BOOK-ILLUSTRATION IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY.¹

THE first thing to be explained in a talk about old book-illustrations is that they are not the work of great artists. For a short time in Germany great artists like Dürer and Cranach condescended to illustrate books, but the great majority of illustrations, and all those of the earlier period, are by unknown men, who did not regard themselves as artists at all, but merely as skilled craftsmen, putting the best work they could into the books bought by the well-to-do middle-class readers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is worth while at the outset to emphasize these words—‘the well-to-do middle-class readers’—for people usually run away with one of two contradictory ideas, that all early books were very costly and only prepared for princes, or that Illustrated Books were then the Books of the People, and therefore possessed all sorts of beautiful properties not discoverable in the bourgeois volumes we get at Mudie’s. Of course, both these ideas have some foundation. Profusely illuminated manuscripts, whether Prayer Books or Romances, were literally a luxury reserved for princes; but then a profusely illuminated manuscript is not only a

¹ The two articles which are to be published under this heading are slightly recast from a lantern-lecture delivered last winter before the Guild of Art Workers and elsewhere. The slides for the lectures were made chiefly from previous books and articles by the author, and therefore only a few of the illustrations which now take their place are entirely new. The lecture is here printed in the hope that a rapid survey of the subject may be useful to some readers of the ‘Library,’ with due apologies to those who are already well acquainted with the subject.

book, it is a picture gallery as well, and even now, when people talk of extravagant prices, the fine manuscripts which can be bought for from one to two thousand pounds are probably the cheapest art treasures on the market. But until quite the end of the fifteenth century princes cared very little for printed books, thinking them rather cheap and common, even to the extent of refusing to have them in their libraries. More than this, rich connoisseurs generally, and not merely princes, when they patronized printed books at all, preferred them quite plain, finely printed, but with no pictures in them. They even preferred them without any printed initial letters, no doubt telling each other it was so much nicer to have the initials prettily painted in by hand—just as there are some people who prefer books in paper covers, because they can have them bound as they please. We all know that most paper cover books melt away and never get bound at all; and most of the books which were to have painted initials remain to this day with the blank places still unfilled. But it was a very pretty theory, and it shows clearly enough that the rich people who held it cared nothing for printed ornaments, and *à fortiori* nothing for printed illustrations.

On the other hand, though some of the books we are concerned with were probably sold for less than sixpence, sixpence in the fifteenth century was worth five or six shillings now, and, in fact, from five shillings to five guineas very fairly represents the range of prices of early illustrated books. Thus the cheapest of them, the little Florentine chapbooks, are not really the equivalent of our modern penny dreadfuls, but rather of the pretty gift-books with which the best publishers tempt us every Christmas. There was no fifteenth century equivalent to our modern penny dreadfuls, because the sort of people who now read penny dreadfuls then read nothing at all; as soon as they began to read, plenty of bad pictures were produced to please them.

If this prologue did not already threaten to be too long it would be interesting to advance the theory that the great body of readers in every civilization has always been drawn from much the same class as at present, and also that the price of books, when we allow for the different value of money, has varied equally little. In any case it should be understood that early illustrated books were neither very rare, nor very miraculously cheap, but cost about the same as the illustrated books of to-day, and were intended for about the same class of readers.

Now as to the time when they were made, and the manner of the making. With three or four exceptions all the pictures mentioned in these articles were made between the years 1472 and 1508. In 1472 printing had been invented for about twenty years, and had spread from Germany into Italy, France, and Holland. Two or three printers had already used illustrations in their books, but not very successfully, so that about 1470 is the date from which book-illustration took its real start. Soon after 1500, on the other hand, it began passing out of its first stage, and this leads us to the point as to how the pictures were made.

There were three ways of making book-illustrations in the fifteenth century. The first was to paint them by hand, as beautiful manuscripts had been painted for centuries before printing was invented. In some early printed books spaces were left blank for a picture or headpiece to be painted at the beginning, and, as we have already noted, up to 1490 it was quite common for all the initials to be painted in by hand. But this, of course, was expensive, and was gradually given up in favour of illustrations and ornaments which could be printed. Now, there were only two different ways then in which printed pictures could be produced. In one you took a piece of wood (or, in some cases, of soft metal, such as pewter), and you cut or dug at it with a knife or a graver, until the picture you wished to draw was left standing in relief,

GERMAN WOODCUTS.

In France, in Italy and in England there are plenty of bad woodcuts in early printed books. In Germany book-illustrations have always a certain technical excellence, though it may be only of a primitive kind. The reason is, that in Germany, when printing was invented, wood-

FROM INGOLD'S 'GULDIN SPIEL,' AUGSBURG, 1472.

cutting was already a recognized craft; what is more, it was an organized craft, and when the printers began to publish illustrated books the guilds, or trades-unions, were promptly up in arms. A venerable Abbot was called in to arbitrate, and the award he made was that the printers might illustrate books as much as they pleased, but only so long as the illustrations were cut by authorized crafts-

and everything else was cut away. Then you inked the ridges of wood, and pressed your paper on to them in a printing press, and so obtained a printed picture. That is wood-cutting or wood-engraving, the method of relief, and that is the ideal method to employ for illustrating books, because the printers' types are in relief also, and you can fasten the types and the wood block together and print them both at once, and there is a real harmony between the two.

In the other method of picture printing you take a piece of copper and cut in it the lines you want printed. These lines become little trenches into which you run your ink; then wipe the surface of the plate clean, damp your paper and press it with a roller right down into the lines till it takes up the ink. This is called engraving on copper, or incised engraving, and it is a less good way of illustrating books, because the illustrations have to be printed separately from the types, and are out of harmony with them. But it can be seen in an instant how much easier it is to scratch very fine lines, than to cut away on each side so as to leave a very fine ridge; also, lines can be scratched across each other by way of shading, but ridges can only be made to cross each other by the laborious gouging out of little squares. The great reason why the art of wood-cutting declined during the sixteenth century was that the woodcutters tried to do the things on wood which the engravers did on copper, instead of keeping to their own art. Thus they first spoilt their pictures, and were then punished by going out of fashion altogether for quite two centuries. That is why these earliest woodcuts are so interesting, because they represent the period when wood-cutting was practised for its own sake, and not in imitation of engraving on copper. They have also an advantage over those of any later period in that they were almost invariably printed on good paper and with careful press-work.

half of the picture, the thrown-back head of Sophonisba is typical of her unflinching courage, and the horror on the messenger's face tells its own tale. The work is absolutely primitive, but as illustration it has very high merit.

At Ulm they paid special attention to the decoration as distinct from the illustration of books; but Dr. Jennings has written so recently in 'The Library' on printed

FROM BOCCACCIO, 'DE CLARIS MULIERIBUS,' ULM, 1473.

initials that we must not go over the ground again now. But they were ambitious people at Ulm, who tried by nearly full-page illustrations to popularize a Latin classic, the 'Eunuchus' of Terence. The book, printed by Conrad Dinckmut in 1486, is a famous one, and here, very much reduced, is a picture from it, a street scene, in which the architecture will doubtless be admired. It is good, but, in my judgment, not so good as many smaller and

men. Hence the absence in Germany of the eccentricities we find in other countries.

Of course these good trades-unionists were not great artists. They were only simple craftsmen. But they had the root of the matter in them, and there is more character in these simple German cuts than in those of any other nation. The chief homes of the early German woodcutters were the neighbouring towns of Augsburg and Ulm, and here, from Ingold's 'Guldin Spiel,' printed by Günther Zainer in 1472, is a woodcut of card-players which for character can hardly be surpassed. The hesitation of the woman, whose turn it is to play, the rather supercilious interest of her *vis-à-vis*, and the calm confidence of the third hand, not only ready to play his best, but sure that the best will be good enough, are all shown with absolute simplicity, but in a really masterly manner.

At the neighbouring town of Ulm the work done was much on the same lines as at Augsburg, but perhaps even better. I give my readers free leave to laugh at the next illustration, for it certainly has its comic side; but if the true aim of an illustrator should be the bringing out of the points of a story, not merely to make a pretty picture, it deserves praise as well as laughter. The illustration is from an edition of Boccaccio 'De Claris Mulieribus,' or 'The Lives of Illustrious Women,' and the text tells how Massinissa, Prince of Numidia, had married Sophonisba, the daughter of the Carthaginian Hasdrubal; how the Roman general, Laelius Scipio told him he must put her away; and how the obedient Massinissa, who apparently knew that his wife's sense of honour was much keener than his own, sent her a cup of poison with the information. Now look how the craftsman-artist has treated the subject in the two pictures, which, medieval-wise he has put into one frame. Laelius Scipio is, of course, comic, as he holds up his warning finger; but, as Massinissa stands, dutifully checking off his instructions, is he not the very incarnation of a craven milksop? In the other

less pretentious cuts. Indeed, in early illustrations it may almost be taken as a rule that the smaller and less preten-

FROM THE 'EUNUCHUS,' ULM, 1486.

tious the pictures, the better they are likely to be. It is, however, only fair to add that Mr. William Morris

estimated this edition of the 'Eunuchus' more highly, pronouncing it a book 'altogether of singular beauty and character.'

The first period of German book-illustration was drawing to a close, when, in 1493, was published the famous 'Nuremberg Chronicle,' printed by Anton Koburger at Nuremberg, with whose illustrations we have for the first time a name connected, that of Michael Wohlgemuth, the master of Dürer. The industry of Mr. Cockerell has ascertained that the 'Nuremberg Chronicle' contains altogether 1,809 pictures, of which 645 are separate designs and 1,164 'repeats.' This is mentioned here, not from any love of statistics, but because it brings out the essentially decorative intention of most early woodcuts. The illustrators of the 'Nuremberg Chronicle' could not procure authentic likenesses of the 224 Kings, or 198 Popes, mentioned in the text, so they made woodcuts of 44 Kings and 28 Popes, and used them five, six or seven times each. Conrad Dinckmut, in his 'Seelenwurzgarten,' overdid this liberty of repetition, for in a not very large book he made seventeen full-page cuts serve for 133, each cut coming over and over again in the same chapter, till one grumbles at the waste of space. In the 'Nuremberg Chronicle' there is no such monotony, and the illustrators fully attain their aim of breaking up the large folio pages and making them look attractive, while many of their pictures of cities possess real topographical value.

In the next year to the 'Nuremberg Chronicle' appeared the last of the German books at which we can look, the 'Narrenschiff,' or Ship of Fools of Sebastian Brant, an author who (as Mr. Redgrave showed in the second volume of 'Bibliographica') made book-illustration his special care, and the woodcuts in whose publications stand midway between the primitive work of the early craftsmen, and the more self-conscious efforts of the artists of the sixteenth century. In Grüninger's 'Virgil' of 1502, published under Brant's supervision, the illustrations are full

of delightful medieval anachronisms, but they are in their way, elaborate pictures. In the 'Narrenschiff,' the old simplicity of design is still maintained, though there is an

VENUS, FROM 'THE SHIP OF FOOLS.'

abundance of symbolism, as in the picture of Venus, illustrating the fatal follies of love, here shown.

ITALY.

According to the scheme which has been laid down for this paper, I must be content with having, I hope, whetted some appetites for German woodcuts and now hurry to Italy. The earliest Italian woodcuts, with the exception of the famous Verona 'Valturius,' with its pictures of military operations, are rather of the nature of experiments, but the books which the German printer, Erhard Ratdolt of Augsburg, printed at Venice, during his ten years' stay there, which began in 1476, are notable for their very beautiful borders. In Naples also the German printers used borders to several of their books. But book-illustration, as distinct from decoration, did not really establish itself in Italy until about 1490, when the German printers who had introduced the art of printing into the country of Italy had done their work, and the native Italian printers went to native artists and woodcutters for their illustrations. It would be easy to occupy a whole article with talking about Italian illustrations, because, although they bear only a very slight relation to Italian paintings, yet just as we divide Italian paintings into the schools of Umbria, of Venice, of Ferrara, and the like, so every centre of the Italian book-trade had its own school of illustrators, whose work is strongly marked off from that of any other.

At Florence book-illustration begins quite suddenly in 1490 with a few outline designs of extraordinary grace and beauty, and then settles down into a wonderful series of little woodcuts, each framed in its own border, and making some use of white lines upon black as well as black upon white. Of the designs in outline one of the finest is this from the 'Laudi' of Jacopone da Todi, printed in 1490, showing the great hymn-writer in an ecstatic vision of the Blessed Virgin. Of books illustrated with bordered cuts, the most famous is the 'Quatriregio' of 1508, a dull imitation of Dante, by a certain Bishop

Frezzi. A copy of this book has just been sold for £800, but it has won its fame and consequent price chiefly because it is a sizable folio, instead of a small quarto, and because the signature 'L. V.' on the first cut has given rise to the mistaken conjecture that the pictures might be attributed to Luca di Venturi, *i.e.*, Luca Signorelli, whose

FROM FREZZI'S 'QUATREGIO,' 1508.

recognized signature, however, was L. C., *i.e.*, Luca di Cortona. Similar attributions used to be made of some of the Venetian woodcuts, but it is now generally recognized that the initials occasionally met with on early cuts are the signatures of the cutters, or more probably of the owner of the workshop where the cuts were made. I have never read the 'Quatregio,' and except Dr. Garnett, who has

read everything, I know no one who has. It is a dull imitation of the 'Divina Commedia,' and the pictures suffer, as those in the early illustrated Dantes suffer, from the monotonous recurrence, in every cut, of the figures of

¶ Operetta di frate Girolamo da ferrara della oratione mentale

FROM SAVONAROLA'S 'ORATIONE MENTALE,' S.A.

the hero and the virtue who guides him. In the example here shown, we get the normal charm of Florentine woodcuts, each inclosed in its little frame, fairly well represented. But in the Savonarola pamphlets and the Rappresentzioni, or Miracle-Plays, we have, in addition

to this normal charm of style, touches of feeling and characterization as well. Here, for instance, from Savonarola's treatise, 'Della Oratione Mentale,' on private prayer, is a little woodcut, which has all the charm of a picture in the grand style. As an example from a miracle-

FROM THE 'RAPPR. DI S. PANUNZIO,' S.A.

play, we may take the title-cut of the 'Rappresentatione di Sancto Panuntio.' S. Panuntius was a hermit, who thought rather highly of his own piety, so he prayed that he might be shown some one else as devout as himself, and was intensely surprised when an angel bade him make the acquaintance of the village-musician. He goes to the

village, finds the musician singing a cheerful song, and proceeds to cross-examine him, as in the background of our picture, where I pray you to note the look of superior curiosity in the saint's face. The musician had been a robber, but he was a kindly rogue, had saved a girl's virtue and paid the debts of a poor woman, so grace was given him to repent, and now by his songs and fluting he helps to keep people cheerful, and free from *accidie*, that medieval sin from which we all suffer in bad weather. Panuntius falls on his neck, the musician embraces him, as in the foreground, and—the author's inspiration here utterly deserting him—breaks his flute and becomes a monk.

Time does not permit me to speak of the fine woodcuts found in a few books printed at Milan, or of those produced at Pavia, perhaps under the inspiration of Milanese artists. But before hastening on to Venice, the capital of the Italian book-trade, we may stop to look at this St. Christopher from a missal printed in 1503 at Ferrara, where also had been produced two very famous illustrated books, an edition of 'The Epistle of St. Jerome' and the 'De Claris Mulieribus' of Philippus Bergomensis, the illustrations in the latter showing Florentine influence in their black backgrounds.

At Venice book-illustration in the fifteenth century took the form partly of very charming, but sometimes very scratchily cut little illustrations of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $1\frac{1}{2}$, suited to text-illustrations in books printed in double columns, partly of larger illustrations often of a very noble and serene beauty. The first important book illustrated with the little cuts was an edition of the Italian translation of the Bible by Niccolo Malermi, printed in 1490. From this we may take two typical examples, the first of St. Jerome in his study, with his cardinal's hat slung on his desk, his lion at his feet, a bookstand by his side, and a bird cage in the window; the second a spirited illustration of the text in the Psalms, 'The Fool

FROM A CARTHUSIAN MISSAL, FERRARA, 1503.

hath said in his heart there is no God,' a village innocent (with feathers in his hair, which make him look like a Red Indian, arrived in Europe in search of Columbus), bestrid-

FROM THE MALLERMI BIBLE, VENICE, 1490.

ing a hobby-horse, with the village boys jeering at him, and the village dog barking at his heels. Editions of the 'Decamerone' and the 'Divina Commedia,' of Masuccio,

FROM THE MALLERMI BIBLE, VENICE, 1490.

of Livy, and of the 'Lives of the Saints' were illustrated in the same style.

Of the larger style of illustration the most familiar

examples are the two woodcuts in the 'Fasciculus Medicinæ' of Johannes Ketham (1493), to which additional interest is lent by their being occasionally found with additional printings in colours. Even finer than these, in its quiet beauty, is a woodcut of a preacher preceded by a little crucifer, found in an edition of the 'Doctrina della

FROM THE 'HYPNEROTOMACHIA,' VENICE, 1499.

'Vita Monastica' of Lorenzo Giustiniano, probably printed about 1495. This woodcut also has a special interest, as according to Dr. Lippmann who reproduced it in his pioneer book on 'Wood-engraving in Italy'; it was imitated from a picture painted by Gentile Bellini in 1466 for the Church of S. Maria del Orto. Dr. Kristeller has traced a few of the little Florentine woodcuts back to

pictures, but this is the only instance of which I know of a Venetian one being thus derived.

Midway between these fine examples of outline drawing and the little vignettes of the Mallerimi Bible, are the cuts in an Ovid printed in 1497, the designs of which are excellent, though they were very badly reproduced by the woodcutters. It was probably the designer of this Ovid, aided by much better cutters, who illustrated in 1499 the famous 'Hypnerotomachia' (or 'Strife of Love in a Dream'), printed by Aldus Manutius, at the expense of Lionardo Crasso, a book-loving lawyer. A single illustration from this famous book, showing the hero, Polifilo, at the side of a woodland stream, must bring to a close the few examples of Italian origin it has been possible to mention in this rapid survey. After 1500 book-illustration at Venice rapidly declined, the introduction of much heavier shading destroying the delicacy of touch of the earlier woodcuts.

Our next paper will be devoted to a glance at some of the illustrated books of France, Spain, the Netherlands and England.

ALFRED W. POLLARD.