

Oct. 5th, 1894.]

From the first Mr. Aldrich has held the notion that it is not well to present his public with large books. It has been his custom, always, to publish his poems in small, but exquisitely printed volumes. Thus we have the *Cloth of Gold*, *Flower and Thorn*, *XXXVI Lyrics* and *XII Sonnets*, *Friar Jerome's Beautiful Book*, etc., compact, pretty books, easy to hold in one's hand, and the contents all gems. There is no need to tell the story of those volumes in chronological order. Not long ago, the whole series appeared in one book. But Mr. Aldrich's plan has been not to give his readers too much to read at one time.

Our poet's fame will rest upon his lyrics and sonnets. Some of his critics have fancied that his blank verse echoed too closely the manner of Tennyson. This, however, is not so. But Aldrich is happier always in writing melody, and though all through his longer descriptive poems there are beauties to admire, his readers will much prefer the shorter pieces. Here is one which any poet in the world would have been glad to claim. It contains only eight lines, but is a masterpiece, and opens up a whole storehouse of thought. *Identity* is what the poet calls it:

Somewhere—in desolate wind-swept space—
In Twilight-land—in No-man's-land—
Two hurrying Shapes met face to face,
And bade each other stand.

"And who are you?" cried one, a-gape,
Shuddering in the gloaming light.
"I know not," said the second Shape,
"I only died last night!"

Identity is a great poem, startling in idea, and full of a bold and striking philosophy. It crystallizes itself at once on the mind, and compels thought. Of lighter texture is the graceful *nocturne*, *Bellaggio*, clean-cut and refined and showing perfectly Mr. Aldrich's delicious combinations, play of fancy and word-blending. *Across the Street* is of the same class. It used to be said of his love-poems that they lacked passion. They do not, to be sure, belong to the fleshly school of Rossetti and Swinburne, and all of them may be read without fear of taboo. But few of them will be found dispassionate. Polished they are—indeed, Mr. Aldrich's work never loses its polish—but they are not cold or unsympathetic. Sensuous they never are. Rather they may be described as elevating and ennobling. One finds no co-respondent in the lovers who figure in this New England poet's books. The types he creates are not flirts of either sex.

The profuseness of color and warmth of feeling, which abound in Mr. Aldrich's poetry, recall the luxuriance of the orient. He would have made a good Persian. Hafiz has given us nothing better, if we may trust his translators, than "When the Sultan goes to Ispahan," which is winning and strong; and *Dressing the Bride*, fragmentary as it is, paints a portrait which the lover of finished work cannot fail to appreciate. Our readers will agree with us as to its remarkable beauty and completeness:

"So, after bath, the slave-girls brought
The brodered raiment for her wear,
The misty izar from Mosul,
The pearls and opals for her hair,
The slippers for her supple feet,
(Two radiant crescent moons they were,)
And lavender, and spikenard sweet,
And attars, nedd, and richest musk.
When they had finished dressing her,
(The eye of morn, the heart's desire.)
Like one pale star against the dusk,

A single diamond on her brow
Trembled with its imprisoned fire!"

And here is another exquisite fancy,
Eastern too in its wealth of color:

TIGER-LILIES.

"I like not lady-slippers,
Nor yet the sweet-pea blossoms,
Nor yet the flaky roses,
Red, or white as snow;
I like the chaliced lilies,
The heavy Eastern lilies,
The gorgeous tiger-lilies,
That in our garden grow!

For they are tall and slender;
Their mouths are dashed with carmine;
And when the wind sweeps by them,
On their emerald stalks
They bend so proud and graceful—
They are Circassian women,
The favorites of the Sultan,
Adown our garden walks!

And when the rain is falling,
I sit beside the window
And watch them glow and glisten,
How they burn and glow!
O for the burning lilies,
The tender Eastern lilies,
The gorgeous tiger-lilies,
That in our garden grow!"

The same quality of conscientious workmanship is met with in all of Mr. Aldrich's lyrics, and notably in such poems as *The Old Castle*, *The Flight of the Goddess*, *On an Intaglio Head*, *Before the Rain*, *After the Rain*, and *An Untimely Thought*.

In Leigh Hunt's *Book of the Sonnet*, some words of praise are said of Mr. Aldrich's powers as a sonnet writer. He has succeeded in producing a few of the really good sonnets written during the present age. Many have attempted the English sonnet, and many have failed, Longfellow succeeding better, perhaps, than his contemporaries. We may quote here *Pursuit* and *Possession*, which is universally acknowledged to be one of the best specimens of this class of poetry written in America:

"When I behold what pleasure is Pursuit,
What life, what glorious eagerness it is;
Then mark how full Possession falls from this,
How fairer seems the blossom than the fruit—
I am perplexed, and often stricken mute
Wondering which attained the higher bliss,
The winged insect, or the chrysalis
It thrust aside with unreluctant foot.
Spirit of verse, that still elud'st my art,
Thou airy phantom that dost ever haunt me,
Oh never, never rest upon my heart,
If when I have thee I shall little want thee!
Still flit away in moonlight, rain and dew,
Will-o'-the-wisp, that I may still pursue!"

Almost as perfect as the above are *Three Flowers*, inscribed to Bayard Taylor, and *At Stratford-upon-Avon*, dedicated to the poet's life-long friend, Edwin Booth.

Mr. Aldrich has not written many long poems, though, judging from *Friar Jerome's Beautiful Book*, *Judith*, *Wyndham Towers* and the drama, *Mercedes*, he is quite capable of achieving high distinction in that department, and giving us grander and more sustained work than he has yet essayed. *Friar Jerome's Beautiful Book*, A.D. 1200, full of the flavor of the middle ages, is a most striking rhythmical performance. In his youth the Friar had committed a venial fault which preyed upon his mind. His duty was to feed the poor, but one night his soul revolted at the task and he resolved to add to the treasures of the convent one of those illuminated books which have survived the centuries. He had often thought of

"those great tomes
With clamps of gold,—the Convent's boast—

How they endured, while kings and realms
Passed into darkness and were lost;
How they had stood from age to age,
Clad in their yellow vellum-mail,
'Gainst which the Paynim's godless rage,
The Vandal's fire, could naught avail:
Though heathen sword-blows fell like hail,
Though cities ran with Christian blood,
Imperishable they had stood!
They did not seem like books to him,
But Heroes, Martyrs, Saints—themselves
The things they told of, not mere books
Ranged grimly on the oaken shelves."

It was a laudable ambition and the Friar made up his mind to devote the remainder of his days to the great work, which seemed revealed to him as a mission, which he must perform. Then says the poet in this splendid passage:

"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 were 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."

The Friar began his book and bent long and lovingly over the lengthening page, pausing scarcely to tell his beads, save when the night had come. And even then his mind worked, for he lay restless on the straw, anxious and impatient for the morning's dawn. He excused himself, now and then, for forgetting the poor at the convent door, by whispering to himself:

"I feed the souls of men
Henceforth, and not their bodies!"

"Yet," says the poet:

"Their sharp, pinched features, now and then,
Stole in between him and his Book,
And filled him with a vague regret!"

Thus thought and toiled Friar Jerome, now eagerly finishing a vignette, now adding a fragment to a tail-piece, anon painting some grand figure in the Book. He was full of the great work he had in hand, and though a blight had come stealthily upon the region where he lived, and the corn grew cankered in its sheath, and sickness, the "green-spotted terror called the Pest," was hurrying to the grave the young bride, the infant and the strong man, the monk, filled with the magnitude of his task, and unmindful of anything else, still pored over the tome, which grew more and more beautiful under his skilful touch:

"And evermore that dreadful pall
Of mist hung stagnant over all:
By day, a sickly light broke through
The heated fog, on town and field;
By night, the moon, in anger, turned
Against the earth its mottled shield."

Then we have a picture of the friars and the monks, going about two and two, chanting, shriving the sick and burying the dead. Of all the monks only Jerome remained behind, hiding in his dusty nook, resolved at all hazard to complete the last ten pages of his Book. The stately figure of St. John, his master-piece, done, the work as a whole would be finished, and then he would go out with his brethren