A SHORT COURSE IN BOOK ILLUSTRATION

By Robert Cortes Holliday

ONE time in the long ago — on October 13, 1906, to be quite exact — the New York "Times" was provoked to comment sarcastically on a style of book illustration very much current at that period. It was in the heyday of that stuffed affair known as the "gift book". Of the making of elaborately illustrated editions of every conceivable classic of literature there was no end. Masterpieces, great and little, were illustrated at all hazards, and as often as not with comical inappropriateness. The editorial commentator in the "Times" cited as especially wonderful instances of lack of discrimination the selection of E. W. Kemble, popular as a delineator of the southern darky, to make drawings for "The Vicar of Wakefield", and of Elizabeth Shippen Green, who had gained her following by the sentiment in her drawings of children, to illustrate "The City of Dreadful Night". Hardly anything, of course, could have been more preposterous. There were other examples galore almost as ludicrous. One in particular that the memory cannot lose was the set of drawings commissioned of Howard Chandler Christy for a "de luxe" volume of poems by James Whitcomb Riley. But the book buying public of the time, or at any rate the very considerable and apparently insatiable gift-book buying public, evidently was not perturbed a jot by the phenomenon of a group of aristocratic New York types comporting themselves as natives in the neighborhood of the ol' swimmin' hole. Performances of that kind could be counted on for a great run.

And then, maybe a dozen years or so ago, the huge vogue of the "art book" of this order began to wane. Perhaps in the natural course of things it was on the road to wearing out its welcome. People, it may be, had begun to have enough of such contraptions. At any rate, with the war the flood of elaborately illustrated books of all kinds went out. Highly difficult manufacturing conditions made such volumes too expensive a publishing venture. Books of value to the discriminating student were for a while in eclipse, as well as the erstwhile merely popular picture volumes. Latterly, with the return to better publishing conditions, the illustrated book on a fairly sumptuous scale has been coming back. What, one may inquire, is to be its general tendency in this new day?

We are all very much aware of our literary renaissance. The serious biography has supplanted in popular favor the hack writer's spurious concoctions which of yore loaded the fashionable bookseller's tables — "Georges Sand and Her Lovers", and all that kind of thing. Poetry of intellectual content, the literary essay, criticism, fiction of searching social analysis, of course, are upon the town, and our old friend Pollyanna and her kith and kin are nowhere. Most happily, the trend in recently published books going in more or less lavishly for illustration

has been decidedly in an auspicious direction. These volumes have been mainly bona fide art books: not art books of the rather superficial type which prevailed a good deal in the gift book days — a fancy affair of much picture with a trimming of gossipy text — but the ambitious productions of the historian and the critic. The several months just past have furnished, most notably perhaps, such excellent and enduring volumes as the exhaustive folios on the work of the Adams, by Arthur T. Bolton, curator of the Sloane Museum; the rich and comprehensive work on "Subjects Portrayed in Japanese Color Prints", by Basil Stewart; the study of "Goya as Portrait Painter", by Beruete y Moret, the late director of the Prado; the worthy memorial volume to J. Alden Weir, and the monograph, "Honoré Daumier", with manifold reproductions and sympathetic essays by several hands. And, by the way, another outstanding book of quite authentic art for which we are indebted to recent months is the ever delectable Max Beerbohm's "Rossetti and His Circle". So the times yield a fair enough profit for the student and the amateur of art, the wideawake collector.

But there are signs, too, that in the world of embellished books the millennium is not yet at hand. The publisher today has indicated in a way heartening to those concerned for the matter his confidence in the support of a very fair body of book buyers who are, to some degree, at least, connoisseurs. And there is, in contrast with more florid publishing days of the past, an agreeable absence of "color books" and other such truck. But aroundabout here and there in the new era one begins again to come upon a threatening survival of the most woeful ideas in illustrated editions of works of literature. And is it not one's bounden duty, when he knows them for what they are, to view with alarm the possibility of their return this coming season in greater numbers?

The reason why such senseless book illustration continues to be possible may be illuminated by the following parable. One time not long ago a person who had in youth thought to be a painter and who had directed his early education toward that end was talking for several days, in his home, with a very distinguished poet, one of the very first in rank indeed of our poets: a man of the most lofty artistic conscience in his work, firmly holding to exacting standards of craftsmanship, detesting the faintest breath of the meretricious and the shallow in literature, his life a persistent pondering of the varying aspects of beauty which he feels around him. On his wall, handsomely framed, the visitor observed the original drawing of an "illustration" which had been used in one of this author's books of poems. It was so wretchedly feeble as to make the visitor squirm in his chair to look at it.

With, obviously, a feeling of cheerful approval for the lamentable thing the poet got it down for his friend's closer inspection, and unsuspectingly asked him what he thought of it. Polite, evasive murmurs, his friend felt, in the presence of a nature of such intense sincerity would have been a shabby way out of the situation. And so the matter was frankly taken up — the matter of the appalling discrepancy between the vitality of the author's own work and the total emptiness of the "decoration" made to accompany it, to (shall we say?) "interpret" it. This very sagacious man

of pungent verse didn't require to be hit on the head with a marline spike to get the idea; when (at last) he really looked into that picture he saw that there was nothing there at all.

A perception of the principles of decorative art does not "come natural". It does not even necessarily "go along with" a very careful belletristic education. I have known very celebrated Oxonians whose comments (innocent but firm) on "art" would drive a painter into something like delirium tremens. Any number of people who are in familiar contact with literature have little or no insight into the work of the painter and the draftsman. Paint and line do not talk in the selfsame language as literature.

An uncommonly high and sensitive intelligence in any art is not at all incompatible with a very decided blind spot in regard to another. Painters are not in general noted for their discernment in matters of literature. Nor actors, nor musicians. Indeed, a good many of them (anyone, I think, will say who has lived among them) do not read, to speak of, at all. But a painter (we'll say) does not, usually, "set up" to be an arbiter of taste in literature. A critic of literature would probably dismiss his judgment if he should presume to do so. At any rate, there would not be enough of his kind to affect the course of a work of literature.

On the other hand, I quote from the recent letter of an esteemed book loving friend of mine: "It is quite true that it seems to be more or less generally assumed that if we have something of an instructed and cultivated taste in literature we are, *because* of that, equally sensitive to art." Of course, it is an old, old quarrel between the literary man and the painter. Art is long and this article must be brief. The point of my friend's letter for the discussion in hand comes here: "I frankly admit that I am a perfect dunce as an art critic. I wouldn't think for a minute of posing as such. I do, however, think I know something about *book illustration.*"

He then goes on, it should be added, to tell of the books he has collected for their drawings; and they turn out to represent no duncelike array of art at all: Rowlandson, Cruikshank, Leech, Rackham, Hugh Thomson, and Beerbohm. But an excellent text he has left with us — the notion that one need not be concerned with the principles of some kind of fine art in museums and galleries to have good taste in book illustrations. Bad illustration is frequently furthered by cavalier dicta handed down by some of our favorite book commentators; just the other moment there flitted before my saddened spectacles such a happy go lucky compliment paid to the decorative designs made for a mediæval romance of wide publicity which æsthetically have no business there at all. Editors of publications of excellent literary quality again and again reproduce in the pages under their control illustrations nowhere in keeping with the cultural sophistication of their text — drawings which if they should see them as they see poems they would summarily have thrown out. And in justice to book publishers it should be said that some of their most peculiar offerings in the way of picturified editions of this and that are not inspired solely by an avaricious hope for quick sales. They are not unlikely to think that the stuff is all right.

Not a bad way to come to some appreciation of any art is to realize how bad some of the worst of it is. One of the most deplorable failures in il-

lustrated editions persists with greatest regularity. More often than not the variety of book seized upon is precisely the kind of literature most difficult of all for pictorial art to reflect. There was, indeed, nothing incongruous about William Blake's setting about to make a series of designs for "The Book of Job". And Hans Holbein was in his sphere when he turned for the moment to the illustration of the Old Testament and "The Dance of Death". We need not be aghast at Delacroix's seeking (with questionable success) to interpret "Faust" and "Hamlet". And though Doré's grandiloquent mannerism fell far short of the "Inferno", there is a certain amount of logic in the combination. But such a thing (and it is likely to appear any moment) as an edition of "The Book of Job" illustrated by a young lady entering upon study in the life class at the Art Students' League of New York *is* more than likely to be decidedly worse than senseless.

A small army of illustrators of varying talent have at one time and another essayed the "Rubáiyát", but who has had the peculiar genius to catch the spirit of the magic of Omar Khayyám? Nearly all of the decorated editions are very bad. Frank Brangwyn made the poem an excuse for a set of colorful posters. Elihu Vedder, doubtless, came nearest to the spirit of the Persian philosopher, and is the standard. But, to my mind, he is pretty prosaic. I seem to feel a decided lack of wine in his nature.

Now, it takes something more than a little talent to create a picture which has any value to it of such a thing as, let us say, Morning in the Bowl of Night flinging the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight. The common resource of the journeyman illustrator who has the cheerful temerity to attack the symbolism in works of literary genius is vagueness. And when he leaves everything, so to say, up in the air, he is pretty sure to be complimented here and there upon having his work "full of feeling". In fact, this lack of clarity which is thought by some to be a mark of the imagination is much more apt to be the mark not of imagination but of the absence of it. The more farfetched the literary image, the more precise in the hands of a great artist generally has been the presentation of it. There is no feeling about blindfolded in a mist in the actually sublime "Apocalypse" woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer.

Many a profound masterpiece of literature reduced to a bare outline of its concrete action would be but a sorry story — and that precisely is what popular illustrated editions often have made of them. Edmund J. Sullivan, himself an illustrator of distinction, in an excellent volume for the student, "The Art of Illustration" (1921), cautions his reader to be diffident about undertaking to make an illustration for the line: "O Absalom, my son, my son!" Dramatic gesture alone is untrue. The drama of a broken heart becomes (in another way) more heartbreaking still when travestied by gesticulating hands, extended fingers and protruding eyes.

It is a familiar thing to find a literary work of lofty moral or lyrical exaltation accompanied by a set of what may correctly be called costume plates. What happens is that the characteristic magic of the work begins to evaporate as soon as the dramatis personæ are bodied forth to the eye in the dress of the period; the drawings convey nothing more than do the illustrations of a melodramatic novel. The story element is emphasized and the lyricism or fervor expelled — it is

the mediocre husk alone that remains.

But enough of this side of the matter. The best way to come at an understanding appreciation of any art is to cultivate an acquaintance with the best that has been done in it. Books were illustrated from the beginning. Erudite interest in finely illustrated books has resulted in various public and private collections of noteworthy examples. A memorable collection which exemplified book illustration at its best throughout four centuries was assembled in the print gallery of the New York Public Library in 1919. An instructive little essay called "The Illustrated Book", by Frank Weitenkampf, chief of the arts and prints division, may be had of the Library for a very nominal charge. It consists of "notes" on the exhibition prepared for the Library Bulletin, reprinted together with several illustrations. Uniform with this leaflet, and likewise to be obtained, is a valuable pamphlet by Dr. Weitenkampf entitled "Illustrated Books of the Past Four Centuries", a record of the exhibition in the form of a catalogue elaborately annotated from many sources. Dr. Weitenkampf is the author, too, of a very useful little historical volume called "American Graphic Art", issued by a New York publishing house in 1912, which contains a chapter on our book illustration. All in all, the illustrative work of America is in many ways perhaps more interesting than that of any other country; at least Mr. Pennell has asserted that it is.

Though the supreme classics of literature have not always fared well at the hands of the illustrators, they have repeatedly engaged the powers of men of genius. The Dantesque illustrations of Botticelli presented a conjunction of two spirits which enriched the world of art with some enchanting designs, and gave stimulus to the analysts of the poet. The idea of the need for an artist to adjust his design to the conditions of the printer was of later date. The independent pictorial interpretation of a great literary theme, even when successful from the literary or artistic point of view, is not logically an illustration, even when bound into a book by means of "inserts" or other devices. Illustration should comport in perfect harmony with the printed page, a result which has not been achieved by many illustrious artists.

The history of book illustration from the earliest times follows, of course, the history of the development of processes for reproducing decorative designs; and the art finds an expression not only in the individuality of the artist but, naturally, in the group individuality of the nation or race. An Italian classic of the fifteenth century changes its color with the cuts redrawn in a French edition of the sixteenth century.

A very rapid survey of the field of outstanding modern book illustration may have its uses. The Pre-Raphaelites Rossetti and Millais appropriately lent their hand to the illustration of the Moxon "Tennyson" (1857), which introduces the group known as the men of the 'sixties. In this group was included Charles Keene, who stands as the equal of any of the world's master draftsmen. In Germany at approximately this time Adolf Menzel, one of the greatest illustrators of the century, was employed upon his two hundred illustrations for the works of Frederick the Great. In France, in 1863 or thereabout, Doré's "Don Quixote" and Rabelais illustrations, done with so much *élan*, were entering upon their immense vogue—now gone down the wind. And a little later in Lon-

don John Tenniel made the forty-two drawings which probably will always stand as the rare right illustrations for "Alice in Wonderland".

Nothing more exquisitely appropriate can be found in book illustration than the drawings made early in the nineteenth century by Edwin Abbey for Herrick, "Old Songs", and "She Stoops to Conquer". If his famous Shakespeare illustrations express grace rather than dramatic force or grandeur, he at least did as well as anyone has ever done. It is to be regretted that his fellow countryman of the period, Howard Pyle, though he exercised his distinguished and versatile gifts throughout thirty years of prominent attainment, did not set himself to some work which would stand as a particular monument. In England at about this time a boy of twenty, Aubrey Beardsley, was lavishing his rich invention and the resources of his decorative line upon the five hundred and forty-eight vignettes and decorative borders which he did for the "Morte d'Arthur". And a French gift of rare talent to the art of illustration of the period was the Boutet de Monvel "Jeanne d'Arc" drawings. Many lesser though happy unions of pen or brush with classic text have of necessity in this space been passed over.

In the infant years of the present century was issued a work which in high authority is held to be the pinnacle of book illustration, the Daniel Vierge edition of "Don Quixote" (1906). In this overshadowing undertaking the most noted pen draftsman of his age, as Royal Cortissoz observes in his introduction to the volumes, rounded out his long and active life as though with a predestined felicity. Throughout his years he had cultivated the medium of the pen with close reference to modern reproductive processes. Spanish born, Velasquez and Goya his ancestors and true masters, he gives us a brilliant and worthy interpretation of one Spanish master by another.

Would that artist and publisher and general public could in this day draw more into "cahoots" — the possibilities of book illustration would be illimitable.