

LITERATURE. REVIEW OF NEW BOOKS.

THE EARTHLY PARADISE. By William Morris. Part III. Published by Roberts Brothers, Philadelphia agents, Porter & Gaites. The most ardent lovers of poetry are notoriously shy of long poems, and more than one work of real merit has fallen into neglect because the poet has undertaken to cover too large a canvas, and inspired a fear lest beauties might not be worth seeking amid so much prospective dullness. Indeed, it has been asserted many times that the age of long poems was past, and that the writing of epics was a lost art. It is therefore something very remarkable that a new poet, one of whose most marked characteristics is the length of his effusions, should spring into such immediate popularity as the author of "Jason" and "The Earthly Paradise." Life is short, and there must be many good volumes left unread by the most industrious bookworm. We have, therefore, a right to be suspicious of the quality of an author who astonishes us in the first place by his quantity. "The Earthly Paradise," considered as a consecutive work, will, when it is completed, be one of the longest, if not the longest, poem in existence; and yet there scarcely been a poetical work produced during the present century that has received more hearty and unqualified praise from all the critics of Europe and America that have been called upon to notice it. Under these circumstances, there must certainly be some sterling qualities of excellence that commend the verses of Mr. Morris not only to the critical faculty of those who are called upon to dissect them with a view of finding out the secret of their excellence, but to the popular fancy that is content to enjoy what it finds to be enjoyable without question as to the why or wherefore. The secret of Mr. Morris' success is, however, not difficult to discover—he is a genuine story-teller; in the embellishment of his theme he never forgets that the main object of the story-teller's art is to interest his readers, he never assumes the functions of the philosopher or attempts to soar into those higher regions of fancy where poetry becomes metaphysics, and where men weary of the labors of life hesitate to follow. Mr. Morris acknowledges Chaucer to be his master, and it is necessary to go back to the dawn of English poetry before we can find any writer with whom a comparison can be instituted. Mr. Morris, however, is no more of an imitator of Chaucer than Dante is of Virgil. His genius, though distinctively original, is akin to that of Chaucer, and his poetry has all the unconscious freshness and sympathy with nature that distinguishes the writings of the early poet. The verse of Mr. Morris glides on with an easy flow that never wearies, never satiates; it neither sinks into the level of commonplace nor rises to the heights of the sublime, but is evenly good throughout, and the reader is lulled by its music, and feels that it is just what it ought to be. There are no poetical works before the public to which so little critical objection can be made as those of this writer; he understands his own capabilities so thoroughly, and he writes with such an easy unconsciousness of effort, that he places himself in exact sympathy with the mood of his readers, or rather his poetry creates a mood that will accord with the theme. Mr. Morris fills a place exclusively his own among the poets of the day, and he is deserving of a heartier welcome than has been accorded to any of the new verse writers of the last decade, because of the placid beauty of his style, the pure and healthy tone of all that he writes, and its adaptability to the tastes of a very large circle of readers. It would not be doing justice to this fine poet, however, to leave the impression that the chief merits of his writings consist in placidity and quietness. He is a story-teller, and he knows how to interest his readers in his stories because he is thoroughly interested in them himself. His themes are old, old as humanity; they have been told and retold many times, and a majority perhaps of the tales in "The Earthly Paradise" are old legends that will be recognized by many as among their earliest recollections of imaginative literature. It is not enough to say that these gain a new charm from the treatment of Mr. Morris, but in the telling of them he touches all the chords of human interest and sympathy, so that the reader is surprised at every page by revelations of the longings, hopes, and disappointments of humanity that seem so naturally to belong to the subject, but that the bare outlines of the antique theme scarcely hinted at. This is especially remarkable in the exquisite story of "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," in the present volume, which will astonish and delight those who have hitherto only known it as a singularly imaginative Norse fairy tale. The first volume of "The Earthly Paradise," besides a long prologue relating to the adventures of the wanderer, the failure of their search for the earthly paradise, and their final arrival and hospitable entertainment in the Greek city, where with the elders of the place, they beguile the months by drawing upon their stock of legendary lore, contained twelve tales covering the spring and summer months. The volume before us, which is of nearly equal bulk, only gives six tales for the autumn months, and the winter tales are yet to be told. This shows that Mr. Morris is disposed to be more prolific than ever as he goes on, and his readers may well be almost in despair at being able to keep up with him. These poems of the autumn, however, are not only longer, but they are of a higher quality than those that have preceded them. They are full of exquisite landscape effects, but they deal less with the outward appearances of nature, and more with inner experiences of humanity. Without losing anything of their true narrative character, they are more dramatic in style and manner than anything that is yet written, and they indicate a reserve force that is possibly training for more ambitious work than that of the story-teller, although Mr. Morris may well be con-

tent to rest-satisfied with the laurels that he has won in that particular sphere. The six stories in this Autumn volume are "The Death of Paris," "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," "The Story of Acontius and Cydippe," "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," "The Story of Rhodope," and "The Lovers of Gudrun." The first, third, and fifth are classic, and the others, with the exception of "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," which is an oriental story, are Norse. The Greek subjects have a simplicity and directness that are much in the Greek manner, while those of Northern origin are more or less discursive, in the true Gothic style. It would be impossible within the limits of a newspaper review to give a description of these stories, even if it were desirable, and it is sufficient for us to commend them to our readers, with the assurance that we have been delighted in their perusal. The last and longest story in the series, "The Lovers of Gudrun" is an Icelandic legend, and is a noble poem told. It is stronger, more vigorous, and distinguished by higher poetic qualities than anything that Mr. Morris has yet written. We have no hesitation in praising it as one of the very finest English poems that have been given to the world during the present generation, and it would of itself be sufficient to place Mr. Morris in the front rank of living poets. The scenery, costumes, and characters of this story are set before the reader with remarkable vividness, and even the apparent aimlessness—if we may so term it—of portions of the narrative is perfectly in keeping, and seems to give a verisimilitude to this perfect picture of Icelandic life and society at the time of the introduction of Christianity. The three principal personages are drawn with a skill that shows Mr. Morris to be possessed of a genius that if not dramatic nearly approaches to that quality. The conclusion is a fine example of tragic writing that approaches the intensity of the drama, but that never forgets the style of the story-teller. We cannot refrain from quoting the following magnificent passage where the tender-hearted lover of Gudrun mourns over the body of his proud rival who has fallen by his hand, although we know that very much of its force will be lost by being transferred from its proper place in the narrative:—

—Fair is the night and fair the day, Now April is forgot of May, Now into June may falls away, Fair day, fair night, O give me back, 'Tis that all fair things did lack, Except my love, except my sweet! Blow back, O wind! thou art not kind, Though thou art sweet; thou art no mind, Her hair about my sweet to wind; O flowery sword, though thou art bright, I praise thee not for thy delight, Thou hast not kiss'd her silver feet. Thou know'st her not, O rustling tree, What dost thou then to show me, And kiss'd her foot, and kiss'd her knee, Who shad her breast did never see? O flowers, in vain ye bow down! Ye have not felt her odorous gown, Brush past your heads my lips to meet. Flow on, great river—thou mayst deem That far away, a summer stream, Thou sawest her limbs amidst the gleam, Telling a tale that mortals did lack, Yet get thee swift unto the sea! With naught of true thou wilt me greet, And thou that men call by my name, O helpless one, hast thou no shame, That thou must even look the same, As while ago, as while ago, When thou and she were parted near, And hands, and lips, and tears did meet. Grow weak and pine, lie down to die, O body in thy misery, Because short time and sweet goes by, O foolish heart, how weak thou art! Break, break, because thou needs must part From thine own love, from thine own sweet!

Remarkable as is the merit of "The Lovers of Gudrun," it is doubtful whether it will gain from the majority of readers the same amount of unqualified admiration as the exquisite dream-like tale of "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," which shows Mr. Morris at his best in the capacity of a legendary poet and story-teller. We refrain from making any quotations from this, although much tempted by numerous passages of great beauty, for it is simply impossible to give any adequate idea of the style of Mr. Morris in this manner, and we will be doing our readers a better service by simply inviting them to read and enjoy for themselves. The following song, however, from "The Story of Acontius and Cydippe," is complete in itself, and we therefore give it as a specimen of the lyric quality of the poet:—

Men say that those who went the corpse to bring To Batshad thence, found Bodil muttering Over it, that white face turned up to the sky, Nor did he heed them as they drew along, Therefore they stood by him, and heard him say:— "Perchance it is that thou art far away From us already; caring not at all For what in after days to us may fall— O piteous, piteous!—yet perchance it is That thou, though entering on thy life of bliss, The mood of thy great heart, yet art alone, And some what of my feeble voice can hear; And scarce for pardon will I pray thee, friend, Since thus our love is brought unto no end, But rather now, indeed, begins anew; Yet since a long time past naught good or true My lips might utter, let me speak to thee, If so it really is that thou art free, At peace and happy past the golden gate; That time is dead for thee, and thou mayst wait A thousand years for her and deem it naught. O dead friend, in my heart there springs a thought, That, since with thy last breath thou spak'st her name, And since thou knowest now how longing came Into my soul, thou wilt forgive me yet; That time of times, when in my heart first met Anger against thee, with the sweet, sweet love Wherewith my old dull life of habit rose, So weakly and so vainly—didst thou quite Know all the value of that dear delight As I do? Kieran, she is changed to thee; Yes, and since hope is dead changed to thee; What shall we do, if each of each forgive, We three shall meet at last in that fair heaven The new faith tells of? That and God I pray Impute it not for sin to me to-day, If no thought I can shape thereof; but this, O friend, O friend, when thee I meet in bliss, Will thou not give my love Gudrun to me, Since now indeed this eyes made clear can see That I of all the world must love her most?"

The moral purpose of this remarkable series of poems is the more apparent from the fact that it is never allowed to obtrude itself, and the poet is above everything an artist. But all true art carries its moral with it; and these songs of an unsatisfied heart, as they might be termed, indicate the ippal-

able character of earthly happiness, and the futility of the search for the Earthly Paradise. In the beautiful apologetic verses prefixed to the first volume the poet declares his purpose to— "Strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss, Midmost the beatings of the steady sea, Where tossed about the hearts of men must be," and there is an impalpable quality even in the most vigorous of the poems that leaves the reader unsatisfied and impressed with the thought that not even in poetry, in art, in falling human love is perfect happiness to be realized. There is always something beyond, and still beyond, that the heart longs for, and that the poet's allegory gives us but a glimpse of, like the view that greeted the pilgrims from the summit of the Delectable Mountains. The verse flows on and on in a clear, stainless current, as does the Lethe of Dante's terrestrial paradise, bringing for a season forgetfulness and oblivion of the world and its noises, and leaving the reader's heart softened and his mind purified even by the pictures of fading joy and unsatisfied hopes that it presents. Higher than this the poet does not aim, for, as he says in his "Apology"—

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing, I cannot ease the burden of your fears, Or make quick coming death a little thing, Or bring again the pleasure of past years, Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears. Or hope again for aught that I can say, The idle singer of an empty day. The heavy trouble, the bewildering care That weighs us down who live and earn our bread, These idle verses have no power to bear; So let me sing of names remembered, Because they're living not, cannot be dead, Or long time take their memory quite away From us poor slugs of an empty day. Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time, Why should I strive to set the crooked straight? Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme Beats with light wing against the ivory gate, Or long time take their memory quite away To those who in the sleepy region stay, Lulled by the singer of an idle day."

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