

THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

VOL. XLVIII.

JULY, 1894.

No. 3.

A PORTRAIT OF THOMAS WILLIAM PARSONS.

A FOOT-NOTE BY THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH.

THE face which is engraved on the opposite page of this magazine is that of a poet who will, I think, be better known to our grandchildren than he has been to us. For time saves and sanctifies as well as destroys.

During the last twenty-five or thirty years a tall, slight figure, somewhat bent of late, with Dantean eyebrows overhanging eyes of a singularly penetrative sweetness when they looked at you, was a frequent figure on the streets of Boston. Here and there it encountered a friendly glance of recognition, but to the hurrying throng in the city of his birth Thomas William Parsons was virtually a stranger. The passers-by, brushing against him, were unconscious that that shy man with the inward-looking eyes was a poet of rare gifts, who, however lacking in variousness, occasionally managed in his own direct artesian way to pierce as deep as any of his great contemporaries, excepting, possibly, Emerson. There was something abstracted and evasive about the man's very walk; in the midst of the crowd he was not of it. He carried his solitude with him into the street. Indeed, he was not of the crowd, though allied to it by subtle threads of sympathy. In his poetic as well as in his personal quality he did not address himself to the general.

Dr. Parsons had much in common with Landor, outside of the Englishman's fine moroseness. Each possessed that delicate precision of touch which, to the observing, betrays the steel gauntlet under the velvet glove. Both were scholars, both loved Italy, and both wrote

marvelously finished verse, which poets praised, and the public neglected to read.

Dr. Parsons's lighter lyrics have a grace and distinction which make it difficult to explain why they failed to win wide liking. That his more serious work failed to do so is explicable. Such austere poetry as the stanzas "On a Bust of Dante," for instance, is not to the taste of the mass of readers: but such poetry, once created, becomes a part of the material world; it instantly takes to itself the permanency of mountains, prairies, and rivers; it seems always to have existed. The scant measure of appreciation which his work in this kind met with was in some degree the result of Dr. Parsons's own methods. Though he wrote his poems with infinite care and labor, he was curiously indifferent to their subsequent fate. He gave them, usually, to the newspapers, rarely sending his best to the magazines. Now and then a leaflet, in strange typography, fluttered down into the hand of the passer-by, like a rich leaf blown from a maple. From time to time a handful of his rhyme was tenderly gathered into a privately printed volume, and offered to friends.

The possessors of these furtive little books do not, I have noticed, show any striking eagerness to part with them. Since the Ticknor and Fields volume in 1854, and a rearrangement of it with additions, issued in London in 1872, Dr. Parsons published nothing of his own in a permanent shape. He had high ideals touching his office as man of letters, but a very modest estimate of himself. It was

a lesson to mediocrity to find this consummate artist and deep thinker at times

Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope.

For the most part he dwelt in book-world, and held that nothing was so real as imagination.

The study of the great Florentine and his period was a life-long pursuit of Dr. Parsons. His translation of "The Divine Comedy," so far as he carried it, for it was left like "the unfinished window in Aladdin's tower," places him in the first rank of Dante's disciples. He brought to this labor of love something of his master's own passion. Whether or not the translation is literal in detail, Dr. Parsons's fragmentary versions have a spell beyond that of all other metrical versions, in being poems in themselves. Such pleasure as a translation affords is usually monopolized by the translator. Though the influence of Dante's manner is nowhere traceable in the original writings of Dr. Parsons, it is to be remarked that his noblest lyric was inspired by a portrait of the Tuscan poet—the lines "On a Bust of Dante" already mentioned.¹

Dr. Parsons went seldom into society; he was a beloved guest in the few houses he visited. His own fireside, until it was darkened by ir-

reparable loss, was a happy one. He was a man of great simplicity and alert sympathies; a charming companion, when he was out of his cloud, and, even when in his cloud, a most courteous dreamer. That he sometimes dropped his reserve with me, in his enthusiasm over some question of literature or art, is now among my cherished memories. I frequently urged him to collect his scattered poems, as he alone could adequately perform the task, but I never succeeded in getting more than a faint-hearted promise that he would undertake it. It was left for other hands to do. The recently published collection is not, I imagine, the collection that will definitely represent him. It contains pieces which doubtless his severer taste would have excluded; an important stanza is omitted from one of the notable poems, and the volume is wanting in several lyrics that must be classed with his choicest. How choice those are is something the world will gradually discover. Like Beddoes and Landor, however, he will always be the poet of exceptional lovers. During his life-time Parsons's verse found only a narrow circle of readers, but they were of that kind which in each age keeps the fire burning on the altars. The many make popularity; the few make fame.

Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

¹ Five or six years ago Dr. Parsons told me that the original appearance in book form of these lines was in connection with his translation of the first ten cantos of the "Inferno," published by W. D. Ticknor, 1843. Copies of that little pamphlet in stiff brown paper covers, with the grim profile of Dante regarding Parsons's poem on the opposite page, are now very much sought after by collectors.

ON A BUST OF DANTE.

See, from this counterfeit of him
Whom Arno shall remember long,
How stern of lineament, how grim,
The father was of Tuscan song:
There but the burning sense of wrong,
Perpetual care and scorn, abide;
Small friendship for the lordly throng;
Distrust of all the world beside.

Faithful if this wan image be,
No dream his life was—but a fight!
Could any Beatrice see
A lover in that anchorite?
To that cold Ghibeline's gloomy sight
Who could have guessed the visions came
Of Beauty, veiled with heavenly light,
In circles of eternal flame?

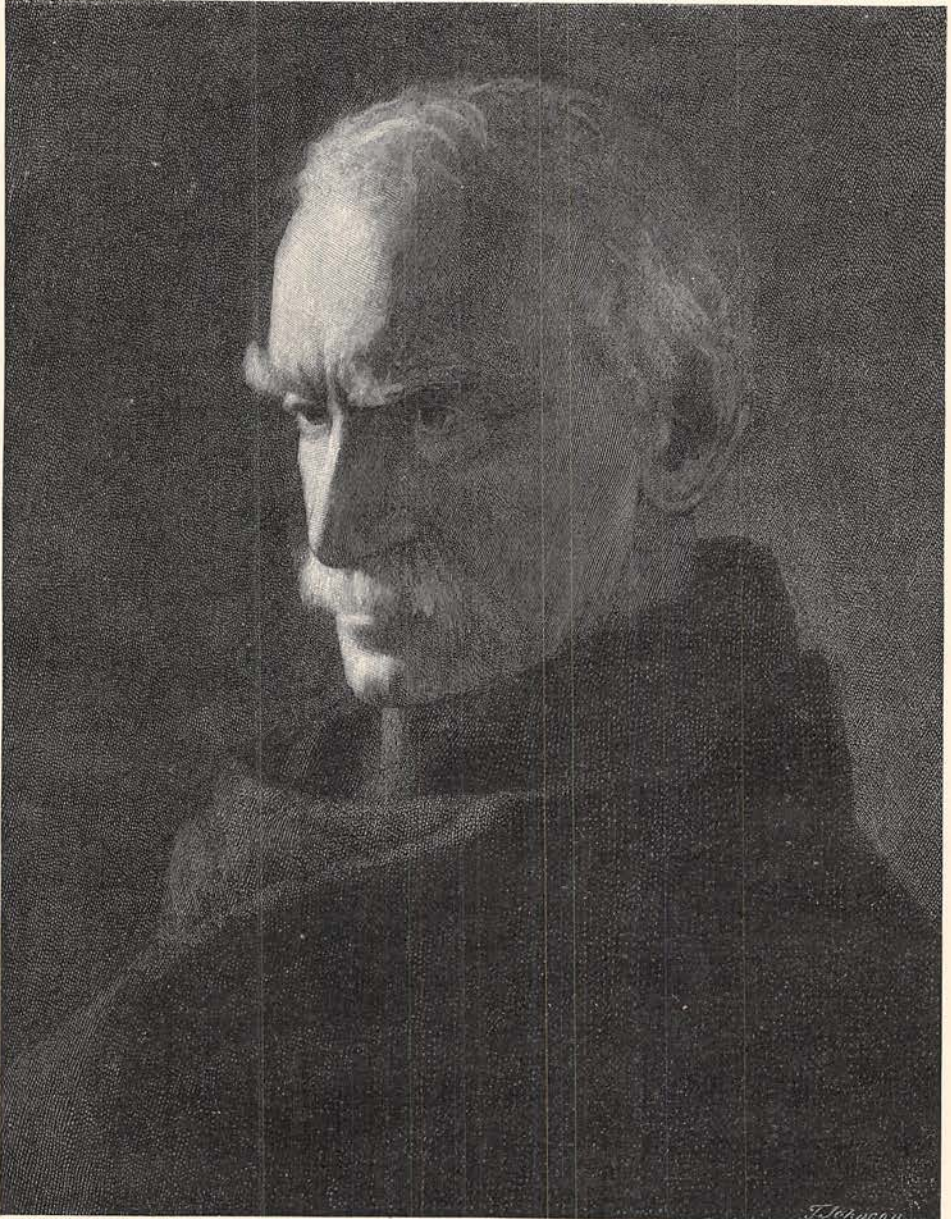
The lips as Cumæ's cavern close,
The cheeks with fast and sorrow thin,
The rigid front, almost morose,
But for the patient hope within,
Declare a life whose course hath been
Unstained still, though still severe,
Which, through the wavering days of sin,
Kept itself icy-chaste and clear.

Not wholly such his haggard look
When wandering once, forlorn, he strayed,
With no companion save his book,
To Corvo's hushed monastic shade;
Where, as the Benedictine laid
His palm upon the convent's guest,
The single boon for which he prayed
Was peace, that pilgrim's one request.

Peace dwells not here—this rugged face
Betrays no spirit of repose;
The sullen warrior sole we trace,
The marble man of many woes.
Such was his mien when first arose
The thought of that strange tale divine,
When hell he peopled with his foes,
Dread scourge of many a guilty line.

War to the last he waged with all
The tyrant canker-worms of earth;
Baron and duke, in hold and hall,
Cursed the dark hour that gave him birth;
He used Rome's harlot for his mirth;
Plucked bare hypocrisy and crime;
But valiant souls of knightly worth
Transmitted to the rolls of Time.

O Time! whose verdicts mock our own,
The only righteous judge art thou!
That poor, old exile, sad and lone,
Is Latium's other Virgil now;
Before his name the nations bow;
His words are parcel of mankind,
Deep in whose hearts, as on his brow,
The marks have sunk of Dante's mind.



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEORGE C. COX.

very sincerely
Your friend & servant
T. W. Parsons