

WOOD-ENGRAVING AND THE CENTURY PRIZES.

READERS of this magazine will remember that in March, 1880, a series of prizes were offered, to be competed for by students of the wood-engraver's art. In April, 1881, the award of the committee was made public in the pages of the magazine, and the best cuts among those that had been submitted were published, with appropriate criticisms. At the same time it was announced that the competition would be repeated. Three prizes, of one hundred, seventy-five, and fifty dollars respectively, were offered to young engravers who had not yet been commercially employed, with a supplementary reward of fifty dollars to be competed for by the prize-takers of 1881. A large number of blocks have been sent to THE CENTURY office in reply to these announcements, and the results of this second contest are now presented to the public. They are, I think, better and more interesting in their collective quality than the specimens of last year, and more than fulfill the hopes of those who believed that much good would come from these competitions—good to the student in the shape of earnest work incited, and good to the magazine in the shape of reinforcement for the ranks of its engravers. For, while these ranks are already populous, there is not only room in them for capable recruits, but an urgent need thereof. Some remarks upon the prize blocks will be made later on, and the reasons which have guided the judges in their decisions will be stated. First, however, it will be well, as a prelude to their intelligent examination by the reader, to sketch very hastily the recent development of wood-engraving in general, and to mark what are the questions of the hour regarding it.

Every reader knows, most probably, that, for the past two or three years, a rather sharp controversy has been going on with reference to the "new school" of American wood-engraving. Every reader ought to know, in addition, that whatever strictures may have been passed upon it at home, it has been almost universally praised abroad. In England as in France critics have been lavish of their commendation. When we find, for example, "L'Art" reprinting a series of cuts from the "Scribner Portfolio," and even the "Saturday Review" ranking American work above all that is done in other countries, we cannot be blamed for feeling a responsive

glow of self-approval.* But foreign praise, even from competent pens, should not serve us in the stead of a personal examination of our work, based upon a knowledge of the theories which lie behind it, as well as of the specimens

* As the most recent example of the estimation in which foreign critics hold American work, I may quote the following passages from Mr. Philip Gilbert Hamerton's "Graphic Arts":

"The development of delicate and versatile wood-engraving in America is due to the managers of SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE, who worked resolutely with this definite end in view, and gradually reached perfection by paying for many cuts which were never published, and by forming a school of wood-engravers animated by the same spirit. Now, whatever may be the differences of opinion about the desirableness of this imitative art, there can be no question that the Americans have far surpassed all other nations in delicacy of execution. The manual skill displayed in their wood-cuts is a continual marvel, and it is accompanied by so much intelligence—I mean by so much critical understanding of different graphic arts—that a portfolio of their best wood-cuts is most interesting. Not only do they understand engraving thoroughly, but they are the best printers in the world, and they give an amount of care and thought to their printing which would be considered uncommercial elsewhere.

"The two superiorities in American wood-engraving are in tone and texture—two qualities very popular in modern times in all the graphic arts which can attain them. Tone in wood-cutting depends entirely upon the management of grays. In etching there are half-a-dozen different qualities of black—all black, yet producing quite different effects upon the eye; in wood-cut there is only one black. In painting there are many different whites, all of them equally called 'whites,' yet bearing little relation to each other; in wood-cut there is only a single white, and it is always got in the same way—by excavating the wood. This being so, white and black are settled for the wood-engraver, and he has not to think about them; but it is not so with intermediate shades, and I cannot but heartily admire the almost unlimited ingenuity with which the Americans vary not only the tone, but the very quality, of these intermediates, getting not one gamut only but several, with the faculty of going from one to another on occasion, as if changing the stops of an organ. Some of their grays are pure and clear, others cloudy; others 'like veils of thinnest lawn'; others, again, are semi-transparent, like a very light wash of body-color, and whatever may be their quality it is always surprising how steadily a delicate tone is maintained in them. As for texture, these engravers seem able to imitate anything that is set before them. It would be an exaggeration to say that they get the exact textures of an oil-painting, but they come near enough to recall them vividly to our minds. To appreciate the technical advance, we must always remember that tone and texture are simply absent from the school of Holbein, and that whilst the engravers of the present day can produce an exact fac-simile of old work, the old engravers had not even begun that course of experiment and of study which has trained such consummate workmen as Juengling, Speer, Kingsley, Closson, Muller, and Cole."

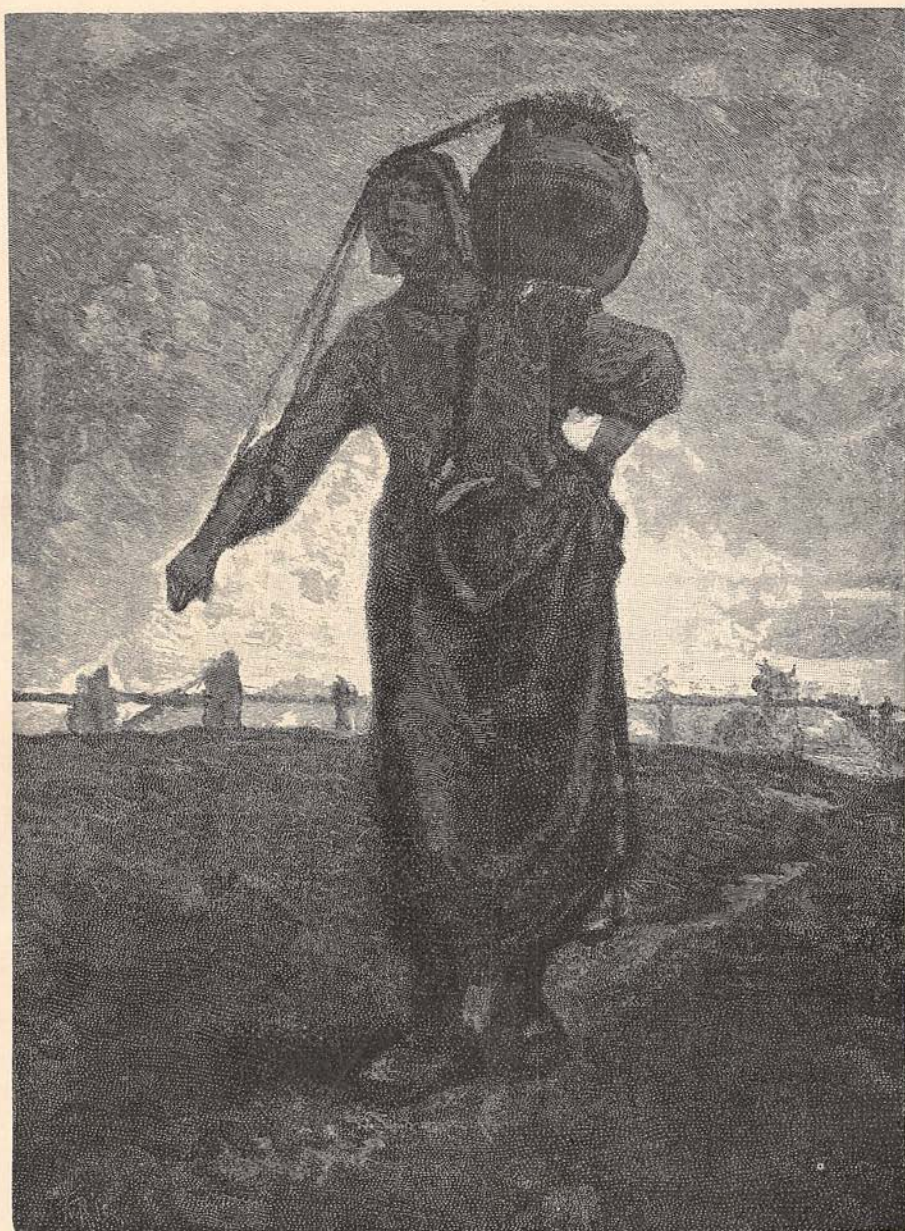
themselves. Within a few months an unrivaled opportunity for examining it has been afforded us. The exhibition of wood-engravings which was held last autumn at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts has already been noticed in these pages. While it was chiefly made up of contemporaneous American work, it contained enough examples of past epochs and of the foreign practice of our own day to afford us terms of comparison. Viewed collectively and in the light of such comparison, the band of young engravers which, to some eyes, had previously seemed to consist but of individual experimenters with no very lucid ideal before them, now appeared homogeneous to a surprising extent, and to a surprising extent clear in its aims and tendencies—working collectively toward a common goal, though with large diversities in the ways employed to reach it. And as each man's work was arranged by itself, we were enabled, on the other hand, to gain a better idea of a given talent than had been possible when we knew it merely through cuts appearing at intervals of time, in all sorts of quarters, and often uncredited to any hand.

Preparatory to understanding the peculiar aims of our recent American work the reader will desire to understand the aims of wood-engraving in former days. It is impossible, however, here to pause over the earlier developments of the art. I have no space in which to speak of the grand work done on the side of a plank with knives alone—work which reached its culminating point in the sixteenth century, but which at all times was more remarkable for the talent of the original draughtsman than for the skill of the engraver who had reproduced him. The work of the latter was admirable in its own way, but this was a mechanical way, devoted to the literal rendering of the lines that had been set him by the draughtsman. For a history of these earlier periods of wood-engraving, of its decline after the sixteenth century, and of its regeneration in a new shape by Bewick at the beginning of our own century, the reader is referred to Jackson and Chatto's "History of Wood-Engraving."* It is not an ideal history of the art, even within the periods to which it is confined. But it is the only one existing, and until a new one shall have been prepared by some competent hand,—rewritten from the beginning and carried down from 1838 to the present day,—it is absolutely indispensable to the student. The

cuts were laboriously copied on the block by Mr. Jackson, for in his day reproductive "processes" were not employed. Of course the repetition by another hand, and the reduction necessary to bring them within the compass of an octavo page, have often greatly detracted from the effect of the specimens, especially in the case of the splendid big blocks of the sixteenth century. Yet they will be found most useful to the student who has not access to their originals. The chapter on technical processes is very clear and instructive; but here especially the reader must remember that many changes have taken place since Chatto's day, and that the conditions under which the engraver works have greatly altered. If the student reads this book, however,—and it is a most interesting as well as a most instructive one,—he will acquire a knowledge of the craft not otherwise to be gained. Since the date of its publication little has been written save in the way of scattered articles, usually of a controversial character. Mr. Linton has, it is true, prepared a "History of Wood-Engraving in America," which appeared in the "American Art Review" in 1880, and will shortly be issued in book form. Instructive and interesting though it is, and full of acute and suggestive criticisms, it is yet written from the point of view of an engraver distrustful of innovations; and it is therefore less valuable to the beginner than to one who has some knowledge of the questions mooted.

Bewick, as I have said, was the father of modern wood-engraving—the first to make a practice of cutting on the *end* of the wood, using engravers' tools instead of knives, and developing his design chiefly by white lines on black instead of by black lines on a white ground. The men who worked with or immediately after him were consummate masters of their craft as it was then understood—not such artists by nature, perhaps, as Bewick himself, but better technical engravers. Their cuts have never been excelled by similar examples made since their day, and are the *ne plus ultra* of the critic who still defends elder as against newer aims and processes. After their time the art steadily declined, owing—at least in England, we are told—in greater part to a wide commercial demand for average work being met by the creation of large engraving establishments where it was turned out by wholesale, the personality of the workman being completely sunk from sight. This, at all events, was the proximate cause of decline. The ultimate cause—as of all such minor phenomena—is probably to be sought in the generally inartistic temper of the day. A few strong and well-trained men were not submerged by the current of something worse than commonplace which

* A Treatise on Wood-Engraving, Historical and Practical. By William Andrew Chatto. With upwards of four hundred illustrations, engraved on wood by John Jackson. A new edition, with an additional chapter by Henry G. Bohn. New York: J. W. Bouton.



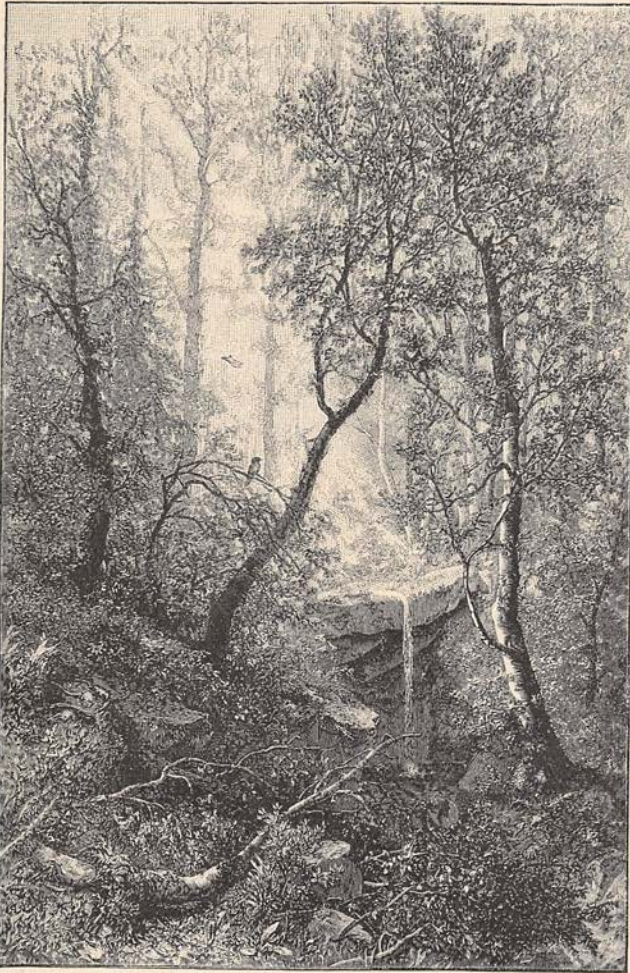
FIRST PRIZE. MILK-CARRIER. ENGRAVED FROM A PHOTOGRAPH (BY PERMISSION OF AD. BRAUN & CO., PARIS) OF THE PAINTING BY J. F. MILLET. ENGRAVER, FLORENCE W. RICHARDSON. TIME OF PRACTICE, THREE YEARS.

swept over the art, among them perhaps the strongest being Mr. Linton, who brought the traditions of good and clever work with him to this country, and who still does good and clever work—none better in its own way. Ten years ago, however, average American was not very different from current English engraving, or, rather, was inferior to it. About that time a more general interest in art of all kinds sprang up among us, following

by a short interval a similar revival among the English. One consequence of this awakening was that the managers of this magazine, then just projected, tried to put better work into their pages, feeling that the time had come when the public demanded—or, at least, might appreciate—its presence. The needs of this magazine, and of others which were obliged to follow in its wake, and the introduction of the gift-book profusely illustrated

with wood-cuts, in place of the old-fashioned "annual" and its steel engravings, originated the new development of wood-engraving in this country. For not only was more and better work required, but work of quite a novel sort. There were no guides, past or present, to help the young engravers who tried to answer these demands. They were obliged to experiment each one for himself—a lucky fact, perhaps, since it has given us the most original

completed work was sufficient unto itself, valued for what it was—not for what it suggested about another work of art. He labored usually on designs made expressly for his use. But if called upon to reproduce a painting he was only expected to give its most palpable facts—its theme, its design, and the broad contrasts of its color. To do this it was necessary that he should be an admirable draughtsman, that he should follow the lines of his original with



THIRD PRIZE. THE MORNING SONG. ENGRAVED FROM A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PAINTING BY MARAK. ENGRAVER, JOHN S. MARQUAND. TIME OF PRACTICE, TWO YEARS AND ONE MONTH.

development of which American art as yet can boast. What, we must now inquire, were these new demands? What are the special aims which present themselves to the engraver of to-day, and which could not have been realized by the best workmanship of a former time?

The elder engraver worked chiefly to make a good line-drawing with his graver. His

intelligence, or supply good lines where none had been provided for him. This "drawing with the graver" is the excellence which finds its highest examples in the work of Bewick's immediate successors—of Thompson, Nesbit, and Clennell. This is the excellence proper to Mr. Linton's work, the excellence upon which he insists so strongly in the work of others. It is indeed and beyond question one



LAUGHING GIRL. ENGRAVED FROM A PHOTOGRAPH (BY PERMISSION OF BROCKMANN, DRESDEN) OF THE PAINTING BY REMBRANDT. ENGRAVER, HERBERT F. LYOUNS.

of the highest attainments of the engraver, and one without which he can do little worth the doing. But alone it cannot serve all the needs of the modern workman, who must make something more of his print than an admirable black-and-white drawing, who must do more than produce a fine engraving in and for itself considered, who must also—such is the demand of the hour—reproduce the most characteristic, most peculiar, and most subtle qualities of his model. If this is a painting, for example, he must not only tell us what is on the canvas but exactly how it has been put there. What, we may ask, is the reason why this demand upon the engraver has been made of late, though it was never made before? The answer to this question is to be found, I think, partly in the growth of new ideas with regard to art in general, and partly in new ideas that have worked upon wood-engraving consciously and directly. About ten years ago, painting itself took a new start among us. Certain elements in its practice which had been almost entirely overlooked by our artists came, under the influence of foreign training, to be universally respected, and, perhaps, even a little overrated. One of these elements was the actual technical method of a

painter. Another was the insistence upon tone and “values” as distinct from local color. The artist whose painting was copied wished these qualities preserved. And the reader whose eye was trained to love them hailed with delight the first prints in which even an effort was made to reproduce them.

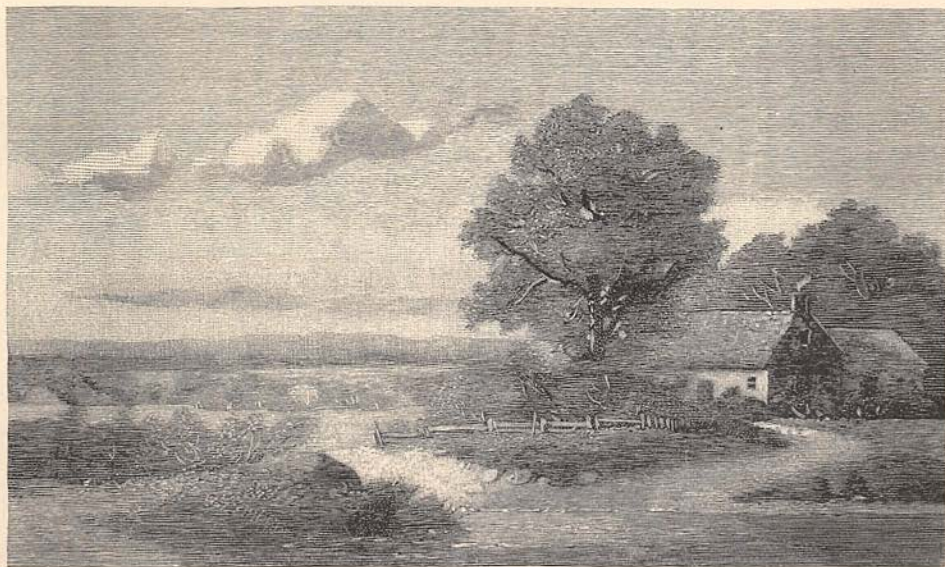
But, one may say, there have been epochs in the past when these and similar refinements of the brush were as highly prized in other countries as they are to-day with us, yet when their reproduction was not demanded from the engraver of any sort. Artists and the public were content if he gave—with beautiful engraver’s work—the forms and outlines and the general color scheme of his original. What is the reason we now ask for more? I think it may be discovered, partly at least, in the introduction of photography as a popular multiplying process. Until photographs taken immediately from paintings met his eye, the student had never dreamed of a reproduction which should give the manner as well as the matter of its original. In such photographs the color scheme of a painting is often seriously maligned, and its “values” are not always correctly given. But often they are so given, and always the artist’s method reveals itself, line for line and touch for touch. To-

day a steel engraving, for example, is valued as highly as ever for its own artistic sake; but the photograph is absolutely essential to a knowledge of any painter's peculiar qualities.

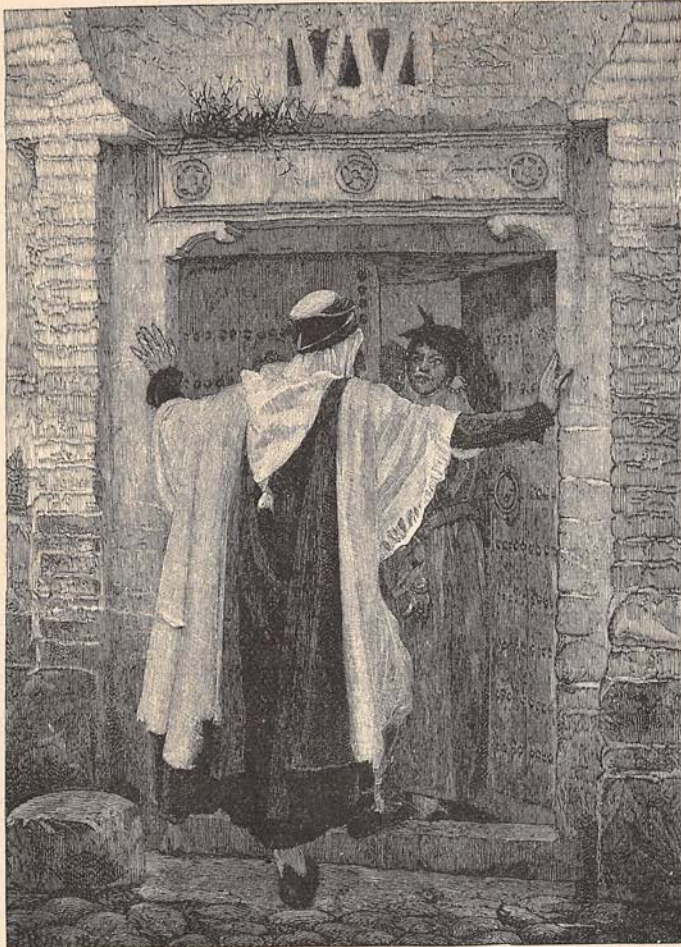
Thus to a great extent was incited, I believe, the effort made by our editors and responded to by our young engravers—the effort to combine the distinctive qualities of a good photograph with those of an engraving, to reproduce as far as possible all the idiosyncrasies of an original while securing a work of art valuable for its own artistic sake, truer than a photograph in its rendering of color, and capable of being cheaply printed in the pages of a book. Similar excellences were demanded, also, when the work was done after originals of a different sort—after drawings made in pen-and-ink, or pencil, or charcoal, or washed tints, or after photographs from nature. In landscape work, especially, tone and gradation and atmospheric effects were looked for as they had never been before.

These, then, were the problems which the young engraver set himself; these were the problems which the old engraver denounced as degrading his art to the level of an imitative handicraft, as sinking the creative entirely in the interests of the reproductive artist. Photography on the block, which has enabled our workmen to realize their aims as they never could had an intermediary drawing been required, was included in the indictment. And, moreover, certain faults which undoubtedly existed in much of the pioneer work were pointed out as of necessity belonging to such efforts, and as disfiguring them beyond indulgence. The first-named of these objections

will not, I think, be sustained by many voices. It must, indeed, be abandoned by its firmest upholders when the new school shall have shown that it can realize its aims with no detriment to the art of wood-engraving in itself considered—nay, rather, with an absolute increase of its beauty. Already it has shown this to a remarkable extent. The first work of our young artists was, I repeat, experimental, and experimenters must run to extremes if they would learn the limits of their possibilities. In their first eager efforts to render faithfully the qualities to which their attention had been directed, they forgot occasionally the claims of their own art. In striving to give us a good reproduction they sometimes neglected to secure a beautiful wood-cut. And even in their reproductive essays proper they have been known to secure “values” and technical effects only with some loss of color and of definition. But each year such mistakes become less frequent. The engraver is rapidly learning that he can accomplish his new aim only within certain limits—that when he has given as much of his original as can be put into a *good* wood-cut, he must hold his hand. It should be said, however, that this amount is almost coincident with that for which he strove in his first ardor. He has not so much altered his aim as learned to work for it with a more cunning hand, with more self-restraint and modesty, with a less palpable show of effort. The handling of our best workmen to-day is vastly more varied, more flexible, and more individual than was that of former masters. But it is coming back



LANDSCAPE. ENGRAVED FROM THE ORIGINAL PAINTING BY FRANK A. WHITE.



ON THE THRESHOLD. ENGRAVED FROM A PHOTOGRAPH (BY PERMISSION OF GOUPIL & CO.)
OF THE PAINTING BY C. BRUN. ENGRAVER, MISS ADA BAMPTON.

very rapidly from the excessive wildness or excessive minuteness which inflamed the wrath of the elder generation. Nor, I must repeat, is the fact that it passed through its earlier and less well-balanced stage to be regretted; for only by such bold experiments, such even reckless attempts to find new ways of expressing his new intentions on the block, could the young practitioner prove what might be allowed to him and what might not. Now he has discovered, I think, the limitations of his art. They are not, by a great distance, the limitations prescribed for it by disciples of an elder day. Yet anywhere within them it is possible to secure as much of technical beauty in the wood-cut as of fidelity to the original. No wood-cuts so faithful to the subtlest facts of nature's handiwork or of an artist's brush are produced to-day as those which come from our younger men; and, I may safely

say, none so beautiful. It was not, for example, their faithfulness to originals unknown in Paris which secured an "honorable mention" for the cuts of Mr. Closson and Mr. Juengling at the last *Salon*, but their absolute excellence as samples of the wood-engraver's art. Nor, in thus praising the newest methods, is it necessary to depreciate the old. The art is wide in its range, and old and new developments may alike be valued, each for its own distinctive sort of excellence. We appreciate the plank cuts of the sixteenth century in spite of our admiration for Bewick and his followers. Nor need this admiration be lessened by an equal or even greater love for still more recent things.

The difference between our individual workmen has grown to be as remarkable as the collective individuality of the school; and this could only result, of course, from self-development unfettered by the tyranny



FIRST PRIZE FOR BEST WORK BY FORMER COMPETITORS. AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH FROM LIFE. ENGRAVED BY WM. H. MACKAY.

of custom or authority. That our students were enabled freely to pursue their investigations, and each to develop in his own way his artistic conscience and his technical skill, is the great benefaction for which we should thank our American magazines.

As yet, however, it must be confessed, our new school is accomplished only within certain limits. Few if any of our young men have yet done large, frank, bold, simple work as well, for example, as it has been done by Mr. Linton in such examples as his "Raft," after Harvey.

But this fact is probably to be traced to the working of the law of supply and demand, the call for the best work being usually to fill pages of a small size. When our illustrated papers shall take the same stand that was taken a few years ago by our magazines, they may encourage our young men to be bold as well as refined, free as well as delicate, and frank as well as subtle. And if, moreover, the art is to be developed *on all sides* to its full capacity, we must have a new school of skillful and intelligent illustrative designers, willing to work with special reference to the needs of the engraver, and of the printer also.

Turning now to the cuts submitted to the judgment of THE CENTURY in this second competition, I may begin a brief consideration of their merits by stating what were the qualities especially looked for by the judges who passed upon them. These were (quoting from their report of last year) :

1. Truthfulness in reproduction of the artist's design.
2. Originality in line or texture.
3. General effect.
4. Management of color.

The length of time spent in practice, the rendering of fac-simile, and the selection of subject were also given some weight. The degrees of merit reached in each quality were marked in numerical order by figures, upon a scale in which ten stood for the maximum. The first prize went to him who had the highest aggregate of marks.

The first prize of this year (\$100) is awarded to :

Florence W. Richardson, of Concord, Mass. Time of practice, three years—fourteen months with F. Juengling and eight months with W. B. Closson. Original, photograph from painting of "Milk-Carrier," by J. F. Millet. Characteristics of work: Truth to the manner of a very difficult original. The character of the face is not especially well given, but the effect of the whole is well rendered.

The second prize (\$75) is awarded to :

W. F. McGrath, of Boston, Mass. Age, seventeen years. Time of practice, twenty-three months. Pupil of A. D. Crombie. Original, photograph from painting of "Othello," by Carl Becker. Characteristics of work: Fidelity to a complicated subject, and rendering of various textures. Especially to be noted is the treatment of the two masculine faces, and of the distant background. This has been an unusually difficult theme, owing to the variety of matter given on a small scale.*

* On account of the inability of the publishers of THE CENTURY to obtain permission to print this engraving of a copyrighted picture, the cut must be omitted. To avoid similar difficulty, competitors for future prizes are requested to select American originals which are not copyrighted.

The third prize (\$50) is awarded to :

John S. Marquand, of New York. Age, seventeen years. Time of practice, two years and one month. Pupil of Victor L. Chandler. First essay in book illustration, previous work having been commercial merely. Original, photograph from Marak's "The Morning Song." Characteristics of work: Very delicate treatment, and good tone—in this latter a great improvement on the photograph.

Honorable mention is awarded to :

Herbert F. Lyouns, of Boston, pupil of Russell and Richardson. Original, photograph from drawing of Rembrandt's painting of "Laughing Girl." Characteristics: Good management of line, and skill in use of transparent shadow. This face has been very difficult to render with the proper expression, and though the engraver has not been absolutely successful his effort is more than creditable. The third prize might have been awarded him, indeed, had there not been doubts as to the "printability"—if a useful word may thus be coined—of his block.

F. J. L. McCann, of Boston, Mass., pupil of Geo. E. Johnson. Original, photograph from cattle-painting by Voltz. Characteristics: Faithfulness to original, and great delicacy of treatment—too great, perhaps, for good printing in magazine. The foliage is given in an especially charming manner.

Frank A. White, of Jersey City, N. J. Self-taught, with suggestions from Wm. Scott. Original, a landscape picture. Characteristics: Directness of method, fine rendering of color, and silvery-like quality of line. The simplicity of the treatment is noteworthy as well as its originality.

Mrs. E. M. A. Heth, of Richmond, Va. Original, a photograph of landscape subject from nature. Characteristic: Effective work.

General mention, furthermore, is awarded to :

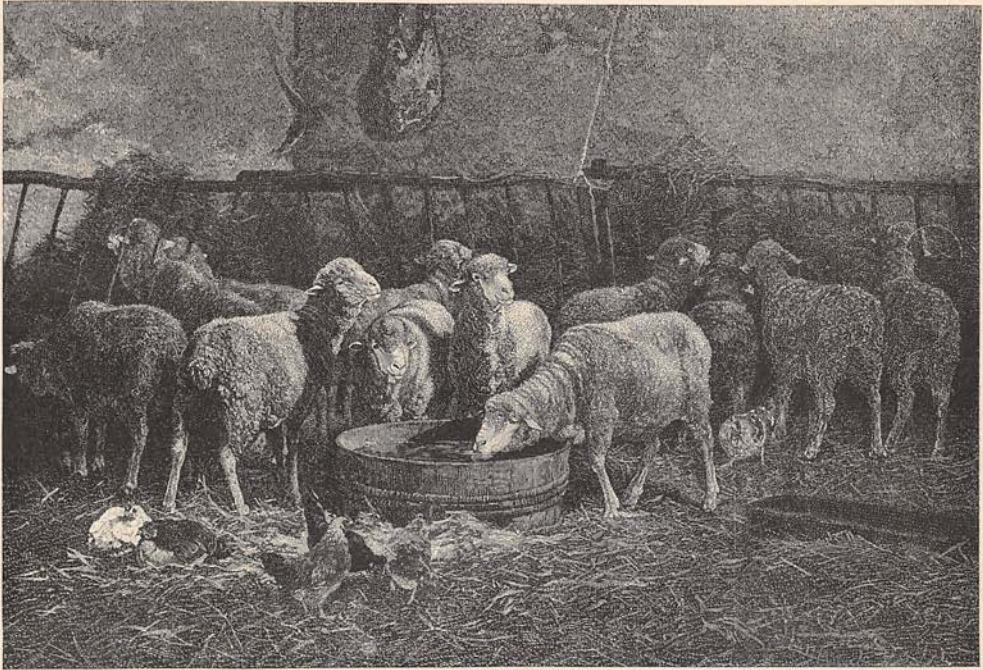
Miss Ada Bampton, of New York, pupil of Cooper Union school, under J. P. Davis. Original, photograph from painting, "Sur le Pas de la Porte," by C. Brun. Characteristic: Very careful work.

Charles P. Marshall, of Lafayetteville, N. Y. Entirely self-taught, without acquaintance with any engraver or advice of any kind, and study pursued under great difficulties. Original, drawn on block from painting of landscape subject.

Miss Edith M. Harte, of New York, pupil of Cooper Union school under J. P. Davis, but chiefly self-taught. Original, drawn on block from landscape sketch by engraver.

Turning now to the prize of \$50 offered for competition to those who took part in the contest of 1881, we find that it has been given to the student who secured the first reward on that occasion :

William H. Mackay, of Boston. Age, seventeen. Original, photograph from life. Characteristics: Excellent management of line, good treatment of varying textures, directness of method, and good tone. The handling of the background is notably strong and simple. If a fault is to be found it is with the drawing of the face, which is not strictly accurate. This cut shows great improvement upon Mr. Mackay's essay of last year. The subject is very difficult, a fact which may not be appreciated by the casual observer. But there is no greater test of an engraver's skill than such steady line-work as is shown in Mr. Mackay's portrait.



SHEEP. ENGRAVED FROM A PHOTOGRAPH (BY PERMISSION OF GOUPIL & CO., PARIS) OF THE PAINTING BY JACQUE. ENGRAVER, C. H. LATHAM.

Honorable mention in this class is awarded to:

- C. H. Latham, who took the third prize of last year. Original, photograph from painting of sheep by Jacque. Treatment very delicate, but might have been a little more forcible. Some doubts as to "printability."
- Hiram P. Barnes, of Waltham, Mass. Self-taught. Originals, photographic portraits.
- M. L. Brown, of Brookline, Mass. Original, photogravure after Hamon's "Twilight."
- J. E. Provine, of Chicago, Ill. Original, photograph after Richter's "Seraglio." Complicated subject treated with much skill in the textures. Some doubts as to "printability."
- Miss M. L. Owens, of New York. Has worked for THE CENTURY since last year, and sends several cuts that have appeared in its pages—for example, the first illustration for the recent article on the "Tile Club Ashore."
- P. Aitkin, of Brooklyn, N. Y. Has also worked for THE CENTURY, and sends excellent cuts, such as La Farge's "Victory" from the article on the "Union League Club House," and Burns's "Taking Observations."

It will be noted that, in criticising the above-mentioned cuts, I have laid especial stress upon a quality not cited in the list first given. This is the quality of "printability,"—one which does not strike the observer who considers the submitted proofs for their intrinsic beauty only, but which is of equal impor-

tance with any other in the eyes of art-manager and printer. A deficiency in this quality, indeed, may be so serious as to vitiate all other merits. Strictly speaking, in fact, a cut is *not* good if it is not adapted for the purpose to which it must be put,—if it is so delicate, or so shallow, or so super-refined, that it cannot be printed to advantage on the steam-press. Many a block which gives a beautiful proof on the hand-press is a sad disappointment to its author when used in the pages of book or periodical. As the tendency of our wood-engraving is just in this direction—toward too great minuteness and subtlety—it will be well for all young artists to bear these facts in mind, and, while making their blocks as delicate as necessary, not to make them "too good to use."

Looking once more over all the contributions, successful and non-successful, it may be added that more attention might well be paid to simplicity of treatment—to securing the desired result with the least possible show of effort. A mastery of strong and simple lines is the best, the only thorough, preparation for every sort of work, even for that where the complicated or characteristic effects of an original must be reproduced in complicated and characteristic ways.

M. G. van Rensselaer.

For the announcement of the terms of the third competition, see "Topics of the Time," in the present number.