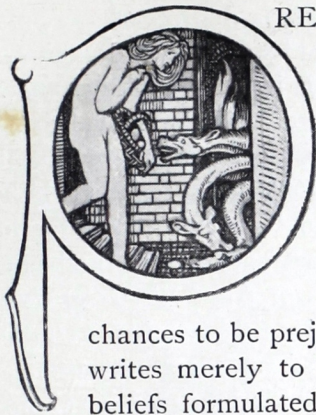


THE WORK OF CHARLES RICKETTS



RE-RAPHAELITE!—the term is accepted, and

a singularly individual movement of romanticism in literature and art must needs be content with the ill-formed adjective. But when one sets out on a career of appreciation of an artist who restricts himself to this method of expression that is not, and never was, sympathetic to the masses, it is with no hope of convincing any one who

chances to be prejudiced against it. In writing of art, the critic writes merely to convince himself. When he sees his vague beliefs formulated in a sort of creed, it strengthens his own faith, and he feels, no doubt, that he is right; thus he is assured of one convert at least.

But although Mr. Charles Ricketts would probably not refuse to call himself a Pre-Raphaelite, if forced to adopt the nickname of a great school, yet it is also certain that his definition of the aims and ideals conveyed by that word would differ entirely from the current acceptance. The original Brotherhood have recorded their own intentions often enough—a whole literature of misrepresentation has also gathered round the school—so that it is best here to insist that the Pre-Raphaelitism of Mr. Ricketts is best understood by study of his work. In place of attempting to define the expression and show how loyally the artist obeys its most stringent rules, it were best to call attention to his method and his achievements, and let those who will deduce the creed from the practice. For any direct statement of Pre-Raphaelite aims and ideals seems doomed to be misinterpreted; one has but to turn to a journalistic notice of the Arts and Crafts movement, or of the Kelmscott Press editions, or to the criticism of any work concerned with decorative intention, to discover that all the qualities which chance to conflict with the writer's own standard of taste are dubbed impartially 'Pre-Raphaelite' or 'Impressionist,' although for the most part unconcerned with either.

Nor is it needful here to trace the evolution of the Pre-Raphaelite illustration, under the hands of various exponents, from *The Germ* until it was almost totally neglected. The best men of the new movement, that supplanted it for a while, contented themselves with a quiet effort to attain naturalistic effects without striving to keep their work intensely

intensely strained in its expression and full of spirituality. The Pre-Raphaelite ideal has always insisted on a high degree of nervous tension, and this may be taken as the boundary between two domains.

In 1870 the *Graphic* was started, and with it grew rapidly a new influence which, for a time at least, caused the Pre-Raphaelite ideal to be no more sought after. No longer was there even a desire to represent things, with every possible circumstance, closely knit together in a design meant to be pleasant to the eye. In its stead, character in isolation was the ruling motive, with just enough actuality in the background to convey time and space. The pages of *Good Words* or *Once a Week* show this gradual change of front in men working simultaneously. The drawings by Boyd Houghton form a connecting link between the old and new methods, the work of Sir John Millais shows also instances of both manners achieved with equal perfection; but the majority are attracted by newer gods. After the death of Boyd Houghton, Pinwell, and Fred Walker, Charles Keene alone remained faithful to an entirely naturalistic convention, which at the same time escaped the mere prettiness that rapidly degraded the style of others.

The Dalziel Bible Gallery, a monumental attempt to bring black and white up to the level of its earlier triumphs, must not be forgotten. It is curious to find how this book, which to-day appears to be what modern jargon would style an epoch-making document, excited no great sympathy when it was published in 1881, and apparently failed to influence the younger men who might have been expected to swear allegiance to its principles. If you compare those illustrations with the average work at the moment of its publication, you cannot fail to realise how wide a field has been traversed by English draughtsmen, and how often and how irresponsibly they have changed their aims. For this work, prepared many years previously, and detained by accidental circumstances, retained the stately phrase of a grander style. Although its contributors showed singularly unequal merit, the best bade fair, even from their accomplishment therein, to be ranked ultimately among the great black and white artists, irrespective of locality or date.

In his children's toy-books, which have given their author a wider Continental reputation than most people imagine, Mr. Walter Crane created a new impulse. Voluntarily enlisting themselves under the standard he then set up, some twenty years after a school of followers have tardily sprung into being with alarming fecundity; a school that is satisfied for the most part if it can be decorative, ingenuous, and quaint.

Its

Its followers display, it is true, a certain inept alacrity, and no little dexterity of a cumbrous sort, but for the most part lack entirely the real fancy, or the naïve humour which distinguishes the work of Mr. Walter Crane's best period.

Quite recently we have welcomed the drawings by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, cut in wood for the Kelmscott Press editions, and here and there, both in England and on the Continent, are to be seen the first attempts at a new renaissance of the Pre-Raphaelite idea, which, born in England, and peculiar to our country, is nevertheless still regarded as exotic, even by those who could so easily be better informed.

The prominent place of Mr. Ricketts in this movement need not be discussed here; it is already evident to many, and because a large number of these chance to be removed from the parochial influences of contemporary criticism, it seems only logical to accept their opinion as the foreshadowing of a future English verdict. Lookers-on see most of the game; yet it would be foolish to set the verdict of the Continent in opposition to that of the current periodical, were it not that the one is the expression of artists, while the other is chiefly that of journalists.

That much of Mr. Ricketts' earlier work is not accepted by its author as representative in any way, need not be urged against him or it. The unfettered illustrations, produced for no programme, and regardless of exterior criticism, may be said to begin with *The Dial*,

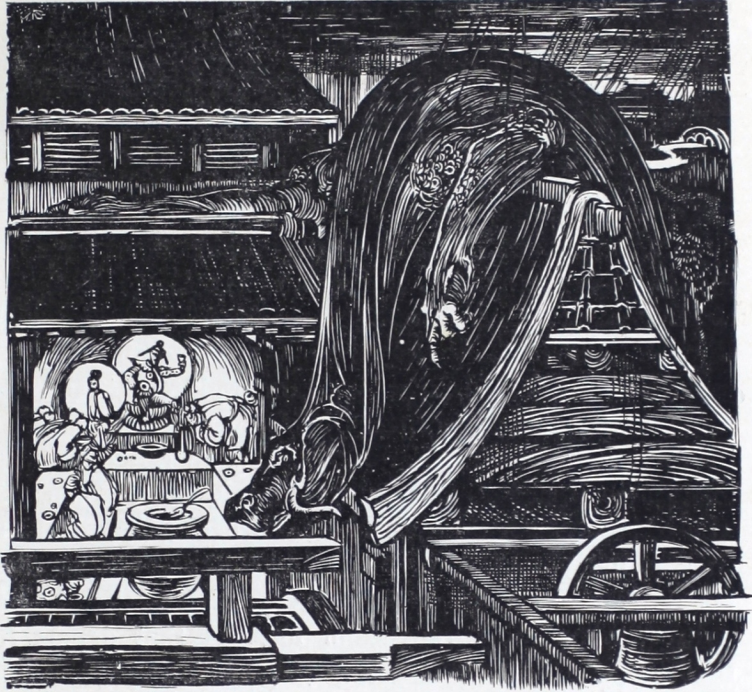
No. 1



No. 1, a magazine privately published, in conjunction with some friends, by the artist, then under the age of twenty-one, at The Vale, Chelsea. This sumptuous quarto, although technically a private enterprise, was sold to the public, and its limited edition exhausted speedily. It found appreciation not merely at home but abroad, and despite its restricted issue, has had no little influence on contemporary workers. This was soon followed by *The House of Pomegranates*, a book which contains illustrations, together with the rather unsuccessful cover of peacocks in gold and ivory, entirely (with the exception of the full-page plates) from Mr. Ricketts' hand. These display, no less surely than the *Dial* illustrations, the peculiar individuality of his style. Later on, the *Poems of Lord de Tabley*, clad in a cover from his design, contained five elaborate illustrations which show the more dramatic, the more substantial, and the more really Pre-Raphaelite aspect of his talent, and are evidence of the survival of the Pre-Raphaelite idea, still possessing the vigour of its first imagination.

All these so far are pen-drawings, reproduced by process—full of intricate dexterity, and abounding in elaborate conceits both of idea and technique. But another side of Mr. Ricketts' art that has engrossed his attention for some years, and still appears to fascinate him most, is conceived in a very different mood. This work, invariably engraved, by its author, is imbued with the spirit of early Italian wood-cutting, and faithful to the convention developed by the artists who illustrated the *Hypnerotomachia*, the *Quadriregio*, and other Venetian and Florentine books. In the Vale editions of *Daphnis and Chloe*, a reprint of Thornley's translation of Longus' idyll, and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, the illustrations throughout are not merely designed, but cut in wood, by the artist; and in their complete unity of idea and handling must needs prove extremely interesting, even to those who fail to sympathise with the spirit of their design. The marriage of art with craft is peculiarly popular among people who talk about the applied arts to-day; but the union often enough appears to be ill-assorted and temporary. Here so absolutely integral is the line conceived and the line resulting, that you cannot sever them, even in thought. These illustrations are severe in their direct statement, suave in curve, and full of lavish invention; yet their effects are always gained by the most reticent expression of the idea. Courteous and scholarly, they do not aim to astonish, or to betray mastery of technique. It is surprising, indeed, to compare the *Œdipus* (a pen-drawing in the possession of Sir Frederick Leighton)
here

here reproduced, with one of the illustrations to the poem of *The Sphinx*. In the earlier work, minute decoration, elaborate symbolism, exquisite daintiness of finish, are carried to their final utterance; in the other,



the adventurous idea is curbed, and the prodigal imagination brought within the most restrained limits. The one leaves unrecorded no facet of the flashing crystal of the idea itself: the most ingenious student can scarce elucidate the many-sided presentation of the subject which is always consistently elaborated to develop the central motive of the composition, while its main intention is apparent at the most casual glance. In the other, the main purpose of the imagined poem in line is directly insisted upon, and reiterated without any comments or similes. Each class appeals to students; but whereas merely intelligent patience may unravel the first, to grasp the intention of the second demands a poetic vision hardly less keenly sustained than that of its author. Such work never has been, and is never likely to be, popular with the multitude. The simplicity of the commonplace they understand; the perplexity of the complex is also sufficiently dazzling to charm, if not to convince, them; but the final simplicity which is not to be appreciated without equal renunciation on the part of the spectator—equal knowledge of his unexpressed but deliberate ignoring of all but the essential—that can never appeal to any but those already in touch with the idea. Merely to be misunderstood is no proof of genius;

genius ; bad grammar, or infelicitous expression, may accomplish as much ; but to be misunderstood of the careless or ignorant, and yet understood of artistic people, has often been the reward of an artist.

Leaving for a moment the directly pictorial work, one has only to study his designs for covers, and the printed pages of books produced under his direction, to discover even stronger evidence of his influence upon younger men. True it is, that the new crusade to bring together the harmony of the type and its decoration cannot be credited solely to Mr. Ricketts in face of the achievements of the Kelmscott Press. But the artist, in the daring of youth, has combined intense loyalty to precedent, with experiment based on tradition. Saturated with knowledge of the past, his Pegasus has nevertheless shaken its wings and essayed fresh flights. For his first manner, one has but to turn to a prospectus issued to announce the advent of a new *Dial*, or to the title-page of *Silverpoints*, or to still earlier books for which he is responsible, to find absolutely new arrangements of older motives. Fantastic, bizarre, and with splendid audacity, the unalterable *tesserae* of the printer's type are arranged in mosaics that depart from no single tradition, and yet reunite to display a score of fresh devices. In later examples of this class there is a marked change ; despite the success of his improvisations, the importance of style is now more obviously felt, obedience rather than invention is the aim. For this newer work, despite its original appearance, is built on ancient models to an extent scarce suspected by chance observers, because the artist has explored the past very thoroughly and discovered new models worthy of revival, and deduced from them new rules unsuspected heretofore. The legerdemain of a Houdin, prince of jugglers, dealt with gorgeous but impossible objects—cubes and cones wrought with mystic devices, and all the tinselled paraphernalia of the property-man ; that of the great modern exponent of sleight-of-hand astounds you the more, although he juggles with the commonest objects of the household. All your wonder is called forth by the sheer artistry of the consummate master, and by no extraneous adjuncts. Mr. Ricketts' effects, so far, belong to the latter class. From the ordinary types of the best founders he has evolved new triumphs, austere yet seductive, in detail absolutely obedient to self-imposed rules, but in massing and architectural arrangement, novel and vivid, as, for instance, in the *Silverpoints* before mentioned.

Cloth-binding

Cloth-binding, but latterly a thing of horror, has suddenly become illuminated with intelligence; and for this no second name need be coupled with that of Mr. Ricketts. In his splendid decorations for many modern books, too familiar to people of taste to need cataloguing here, he has set up new standards that have been largely appreciated, and unluckily as largely imitated. Take, for instance, a beautiful cover to one



of these books, with its three rigidly symmetrical trees, and you will see that a distinctly Eastern flavour pervades it, yet the spirit of the Renaissance infuses all to a sober simplicity. The richness is obtained by using certain contours and forms sublimated to their most naïve expression. The straight lines of the tree trunks, the absence of any definition of the individual leaves, the domestic fascination of the

tiny flowers, that might have been raised in the garden of a jeweller—all are contrived to afford a curiously romantic pattern, that is old-world in its essence but not in its handling. For these covers contain an entire rule of his own as to how metal stamps should be understood in the decoration of a book. If one looks at merely technical facility in employing the material wisely, the absence of any pictorial detail, the gorgeous effect of plain masses of gold upon the subtly coloured cloths chosen to receive the metal stamped upon its surface—all these subordinate items are worthy of appreciative study, for they are not accidental matters, left to the tradesman's fancy.

In the designs themselves one discovers sufficient material to supply a whole army of hungry designers, and leave many basketsful of fragments to be gathered up. Only a fellow-decorator can fully appreciate this single by-path of Mr. Ricketts' art: only one who has studied pattern-making can entirely realise the new impetus he has given to the craft. Hence it would be foolish to indulge in rhapsodies which would be superfluous to those who know, and unintelligible to the rest.

That his work is prized abroad has been stated here before. That his wood-cutting is a sustained effort to preach anew a truth out of favour at present, is also patent enough; but in returning to Mr. Ricketts' pictures in black and white, one must not forget to insist on the importance of recognising in them a gift of narrative that is happily allied to the research of handling. Invention and technique are poised in masterly balance. On purely typographical grounds one must dissect them, and note the well-arranged changes of line to suit the type destined to be set with the woodcut. Thus when the pictures (as in Lord de Tabley's poems) are inserted as full-page plates, they fulfil a distinct pictorial convention, and hardly consider the type-page; but when (as in *The Sphinx*) they are embedded in the text, they are intensely conventional, and entirely disdain the naturalistic circumstances and intricate workmanship of the earlier book. Yet all the same they equal the earlier fancies in complexity of idea and intensity of situation. Planted among the type they forbear to arrogate supreme importance to themselves. Although dominating the page, they do so with a courteous affectation of being merely decorative adjuncts; yet all the time they maintain their dignity unimpaired. In the illustrations to *The Sphinx*, where the type, sparsely planned to decorate large pages, supplies a modicum of text, the pictures are also in delicate lines,

lines, with masses of white to balance and accord with the matter of the book. The mere spacing of the pages and the placing of the pictures and text in this one volume would suffice, did space permit, to demonstrate the principle of balance and harmony which it is the peculiar aim of Mr. Ricketts to secure.

So much for their technical fascination. In their pictured fancies accompanying *Poems Dramatic and Lyrical*, by Lord de Tabley, you are not, as it were, confronted by the plane of the white page. Through it, you gaze into time and space far removed from everyday associations; and the glimpses of things scarce known before brand themselves deep into the memory, with all the fascination of things seen for the first time; for the artist's power of re-edifying the crumbled palaces beyond the gates of ivory is akin to the cunning of a slave of the lamp. Take, for instance, the 'Nimrod,' and note how the impassivity of the stricken hero, with all the accidents of cloud and flame, is rendered more impressive by the oak-sprig in his girdle, plucked from the tree which has since fallen behind him. The lightning still playing on his crown, upon every metallic surface of his spear, and the decoration of his garments, leaves no doubt of the source of the catastrophe. Nor must one fail to recognise the tact of the artist in closing the eyes of the man, who seems to be the only thing remaining alive when all has crumbled about him. To analyse these more minutely, it is interesting to compare the different treatment of the nerveless hand of the Nimrod who has dropped his shield with the searching hands of the figure that represents Death (in the frontispiece 'Death of the Old King'). Nor should one fail to notice the fantasy that depicts this figure picking a laurel wreath to pieces, leaf by leaf, nor the admirable conceit in crowding his lap full of love-letters and locks of hair.

The designs for a forthcoming edition of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, some of which are here given before being cut on the wood, fulfil very different conditions. There is an ingenious touch in making Psyche pensive before the painted representatives of the Loves of the Gods, and one that does not lack humour, elsewhere a not unusual quality in the artist's work, although rarely evident on the surface.

But it would be almost impertinent to attempt to compile a guide-book to the wonderland of Mr. Ricketts' imagination. Only a poet can fully gauge the whole of a poet's meaning. One must remember that

months

months of patient thought in elaborating the germ of an idea, and then presenting it in a way purposely sublimated and reduced to its most meagre essentials, leave no result that he who runs may read. Great ideas slowly shaped require no little study to realise their concealed variety.

As a last word, it may be wise to say that, in the illustrations here reproduced, we see but one side of Mr. Ricketts' art. For, with a single exception, they are all reproductions of pen-drawings made for process, or drawings intended to be, but not already, cut on wood. The little dragon on the roof affords a solitary example of his most expressive manipulation of the yet unappreciated line of the wood-block. The etcher's line has been the subject of many rhapsodies; but the line of the great wood-engraver is still to be commemorated by a perfect eulogy. A line that varies from that of Dürer to the white line of Linton, that can imitate the nervous accent of the brush of Hokusai, or accord gracefully with the labial fluid curves of the great Italians, a line that ranges from the wooden inelegance of the journeyman engraver to the sentient, emotional touch of Mr. Ricketts, is of no slight importance. It can be the meanest or the most beautiful of lines, according to the handling of the one who cuts it, and let us not forget that, unlike the Japanese engraver and the dexterous American engravers, Mr. Ricketts invents the work to be cut; that, even in the past, such men are few in number, and that he already has his following. It is of less importance to decide whether the art of wood-cutting is dying out for popular use, or is being restricted to the highest employment only from the commercial rivalry of process work. While an artist so accomplished and withal so reticent in the mere virtuosity of his craft handles it as Mr. Ricketts can, one need not fear for its immediate future, or doubt that the end of the nineteenth century will leave new masterpieces for the cabinets of future collectors.

The apparently unproductive years, since the last Vale books appeared, do not imply cessation of creative work, but rather denote the conception and elaboration of a new enterprise. Amid the group of books—not merely illustrated, but planned in every detail by Mr. Ricketts—which are on the eve of publication, with a type of his own designing, will be found some notable works that will more than justify the appreciation here set down clumsily, if truly.

The courage of one's convictions has been unduly praised; the really
praiseworthy

praiseworthy attitude is surely to possess the undoubted conviction of one's courage. Yet as the first person who tells the truth before its time is usually held to be a proved liar thereby—perhaps it would have been more seemly to refrain from an attempt to formulate opinions not yet accepted by all men of light and leading, although one has no doubt of the final verdict. For an artist so individual and distinctly true to his own ideals, no matter what they may be, as Mr. Ricketts assuredly is, will certainly receive complete appreciation ultimately from those who can consider his work dispassionately, with full documentary evidence of the influence it exerted on his successors, and its relative position among contemporaneous efforts.

GLEESON WHITE.