the void that stretched between the real and the ideal; and her soul, like those of the Prophets before her, burned in anguished indignation. The Cambridge Review in its criticism declared that Reuben Sachs was written in vitriol. Reuben Sachs was written in something more powerful, more enduring: it was written in her own life's blood. It was a cry of protest: the people of the Prophets was
no longer the prophet of the peoples; the people of the Lord were now the devotees of Mammon.

_Reuben Sachs_ is an historic picture of the time, written with a power that grows with each successive reading, forcing its message with the strength of its rare beauty of language. She achieves with an economy of words the work of the adept, who with a few strokes presents a likeness of the sitter characteristic even to the personality. It is a story with an object: to stop the gross materialism so rife in the Jewry she knew. It was most unfavourably criticised by the community, who failed to see that the awareness of the evil which had prompted the book was cause for communal congratulation.

Limit of time forbids me to quote, and quote copiously, from this story, from those passages that indicate so clearly the mind of contemporary Jewry on matters of intense Jewish interest, for _Reuben Sachs_ was written some few years before the advent of Theodor Herzl and that movement which has arisen to regenerate the Jewish people. It would be interesting, if such speculation were not idle here, to dwell on the possible effect that this movement would have had on one so conscious of the lack of poetry in the lives of her co-religionists. But these side-tracks are not at the moment permissible, so I will give part of the conversation between Reuben Sachs and his cousin Leo Lenniger as Amy Levy's contribution towards the Jewish Problem. It reaffirms the views expressed in the article on "Jewish Humour," and ends with the same sense of regret.

"'Oh, I have nothing to say against us at all,' said Leo ironically, 'except that we are materialists to our fingers' ends, that we have outlived, from the nature of things, such ideals as we ever had.'

"'Idealists don't grow on every bush,' answered Reuben, 'and I think we have our fair share of them. This is a materialistic age, a materialistic country.'

"'And ours the religion of materialism. The corn and the wine and the oil; the multiplication of the seed; the conquest of the hostile tribes—these have always had more attraction for us than the harp and crown of a spiritualised existence.'

"'It is no use to pretend,' answered Reuben in his reasonable pacific way, 'that our religion remains a vital force among the cultivated and thoughtful Jews of to-day. Of course it has been modified by the influence of Western thought and Western morality. And belief, among thinking people of all
races, has become, as you know perfectly well, a matter of personal idiosyncrasy.'

"That does not alter my position," said Leo, "as to the character of the national religion and the significance of the fact. Ah, look at us," he cried with sudden passion; 'where else do you see such eagerness to take advantage; such sickening, hideous greed; such cruel, remorseless striving for power and importance; such ever-active, ever-hungry vanity, that must be fed at any cost? Steeped to the lips in sordidness, as we have all been from the cradle, how is it possible that anyone among us, by any effort of his own, can wipe off from his soul the hereditary stain?'

"'My dear boy," said Reuben, touched by the personal note which sounded at the close of poor Leo's heroics, and speaking with sudden earnestness, 'you put things in too lurid a light. We have our faults; you seem to forget what our virtues are. Have you forgotten for how long, and at what a cruel disadvantage, the Jewish people has gone its way, until at last it has shamed the nations into respect? Our self-restraint, our self-respect, our industry, our power of endurance, our love of race, home, and kindred, and our regard for their ties—are none of these things to be set down to our account?'

"'Oh, our instincts of self-preservation are remarkably strong; I grant you that.'

"... 'There is one good thing,' cried Leo, taking a fresh start, 'and that is the inevitability—at least as regards English Jews—of our disintegration; of our absorption by the people of the country. That is the price we are bound to pay for restored freedom and consideration. The Community will grow more and more to consist of mediocrities, and worse, as the general world claims our choicer specimens for its own. We may continue to exist as a separate clan, reinforced from below by German and Polish Jews for some time to come; but absorption complete, inevitable—that is only a matter of time. You and I sitting here, self-conscious, discussing our own race-attributes, race-position—are we not as sure a token of what is to come as anything well could be?'

"'Yours is a sweeping theory,' said Reuben; 'and at present I don't feel inclined to go into the rights and wrongs of it; still less to deny its soundness. I can only say that, should I live to see it borne out, I should be very sorry. It may be a weakness on my part, but I am exceedingly fond of my people. If we are to die as a race, we shall die harder than you think. The tide will ebb in the intervals of flowing. That strange, strong instinct which has held us so long together is not a thing easily eradicated. It will come into play when it is least expected. Jew will gravitate to Jew, though each may call himself by another name.'"

Scattered throughout the book are many witticisms, pen-portraits
of characters sketched with a few words only, but each vividly alive, whole passages of sheer beauty in the restraint of expression, the touches of light and shade. Especially noticeable are those parts dealing with the love between Reuben and Judith Quixano, which was one of those sad cases of "might have been." Reuben, a barrister, sought to make a political success of his life, and gave up his chance of happiness with Judith, who had a dowry of but five thousand pounds, to seek a bride with one nearer fifty thousand pounds. The scene in the conservatory during a dance, when a declaration of love imminent between Reuben and Judith is frustrated by the passing newsboy's cry of "Death of Conservative M.P.! Death of the member for St. Baldwins"—the constituency Reuben wishes to represent—this scene is one of the most beautiful and poignant Amy Levy ever wrote. In this tale it is only surpassed in the Epilogue, where Judith, married to an Englishman of aristocratic family converted to Judaism, learns of the death of Reuben. The final note is struck with:

"Before the great mysteries of life her soul grew frozen and appalled.
"It seemed to her, as she sat there in the fading light, that this is the bitter lesson of existence: that the sacred serves only to teach the full meaning of sacrilege; the beautiful of the hideous; modesty of outrage; joy of sorrow; life of death."

"The ways of joy, like the ways of sorrow, are many, and hidden away in the depths of Judith's life—though as yet she knows it not—is the germ of another life, which shall quicken, grow, and come forth at last. Shall bring with it, no doubt, pain and sorrow, and tears; but shall bring also hope and joy, and that quickening of purpose which is perhaps as much as any of us should expect or demand from Fate."

Within a few months Reuben Sachs went into a second edition. Besides one short story, the only other Jewish contributions by Amy Levy were in Jewish Portraits, by the late Lady Magnus. The first was a translation of the German of Geiger's translation of Jehuda Halevi; the second a translation of one of Heine's songs.

During the year 1889, the last of her life, several poems appeared in the magazines and weeklies. One poem, entitled "The Village Garden," appeared in the Spectator, February 9, and was the subject of a leader in that journal. As in "Out of the World," so too have
AMY LEVY.

we here the persistent cry for the town—and knowledge of the reason of the persistency of the call.

"Fain would I bide, but ever in the distance
A ceaseless voice is sounding clear and low;—
The city calls me with her old persistence,
The city calls me—I arise and go.

"Of gentler souls this fragrant peace is guerdon;
For me, the roar and hurry of the town,
Wherein more lightly seems to press the burden
Of individual life that weighs me down."

The next and last novel, *Miss Meredith*, commenced in serial form in the *British Weekly*, April 19, 1889. This novel, quite a short one, ended in the issue of June 28 of the same year, and was published in book form the following year with nothing from the publishers to show that it had first appeared as a serial. The tale is a perfect gem, a charming tale, slight and simply told, of an English governess who, taking the post of teacher to the daughter of a count in Italy, there meets her fate. The theme is that of *Jane Eyre*, with the difference of a peaceful, calm spring day, the pulsation that of promise only, compared with a summer storm. The handling of the characters is delicate. It would seem the delicacy of treatment was due to the exhaustion of the emotions that went to produce *Reuben Sachs*. In *Preferences*, of which only three hundred copies were printed, Harry Quilter in an article, "Amy Levy: a Reminiscence and a Criticism," remarks of *Miss Meredith*: "To write in such a manner . . . yet to preserve the more ideal portion of the story and to render it in no way trivial or commonplace, denotes very high art, and is equivalent in fiction to such works as that of Israels in painting."

The same year saw further contributions to the *Woman's World*, *Time*, *Temple Bar*, and the *Gentleman's Magazine*. In the May number of the last-named journal Amy Levy's last Jewish contribution, "Cohen of Trinity," appeared. Intensely subjective, the story was written but a few months before her own end. It is as if, standing aloof from her own self, she endowed another with all the mass of complexities which had gone to make up her own life. The story is a passionate cry of protest of one who, seeking the highest life has to offer, is
worsted, first by his own nature and upbringing; then when he has
achieved the fame he thought would give him happiness, by the
canker of discontent which reveals the emptiness of success. The
story is an intensive study of the Jew, brilliant, ambitious, thrust into
surroundings and environment alien to him, finding that though he
may affect the weaker, the more ordinary people, there is a class
apart in every way, alien to him, his moods, his temperament, his
very brilliancy which chills where it wishes to soften. Norwood, Lord
Norwood, mentioned first in Reuben Sachs, is the aristocrat by whom
Cohen is passionately desirous of being recognised as an equal; into
whose circle he wishes to penetrate. Leo Lenniger, cousin of Reuben
Sachs, is re-introduced as one already admitted to "those young
puritans, aristocrats, and scholars, the flower of the University." Little
Lenniger resolutely cold-shouldered Cohen, contenting himself by
saying that "Cohen's family were not people one 'knew.'"

"He came across the meadows towards the sunset, his upturned face
pushed forwards, catching the light, and glowing also with another radiance
than the rich, reflected glory of the heavens.

"A curious figure: slight, ungainly; shoulders in the ears; an awkward,
rapid gait, half slouch, half hobble. One arm with its coarse hand swung
like a bell-ropae as he went; the other pressed a book close against his side,
while the hand belonging to it held a few bulrushes and marsh marigolds.

"Behind him streamed his shabby gown—it was a glorious afternoon of
May—and his dusty trencher-cap pushed to the back of his head revealed
clearly the oval contour of the face, the full, prominent lips, full, prominent
eyes, and the curved beak of a nose with its restless nostrils.

"'Who is he?' I asked. . . .

"'Cohen of Trinity.'"

Although the ruling spirit of the riotous members of Trinity,
Cohen was "desperately lonely and desperately unapproachable." It
is significant in viewing this story that he, as "Melissa" before him,
quotes from Browning's "Caliban" of

". . . an icy fish
That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she lived,'"
as descriptive of himself. Norwood and his set were the "lukewarm"
water wherein he "found repulse."

Up on a scholarship, Cohen failed in his work "scoffing at academic
standards, yet writhing at his own inability to come up to them,” and had to disappear at short notice from the University.

About five years after his expulsion Cohen’s book, *Gubernator*, was published, and within three months was in its fourth edition—a book, “half-poem, half-essay, wholly unclassifiable, with a force, a fire, a vision, a vigour and felicity of phrase that carried you through its most glaring inequalities, its most appalling lapses of taste.” Lord Norwood was repelled by the book, as he had been by its author. But Cohen was feted and was the lion of the moment. He arose to the sense of his own importance, but in his success knew of his defeat.

"‘Do you know what success means?’ he asked suddenly.
"‘Ah, no, indeed.’
"‘It means—inundation by the second-rates.’
"‘What does the fellow want?’ I cried, uncertain as to the extent of his seriousness.
"‘I never,’ he said, ‘was a believer in the half-loaf theory.’
"‘It strikes me, Cohen, that your loaf looks uncommonly like a whole one, as loaves go on this unsatisfactory planet.’

He burst into a laugh.

"‘Nothing,’ he said presently, ‘can alter the relations of things—their permanent, essential relations. . . . They shall know, they shall understand, they shall feel what I am.’ That is what I used to say to myself in the old days. I suppose, now, ‘they’ do know, more or less, and what of that?

"‘I should say the difference from your point of view was a very great one. But you always chose to cry for the moon.’

"‘Well,’ he said, quietly looking up, ‘it’s the only thing worth having.’”

Unable, despite his striving, to bring the moon to earth, Cohen, in the midst of the success for which he had thirsted so long, died by his own hand.

In the literary productions of the period Amy Levy had her assured place. The critics all spoke highly of the promise in and originality of any work from her pen. It seemed that the future held nothing but the promise of that happiness only to be achieved by rewarded endeavour, when in the hey-day of her youth, in her twenty-eighth year, she died.

On September 10, 1889, died Amy Levy. Two weeks before her death she spent a few days with Olive Schreiner at St. Leonards. In the latter’s letters to Havelock Ellis many references to Amy Levy are
to be found. A week before her death she corrected the proofs of her third volume of verse, entitled *A London Plane Tree*, a collection, mostly, of those poems that had appeared in periodicals since the publication of *A Minor Poet*, which went into a second edition in 1890. It was from *A London Plane Tree* that Mr. J. C. Squire and Mr. Quiller Couch selected the poems for inclusion in *A Book of Women's Verse* and *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* respectively. The poems are of a high order, the lyrical note prominent. The *Weltschmerz*, early seen, is now so pronounced that the whole volume is tinged with a sadness that hurts. This undercurrent of sadness makes all too apparent the heart that ached for this life; that in its yearning for beauty was appalled by the gross ugliness which in circumstances forces our lives. Never robust, with a mind exceptional in its knowledge, grip, and comprehension, Amy Levy was the personification of the effect of modern life on one equally capable of keen feeling as of keen thought. Olive Schreiner, in a letter to Havelock Ellis dated April 23, 1892, writes:

". . . I was always trying to cheer up Amy Levy and professing that I found life so delightful and worth living. I've felt since that, if I'd been more sympathetic to her melancholy mood, I might have done more for her. In her last note to me she said, 'You care for science and art and helping your fellow-men, therefore life is worth living to you; to me it is worth nothing'; and the last thing I sent her was Edward Carpenter's 'Do not hurry, have faith,' which she sent back to me the night before her death with the words, 'It might have helped me once; it is too late now; philosophy cannot help me now.'"

It may be of interest to quote here from a letter sent me by Mr. Ellis in the April of this year (1926):

"I think that an appreciation of Amy Levy would be quite worth while as her writing was sincere and strong . . . . I never met her. Olive Schreiner was proposing to bring us together, but her death intervened before this could be arranged. Olive Schreiner often spoke to me of Amy Levy during the time they were seeing each other, and always sympathetically."

Dr. Richard Garnett wrote a sympathetic notice of Amy Levy for the *Dictionary of National Biography*; and had, during her lifetime, written an introduction to a pamphlet, *Historic Doubts*, which she had
translated from the French under the name of "Lily." A lengthy obituary notice by Oscar Wilde appeared in the Woman's World together with a portrait which had been taken some years before in Italy. It is matter for surprise that the Jewish press of the period has little to say of Amy Levy. Perhaps it would be most charitable to say of this singular silence, which has persisted for more than a generation, that a prophet receives no honour in his own time or among his own people. Even the Jewish Encyclopaedia is at fault, for the date of the death is given as 1899—ten years after the actual event. It may not be quite out of place to mention that Amy Levy was the first Jewess and second person of the Jewish faith to be cremated. In her will, signed December 4, 1887, she left instructions, after bequeathing all she possessed to be divided equally among her brothers and sisters, except "all books and papers, letters and documents of every kind and copyrights," to Clementina Black, the writer, that she should be cremated. After the incineration, the ashes were brought from Woking and received burial at Ball's Pond Cemetery.

A portrait of this Jewess is given by Harry Quilter in Preferences, where he describes how, staying at a farmhouse in Devon, he first heard mention of Amy Levy.

"Amongst the photographs on the mantelpiece, one was of a small dark girl, of unmistakably Jewish type, with eyes that seemed too large for the delicate features, and far too sad for their youthfulness of line and contour. In its way I have rarely seen a face which was at once so interesting, so intellectual, so beautiful, and, alas! so unhappy; and somehow . . . our speech would be apt frequently to turn in the direction of the original, and my hostess would tell me all about Amy Levy. She had come down ill, it appeared, some two years before, and had been nursed. . . . she had been a dweller in Bloomsbury all her life, and knew nothing about the country; and my landlady had . . . taken her into the woods and fields, and down amongst the caves . . . and taught her all those strange hidden trifles of earth, sea and air which only the dwellers in, and lovers of, the country know, and the girl—for she was quite a girl then—had taught her instructress—what? Had you asked Miss —,—, she would have told you that there were few subjects upon which she had not talked with her patient, and gained from her some store of knowledge and thought. . . ."

"She died in a time of promise. We saw her taken from life in its prime." Said of Emily Brontë, in common with whom she had the
gift of passionate writing—these words apply as aptly to Amy Levy. She died in the hey-day of her career. Had she lived longer life would have mellowed the keen suffering so natural to youth. What she left as completed work is stamped with that touch of genius that no other English Jewess has equalled or surpassed. She received some recognition from the outside world in her own day; but in ours no voice has been lifted up in her praise. It would be my pride to have it said of me that I had been instrumental, even to the smallest extent, in helping to secure Amy Levy’s position as the greatest Jewess England has thus far produced.