

explanations, and soon plunges enthusiastically into a new venture for the next season, with too much likelihood of a similar experience.

The details involved in the production of an illustrated book are many, and the pitfalls into which an unwary editor may stumble are at every hand. The artist may fail to grasp the theme, and prove to have been a wrong selection; or the drawings may be admirable in the judgment of severe critics, yet be far away from popular understanding or sympathy; or the engravers may fail to render rightly the tones of the drawings; or the paper selected may be too pink or too red in tint, or otherwise deficient; or the wood-blocks may be spoiled by the electrotyper; or the printer, the excellence of whose work depends on conditions of the atmosphere, may fail to obtain good impressions of the cuts; or the sheets may be pressed before they are sufficiently dry, causing the ink to 'offset'; or the binder's stamp for the cover, which looked so well in the colored design, may prove to be something positively ugly. If all these dangers are successfully avoided and the perfected book equals the expectations of its planners and builders, the triumph is complete—almost. For then comes the question, will it sell? Yes, somewhat. Few holiday books fail altogether, but the active sales are crowded into three weeks' time. During this short period orders flow in for it. In the last week there are many orders from distant cities and near cities; Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, demand more copies, all of which is very bustling and stimulating, and to an inexperienced observer success seems assured. But the investment in drawings and engravings require a sale of perhaps three thousand copies before profit begins, and hence the activity, the bustle of the last week's demand may be considerable, and yet the accounts after Christmas show many copies left over and the book in debt. The unsold remainder is now packed away until the following Christmas, with the expectation that it will then be worked off and the financial scale turned. But as an old rustic acquaintance of mine was wont to say, '*Calcutization* is one thing and realization another.' When next Christmas comes, it is found that everyone wants the new issues of the season, that the books of former years are an old story, out of date and out of fashion. The old king is dead; it is the new king that reigns.

Holiday books in recent years have multiplied greatly, because drawings may be re-produced by either photogravure or phototype. In the latter form the publisher makes no investment, except in the drawings. These are printed from photographic reproductions of the originals, at a rather large cost for each impression, but there being no investment in steel-plates or wood-blocks, a small edition is sufficient to pay. The ease and apparently little cost with which illustrations may thus be produced have led to the publication of ambitious and costly folios, many of which are very artistic and reflect great credit upon artists and publishers. But the size is cumbersome, the prices are high, and hence although a small sale would be sufficient, I am afraid the results in most cases have not been pecuniarily gratifying. Phototype re-productions, moreover, are not always artistically satisfactory. In some instances the artist's drawings have been admirably repeated; but great care, large experience, and exact knowledge are necessary, and hence many attempts in this direction are scarcely acceptable.

It is supposed by many people that anything, especially in the way of a poem, will do for a Christmas book. So far from this being true, all experience has shown that favorite poems only will do for the purpose—poems like 'The Deserted Village,' Gray's 'Elegy,' 'The Forest Hymn' and 'Snowbound.' Well-established favorites, such as these, alone will justify expenditure for illustrations, unless the artist has a great reputation. Recently a number of popular hymns and short religious poems have been issued in tiny volumes invitingly illustrated, bound in a showy manner, and sold at a low price—glittering trifles that appeal to the

## The Mystery of the Christmas Book

THE senior partner of one of our well-known publishing-houses said recently to his younger partners and head assistants: 'I hope I shall never see another Christmas book published by us. After I am dead, do as you please, but while I live please make no more books for the holidays.'

Inasmuch as the holidays are supposed to be the harvest-time of the book-publishers, this remark will surprise many of my readers. 'Assuredly,' it will be said, the holidays are the publishers' money-making season. Look at the thronged bookstores, at the counters piled with volumes prepared for it, at the busy salesmen, at the innumerable parcels ready for delivery! And do we not know that on Christmas-day countless thousands of volumes go hither and thither, making glad the hearts of their recipients? It cannot be possible that this gay and glittering season is in any form a delusion—that the sumptuous volumes that come forth with the embers of the year, with all the art, the taste, the care, the wealth, that are lavished upon them, do not bring substantial rewards to those who project them. These are natural comments, yet strange as it may seem, it is not only possible but generally true that the making of Christmas books is not the brilliant thing financially that it seems to be.

I know how promptly my assertion will be met with the rejoinder: 'If holiday books do not pay, why do publishers produce them?' Will the logical reader who asks this question explain how it is that people persist in investing in stocks, in face of all the disastrous consequences that commonly follow an excursion into Wall Street? Will they tell how it is that the gambler, wrecked many times, still returns to the gaming-table, fascinated by its excitement and thrilled with assurance of better luck to come? The making of Christmas books is attended with just these conditions. It is a fascinating pursuit in itself, and its victims are always allured by the hope of a brilliant success next time.

A man who has once edited an art-book has awakened in himself an appetite that will be sure to hunger for the same kind of fruit again. The hunting through poetic literature for a subject, the contact and consultation with artists, the delight experienced as the drawings are brought in, the anxieties, often painful yet absorbing, which attend watching each illustration through the hands of the engraver, the study of designs for the binding—these appeals to the imagination, these exercises of taste and invention, although usually accompanied with many disappointments and vexations, are as exhilarating as champagne. Naturally they prove inducements for new ventures in the artistic field. The book of last year had not wholly succeeded; it had been praised; it had sold moderately well, yet not well enough to yield a profit; but next time the projector is sure that all will be changed. Mistakes had been made which he now knows how to avoid. The book came out too late; the price was too high; there were too many competitors in the field; the binding had been ineffective; the theme was not popular enough—thus the victim deludes himself with excuses and

highest religious sentiment and the smallest incomes, and hence have been successful. But pretty much everything in the language well adapted for a Christmas book has been used. People whose recollections extend back thirty years will recall the charming volumes that came from the prolific pencil of Birket Foster. But Birket Foster has left no successor in England, and only in a few instances has his success been equalled here. He fairly exhausted English poetic literature, that is, the shorter poems adapted for illustration. Artists of to-day have been compelled to travel largely over his well-beaten ground, so far as the poetry of England is concerned. I am mindful, however, of one delightful idyl of Tennyson's that has not so far stimulated the ambition of any artist. I refer to 'The Gardener's Daughter'—a poem full of enchanting pictures. A dozen years ago two attempts were made to illustrate this poem, but the preliminary drawings were so unsatisfactory that the project was abandoned. It was then proposed to the English publishers of Tennyson to produce it in conjunction with an American house. 'We should be glad to act upon the suggestion,' was the reply, 'but who can do it?' Since then a number of brilliant young artists have sprung up, and it may now be worth while to try again. Would it succeed? The chances for it would be as promising as for almost any other English subject, and this is all that can be said.

The ranks of experimenters in Christmas books, notwithstanding all these facts, are not likely to fall off in number, for a time at least. As one house gains experience and withdraws or narrows its operations, other houses eagerly enter the field. Sometimes a house makes a hit with its first book and then confidently rushes into other ventures, only to find that victory is not always to the brave. I recall an anecdote that is applicable here. 'When I went into business,' said an old publisher to me once, 'my first book was a failure. One day a veteran of the trade walked into my office and said, "I have come to congratulate you on the failure of your book." "To congratulate me!" I exclaimed. "Yes," he interrupted, "for if your first book had been a success, you would have been sure that you knew everything, and have branched out recklessly. Now you have learned caution, and therefore your ultimate success is certain. So I congratulate you."'

My observations have referred exclusively to books prepared especially for holiday sales, and which are not in demand at other periods. There is a large consumption at Christmas of books of a different character—books of a class which alone, I apprehend, proves profitable. I refer to choice standard editions of favorite poets, with or without illustrations, and sets of well-known authors, put up in attractive bindings. These are asked for at all seasons, and simply enjoy a stimulated sale in December. This demand, which may be always depended upon, which cares nothing for the fashion of the hour, is what, according to my judgment, the publisher should cater for. And I am informed that it has lately much increased, which may account in part for the ill-fortune that has befallen so many ambitious tomes called forth by the magic name of Christmas.

It is a wonder that so many copies of pictorial books are sold. What satisfaction, for instance, can it be for a gentleman to present to a lady a copy of a book—other copies of which have been paraded for six weeks on every book-counter in town, and which is therefore necessarily familiar to everybody—a book which very likely the lady herself has purchased as a gift for a friend. There is no novelty, no freshness, no element of surprise, in such a gift. How much better to select in time some choice copy of an English classic, in an unduplicated binding, or some neat set of books put up by a tasteful bookseller, for just such selection.

I have made no reference to books for children—juvenile books, as the trade classifies them. The aggregate sale of books for young people is something immense and incalculable, as we all know. Innumerable houses in which a book does not enter from Christmas to Christmas, open their

doors at this season, if there is a child in the family, for something in the way of a book. But while the consumption of children's books is very great, the competition is intense, and in the struggle many promising works go to the wall. Very beautiful are some of the issues published for the little ones. One house in New York puts forth every season a volume for children that for artistic beauty is really captivating. This book—so choice, so charming in every feature—is, I am informed, printed in Germany, large editions being duplicated for America, for France, and for England; and by means of this great sale a return is assured which, if the work, with its large original cost, were made for one market alone, would be impossible to secure. Perhaps we shall in time see some such world-plan enter into the production of the Christmas book for elders. One thing to deter this, however, is that abroad, especially in England, Christmas books are almost exclusively for young people; gifts between adults are not exchanged nearly so generally as with us.

The activity in the bookstores may thus be accounted for by the purchase of children's books, of the works of poets, essayists, romancists and historians, of Bibles, prayer-books, hymnbooks and albums, and of numerous miscellaneous selections—the gay and sumptuous volumes, which occupy so large a place on the counters, which have been produced at such great cost and with so much watchful care, filling but a small part in the general bustle.

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