THE POEMS OF THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH.

I.

BEING born a poet is one thing,— a man owes this to nature,— but the making of a poet is another and an altogether different thing — a thing he must do for himself. It is this and the manner of it that entitle him to distinction, not the faculty with which he is endowed at his birth.

Mr. Thomas Bailey Aldrich was born a poet in the year 1836, and some time before he had reached the age of nineteen he gave the first proofs of his birthright in a slender little book, called "The Bells" (1855). To begin with this volume, and to read in the order of their publication those that have followed it, is to become acquainted with the manner of a poet's making and to see both the promise and its fulfilment.

The real nature of his gift he seems to have begun to understand early in his career, for in his second volume containing the single poem "The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth" (1858), the work, while in some respects immature, becomes individual and independent, the simple octosyllabic verse without stanza forms giving entire freedom to his fancy. As a poem, it is the merest bit of fanciful Oriental legend, told with a winning grace of expression and melody; but, slight as it is, there are to be found in it the same felicitous tropes and charming effects of verbal coloring which have come to be recognized as characteristic features of his work; and in it, too, his happy choice and use of words begins to be noticeable:

> A thousand lanterns, tulip-shaped,
>   Of amber made, and colored glass,
> Were hung like fruit among the trees;
>   And on the garden-walks and grass
> Their red and purple shadows lay,
> As if the slave-boys, here and there,
> Had spilt a jar of brilliant wine!
> The stagnant moonlight filled the air;
>   The roses spread their crimson tents;
>   And all the night was sick with scents
> Of marjoram and eglantine.

But it is in his third volume that one must look to find the tokens by which his work is known to-day. The pieces in "The Ballad of Babie Bell, and other Poems" (1859) show a much wider range of the imagination, a finer discrimination in their treatment, a surer touch in their finish, and a more nicely balanced symmetry. Here any survey of Mr. Aldrich's poetical productions properly begins; and, with the exception of two brief passages in "The Course of True Love" which were afterward modified and included in the "Blue and Gold" edition of his poems, this is where he himself seems to consider that his career began.

The door of the human heart opened at once to receive "Babie Bell," and, for the voice that sang it, it has stood open ever since. But there are others among these poems and ballads just as attractive as this. Here are "After the Rain," "Palabras Cariñosas," "The Unforgiven," and "The Legend of Elsinore," now become familiar as "The Lady of Castlenore," and here also is that clever piece of orientalism, "When the Sultan Goes to Ispahan." These and a few more appear in both editions of his collected poems (1863–1865), and later in "Cloth of Gold." It is interesting to compare the different readings of the same lyric in these three volumes, to see the changes that were made to bring the work closer to the author's ideal, and to note how in every instance his judgment was fortunate, and always gave a new grace to a line or a brighter luster to a figure. Let us take one which has been least altered and see it in its original state:

> The rain has ceased and in my room
>   The sunshine pours an orange flood;
> And on the church's dizzy vane
>   The ancient Cross is bathed in blood.
>
> From out the dripping ivy-leaves,
>   Antiquely carven, gray and high,
> A dormer, facing westward, looks
>   Upon the village like an eye;
>
> And now it glimmers in the sun,
>   A globe of gold, a disc, a speck;
> And in the belfry sits a Dove
>   With purple ripples on her neck.

The only change that has been made in this is the substitution of "airy" for "orange" in the second line. This adds to the effectiveness of the line, giving a more natural feeling to it and enhancing the beauty of the picture by a better distribution of the colors.

Of the eighteen pieces in a diminutive book entitled "Pampinea, and other Poems" (1861), Mr. Aldrich has been willing to preserve but twelve. From this dozen, which includes the idyllic "Pampinea" and "Piscataqua River,"

let us select "Hesperides," which seems prophetic of what was to come after. It records the expression of a hope which has since been realized, and it defines an ideal in art to which the poet has now attained:

> If thy soul, Herrick, dwelt with me,
> This is what my songs would be:
> Hints of our sea-breezes, blent
> With odors from the Orient;
> Indian vessels deep with spice;
> Star-showers from the Norland ice;
> Wine-red jewels that seem to hold
> Fire, but only burn with cold;
> Antique goblets, strangely wrought,
> Filled with the wine of happy thought;
> Bridal measures, dim regrets,
> Laburnum buds and violets;
> Hopeful as the break of day;
> Clear as crystal; new as May;
> Musical as brooks that run
> O'er yellow shallows in the sun;
> Soft as the satin fringe that shades
> The eyelids of thy fragrant maids·
> Brief as thy lyrics, Herrick, are,
> And polished as the bosom of a star!

There could not be a happier characterization of a great number of his own songs than this. The final couplet names their two most striking features — brevity and finish; a brevity not gained at the expense of roundness or completeness, and a finish not carried to the extent of over-decoration.

The first collected edition of Mr. Aldrich's poems appeared in 1863, and was followed by a second in 1865, enlarged by the addition of new work of a more mature character. "Judith" and "Friar Jerome's Beautiful Book" were sufficient to prove that his predilection for writing short lyrics was not due to limitation of power, but was rather the result of a keenly critical sense of the nature of his subjects. They showed that he was able to paint upon a larger canvas, to deal with a greater variety of colors, and also to maintain the same degree of excellence in all the details of his larger pictures that was to be found in his miniatures. But what concerns us most in this collection is the sonnets. Of these there are eight examples carefully wrought, delicate in conception, and expressed with singular melody and grace. None shows this more plainly than the one called "Accomplices," one of the best poems inspired by the war:

> The soft new grass is creeping o'er the graves
> By the Potomac; and the crisp ground-flower
> Lifts its blue cup to catch the passing shower:
> The pine-cone ripens, and the long moss waves
> Its tangled gonfalons above our braves.
> Hark, what a burst of music from yon bower! —
> The Southern nightingale that, hour by hour,
> In its melodious summer madness raves.
> Ah, with what delicate touches of her hand,
> With what sweet voices, nature seeks to screen
> The awful crime of this distracted land —
> Sets her birds singing, while she spreads her green
> Mantle of velvet where the murdered lie,
> As if to hide the horror from God's eye.

In 1874 appeared "Cloth of Gold, and Other Poems," composed entirely of pieces selected from the collected edition published nine years before, and including all that the author wished to retain. It contains the best of what he had written up to this time, improved in form and phrase — a word here, a line there, a whole passage elsewhere. The changes made in the opening stanza of the lyric entitled "Amontillado" are interesting, as showing something of Mr. Aldrich's success in resetting his fancies. As first written it ran thus:

> Rafters black with smoke,
> White with sand the floor is,
> Twenty whiskered Dons
> Calling to Dolores —
> Tawny flower of Spain,
> Empress of the larder,
> Keeper of the wines
> In this old posada.

To obviate the imperfect rhymes "larder" and "posada" the author chose to lay the scene in the Nevada mining district, where the

> Twenty whiskered Dons

were replaced by

> Fellows from the mines,

and the

> Empress of the larder

became

> Transplanted in Nevada.

This was an improvement so far as the rhymes were concerned. But in the final setting the scene is in Spain again, and the strained sixth line is supplanted by the happy simile,

> Wild rose of Grenada.

The last stanza of this merry song is so fortunate in its figure, that one wonders why the author, in the "Household Edition" of his poems, has not kept "Amontillado" merely for the sake of this:

> What! the flagon 's dry?
> Hark, old Time's confession —
> Both hands crossed at XII,
> Owning his transgression!
> Pray, old monk! for all
> Generous souls and merry.
> May they have their fill
> Of Amontillado Sherry!

The two most conspicuous pieces in the book are " Judith " and the medieval legend of "Friar Jerome," the first written in blank verse and betraying the author's preference for the Tennysonian model, without showing any direct imitation of the Laureate's manner, the second written in octosyllabic measure, and recalling something of the method employed in " The Course of True Love," although far in advance of that poem in conception and imaginativeness. This passage from " Judith " gives a fair idea of the character of Mr. Aldrich's blank verse at the time:

When she had gained her chamber she threw off
The livery of sorrow for her lord,
The cruel sackcloth that begirt her limbs,
And, from those ashen colors issuing forth,
Seemed like a golden butterfly new-slipt
From its dull chrysalis. Then after bath,
She braided in the darkness of her hair
A thread of opals; on her rounded breast
Spilt precious ointment; and put on the robes
Whose rustling made her pause, half-garmented,
To dream a moment of her bridal morn.

Equally charming and illustrative of the grace of the second poem is this description of the illuminated folio which was " Friar Jerome's Beautiful Book " :

To those dim alcoves, far withdrawn,
He turned with measured steps and slow,
Trimming his lantern as he went;
And there, among the shadows, bent
Above one ponderous folio,
With whose miraculous text was blent
Seraphic faces: Angels crowned
With rings of melting amethyst;
Mute, patient Martyrs, cruelly bound
To blazing fagots; here and there,
Some bold, serene Evangelist,
Or Mary in her sunny hair;
And here and there from out the words
A brilliant tropic bird took flight;
And through the margins many a vine
Went wandering — roses, red and white,
Tulip, wind-flower, and columbine
Blossomed. To his believing mind
These things were real, and the wind,
Blown through the mullioned window, took
Scent from the lilies in the book.

" Flower and Thorn " (1877) makes an admirable companion for " Cloth of Gold," being like it in character. But in pieces like " Spring in New England," " Miantowona," and in the " Quatrains," the poet's path leads him in a new direction, while in the group of lyrics embracing " Destiny," " Identity," and " An Untimely Thought," it trends towards the weird and ghostly. " Spring in New England " is written in irregular measures, and is a tribute to the men who were lost in the war. Simple, dignified, noble, and sincere, there are passages in it that rank with the best Mr. Aldrich has done. Of those buried in nameless graves he sings:

Ah, but the life they gave
Is not shut in the grave:
The valorous spirits freed
Life in the vital deed!
Marble shall crumble to dust,
Plinth of bronze and of stone,
Carved escutcheon and crest —
Silently, one by one,
The sculptured lilies fall;
Softly the tooth of rust
Gnaws through the brazen shield;
Broken, and covered with stains,
The crossed stone swords must yield;
Mined by the frost and the drouth,
Smitten by north and south,
Smitten by east and west,
Down comes column and all!
But the great deed remains.

" Miantowona " is an Indian legend created out of the author's fancy, and woven delicately into song. The main incident of the legend was conceived by Mr. Aldrich nearly twenty years before the poem was written, and is to be found in a story entitled " Out of His Head."

Of the Quatrains there are a score. These tiny poems are wrought with great finish and precision of epithet. One is a dainty fancy; another, a whole poem condensed into four lines; here, a mood, gay or grave; and there, a happy conceit whose only merit is the beauty with which it is expressed.

GRACE AND STRENGTH.

Manoah's son, in his blind rage malign,
  Tumbling the temple down upon his foes,
Did no such feat as yonder delicate vine
  That day by day untired holds up a rose.

THE PARCÆ.

In their dark House of Cloud
The three weird sisters toil till time be sped;
One unwinds life; one ever weaves the shroud;
One waits to cut the thread.

The lyrics in which the element of weirdness is prominent are too familiar to require quotation. Striking as they all are, none is more so than this airy and graceful " Nocturne," which lends a fragrance to the whole book:

Up to her chamber window
  A slight wire trellis goes,
And up this Romeo's ladder
  Clambers a bold white rose.

I lounge in the ilex shadows,
  I see the lady lean,
Unclasping her silken girdle,
  The curtain's folds between.

She smiles on her white-rose lover,
  She reaches out her hand
And helps him in at the window —
  I see it where I stand.

To her scarlet lip she holds him,
  And kisses him many a time —
Ah, me! it was he who won her
  Because he dared to climb.

"The Guerdon" and "Tita's Tears" are excellent examples of skill in the use of the rhymed pentameter couplet, to which Mr. Aldrich gives the polish of Pope without Pope's hardness and artificiality. But in this volume, as in "Cloth of Gold," it is the sonnets that are the most noticeable feature. They show why it is that he shares with Longfellow the honor of having written the finest sonnets in American literature. One of these, in honor of the poet's craft, might be applied to his own work:

Enamored architect of airy rhyme,
  Build as thou wilt; heed not what each man says.
  Good souls, but innocent of dreamers' ways,
Will come, and marvel why thou wastest time;
Others, beholding how thy turrets climb
  'Twixt theirs and heaven, will hate thee all their days;
  But most beware of those who come to praise.
O wondersmith, O worker in sublime
And heaven-sent dreams, let art be all in all;
  Build as thou wilt, unspoiled by praise or blame,
    Build as thou wilt, and as thy light is given:
Then, if at last the airy structure fall,
  Dissolve, and vanish — take thyself no shame.
    They fail, and they alone, who have not striven.

The sonnet to "Sleep" seems faultless in conception and expression, and of the many poems written upon the same theme it is one of the most exquisite:

When to soft sleep we give ourselves away,
    And in a dream as in a fairy bark
    Drift on and on through the enchanted dark
To purple daybreak — little thought we pay
To that sweet-bitter world we know by day;
    We are clean quit of it, as is a lark
    So high in heaven no human eye may mark
The thin swift pinion cleaving through the gray.
Till we awake ill fate can do no ill,
  The resting heart shall not take up again
    The heavy load that yet must make it bleed;
For this brief space the loud world's voice is still,
  No faintest echo of it brings us pain.
    How will it be when we shall sleep indeed?

"Mercedes, and Later Lyrics" (1884) contains his first venture in the field of dramatic literature. "Mercedes" is a prose drama condensed in form, written in the most direct manner, and depending for its success upon the story alone. It is thoroughly dramatic in feeling and treatment, and inspires the hope that he may some time make a more extended effort in the same line of composition. Among the lyrics is to be found another of those weird imaginings, called "Apparitions":

At noon of night, and at the night's pale end,
    Such things have chanced to me
As one, by day, would scarcely tell a friend
    For fear of mockery.

Shadows, you say, mirages of the brain!
    I know not, faith, not I.
Is it more strange the dead should walk again
    Than that the quick should die?

But the gem of all is the song entitled "Prescience," which is lovely in its simplicity, its tenderness, and its melodious rhythm:

The new moon hung in the sky,
  The sun was low in the west,
And my betrothed and I
  In the churchyard paused to rest —
    Happy maiden and lover,
    Dreaming the old dream over:
The light winds wandered by,
  And robins chirped from the nest.

And lo! in the meadow-sweet
  Was the grave of a little child,
With a crumbling stone at the feet,
  And the ivy running wild —
    Tangled ivy and clover,
    Folding it over and over:
Close to my sweetheart's feet
  Was the little mound up-piled.

Stricken with nameless fears,
  She shrank and clung to me,
And her eyes were filled with tears
  For a sorrow I did not see:
    Lightly the winds were blowing,
    Softly her tears were flowing —
Tears for the unknown years
  And a sorrow that was to be!

"Wyndham Towers" (1890), a long poem in blank verse, is the most ambitious of the poet's productions. A comparison between this and "Garnaut Hall" (Poems: 1865), a discarded poem from which the main incident of "Wyndham Towers" is taken, exhibits the growth of Mr. Aldrich's powers, his increased facility in the writing of blank verse, and his admirable handling of a subject of varied requirements. To tell a story in blank verse is a difficult task. To accomplish it successfully a poet needs to understand the art of the story-teller almost as well as his own. The dramatic movement must be everywhere carefully adjusted to what may be termed the poetic balance: the narrative must be kept clearly

in view and yet not be made too prominent, serving much the same purpose as the fabric upon which is wrought a piece of embroidery —the background and the detail of the pattern each lending its beauty to the other, and so producing a harmonious effect in the whole design. Plot, incident, character, each must be treated with due regard to its importance: while the music of the rhythm must conform to the mood, the thought, and the sentiment. These requirements Mr. Aldrich has met in a way that entitles him to the highest praise, the result being the most artistically finished piece of blank verse that has been written in this country. The entire poem of fourteen hundred lines is built up with the same care that is to be observed in the author's couplets. The imagery is new, and rich in color; the descriptions of nature are apt and beautiful; the characterizations are strong and vivid; and the details of the work are wrought out with a rare sense of proportion and scale.

The following extracts will illustrate these features:

Lean as a shadow cast by a church spire,
Eyes deep in sockets, noseless, high cheek-boned,
Like nothing in the circle of this earth
But a death's-head that from a mural slab
Within the chancel leers through sermon-time,
Making a mock of poor humanity.

Hard by from a chalk cliff
A torrent leaps: not lovelier Sappho was
Giving herself all silvery to the sea
From that Leucadian rock.

A laugh . . .
Like the merle's note when its ecstatic heart
Is packed with summer-time.

Her beauty broke on him like some rare flower
That was not yesterday. Ev'n so the Spring
Unclasps the girdle of its loveliness
Abruptly, in the North here; long the drifts
Linger in hollows, long on bough and brier
No slight leaf ventures, lest the frost's keen tooth
Nip it, and then all suddenly the earth
Is naught but scent and bloom.

The one lyric—a variation of one of the songs in the 1859 volume—merits a place with the daintiest and most graceful of its Elizabethan cousins:

It was with doubt and trembling
I whispered in her ear.
Go, take her answer, bird-on-bough,
That all the world may hear—
Sweetheart, sigh no more!

Sing it, sing it, tawny throat,
Upon the wayside tree,
How fair she is, how true she is,
How dear she is to me—
Sweetheart, sigh no more!

Sing it, sing it, tawny throat,
And through the summer long
The wind among the clover-tops,
And brooks, for all their silvery stops,
Shall envy you the song—
Sweetheart, sigh no more!

As "Wyndham Towers" is the most important of Mr. Aldrich's long pieces, so "The Sisters' Tragedy, and Other Poems" (1891) is the most important volume of his miscellaneous verse. The character of the work in this latest collection is marked by strong personal and dramatic qualities. In kind it resembles that of former collections—the themes ranging from the lightest and gayest to the most serious and thoughtful; but it is far beyond what preceded it. Coming now from the poet in his prime it brings a new promise, as if his finest and most enduring work were yet to be done.

A deeper philosophy and a more intellectual spirit pervade this volume. The author's moods, hitherto emotional and objective, are now often reflective and personal. In "The Shipman's Tale" and the noble sonnet, "I vex me not with brooding on the years," his themes deal with questions of the gravest character and of the most serious concern; while in "The Sisters' Tragedy," "Pauline Pavlovna," "The Last Cæsar," and "Thalia," the dramatic feeling adds to their potency, just as the personal element adds to the strength and force in the "Monody on the Death of Wendell Phillips" and the lines upon "Sargent's Portrait of Edwin Booth." But this deepening and widening of the stream of thought and imagination have in nowise affected its transparency; and there are still left the sunny shallows where all is joy, glow, and music, as, for instance, in these lines entitled "Memory":

My mind lets go a thousand things,
Like dates of wars and deaths of kings,
And yet recalls the very hour—
'T was noon by yonder village tower,
And on the last blue noon of May—
The wind came briskly up this way,
Crisping the brook beside the road;
Then, pausing here, set down its load
Of pine scents and shook listlessly
Two petals from that wild-rose tree.

In the group of verses called "Bagatelle" one can see how the material of *vers-de-société* may be molded into something that is distinctly different. The piece that comes nearest to being society-verse is "At a Reading," but it is uplifted by its poetic pinions: it is simply a lower flight. Mr. Aldrich may be able to write society-verse, but he has never proved his ability to do so. His lyrics have wings rather than feet; they fly, but neither dance nor run.

The most musical lyric in the book, and, in-

deed, the most musical lyric Mr. Aldrich has written, is the "Echo Song." "At the Funeral of a Minor Poet" is a strong protest against the present school of Realism; the tribute to "Tennyson" is admirable in its loftiness and dignity; and these lines from "In Westminster Abbey" are fine:

> Tread softly here; the sacredest of tombs
> Are those that hold your Poets. Kings and queens
> Are facile accidents of Time and Chance.
> Chance sets them on the heights, they climb not there!
> But he who from the darkling mass of men
> Is on the wing of heavenly thought upborne
> To finer ether, and becomes a voice
> For all the voiceless, God anointed him:
> His name shall be a star, his grave a shrine!
>
> . . . . .
>
> Oh, ever-hallowed spot of English earth!
> If the unleashed and happy spirit of man
> Have option to revisit our dull globe,
> What august Shades at midnight here convene
> In the miraculous sessions of the moon,
> When the great pulse of London faintly throbs,
> And one by one the stars in heaven pale!

II.

WHAT most impresses one in reading Mr. Aldrich's poems is their strong individuality of manner and treatment. There are times, now and then, when one is conscious of something reminiscent of Keats in its sensuousness, or of Herrick in its airiness or spontaneity; but it is Landor to whose delicately chiseled and cameo-like verses these polished lyrics bear the closest resemblance. Yet the work of Mr. Aldrich is unlike that of any one of them; it is distinctly his own and shows him to be his own master. His fondness for and use of apt words which have a definite poetic value reminds one of Théophile Gautier, but the finish given to his verse by this fastidiousness is Greek rather than modern. In his attitude towards nature he is not an interpreter, but a lover who is influenced by her external beauties. Without botanizing or analyzing he wins from her forms and moods those graces which are her most pleasing attributes: the tint and perfume of the rose, the voice of the wind, the fantastic fret-work of the frost — these are enough to satisfy him. All of his songs have a rare musical quality, and some of them, like the "Nocturne" which we have quoted, almost sing themselves. His words and meters are always happily wedded, and there is a sufficient variety of each, from the light and tripping measures of "Corydon" to the rich melodiousness of "The Piazza of St. Mark's at Midnight."

One finds in Mr. Aldrich's work an occasional inaccuracy in his rhymes. The instances are very few, and for this reason they are the more noticeable. In "Pursuit and Possession," one of his most graceful sonnets, "haunt me" and "want thee" are almost enough to spoil the effect of the whole composition; while in "The Lady of Castlenore" a more exasperating combination is that of "morn" and "gone"; but it is in the recently written "Guilielmus Rex" that the false rhymes are most prominent, occurring as they do in four lines out of sixteen. These are purely matters of technique, and in the work of a poet less skilful in the choice and handling of words would not call for any special notice; but with Mr. Aldrich's creed in mind, "Let art be all in all," one feels such blemishes. The notion that there are three kinds of rhymes — those for the eye, those for the ear, and those for both the eye and ear — is not well founded. Rhyme is of a mathematical nature; it is a poetic equation which must be satisfied by fixed musical values. In a long poem an occasional deviation or approximate substitute may be excused; so, too, in a short poem where the terminal word of the line is the one word that can convey the poet's idea. But in the poems to which these examples belong, one cannot help believing that Mr. Aldrich could find other terms of expression equally happy that should carry with them his thought, and, at the same time, be absolute in their rhyme. But these are slight defects. He has always gaged his power with accuracy; doing well whatever he endeavored to do, and not attempting anything beyond his capabilities. Hence to review his work is to find much to praise and little to condemn. His claim to the honor and distinction of being a poet is based upon a long and loyal service to the lyric muse. His gift was genuine and precious, and by patient and painstaking study he has greatly enhanced its worth.

The art and beauty of Mr. Aldrich's verse are great enough to make it last. These are imperishable qualities and, being imperishable, shall keep his name in remembrance as one of the rarest lyric poets of the nineteenth century.

Frank Dempster Sherman.

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Thomas Bailey Aldrich.