POPULAR ART.

By MASON JACKSON.

AMONG the historic scenes that have taken place in the Guildhall of the City of London there have been none more remarkable than that which was witnessed there one day last year, when the Lord Mayor and other representatives of the Corporation presented the freedom of the City to Sir John Gilbert, a distinction which has been very rarely, if ever before, conferred upon an artist.

The generous gift of pictures to the Guildhall Art Gallery, of which this was an acknowledgment, may be regarded as the crowning act of a long career in the field of popular art.

It was not merely as a distinguished member of the Royal Academy that Gilbert appeared in Guildhall. He stood there as one who had done more than any living painter to popularise art. Though the occasion was appointed ostensibly to do him honour and give him thanks for his present to the City, it was also a recognition of his merits as a popular illustrator—an artist in black and white —who had laboured for nearly half a century to bring art into the homes of the people.

The pictures given to London and the other large towns may represent the cream of Gilbert's work as a painter; but the thousands of his designs in black and white that are scattered through the publications of the Victorian era are even a more marvellous monument of his genius and industry. While year after year his pictures in oil and water-colours appeared regularly in the exhibitions of the British Institution, the Royal Academy, and the Water-Colour Society, he never ceased to work in black and white. Perhaps no artist has produced so many drawings for the engraver.

One of the most remarkable achievements of Sir John Gilbert as an illustrator was the edition of Shakespeare's plays edited by Howard Staunton and published in monthly parts many years ago.

When we consider the variety of subject in Shakespeare—the mixture of history and romance, of fact and fancy—we cannot but marvel that one man should undertake and successfully carry through, month by month, without a single failure, a work of such magnitude. I do not know of another artist who has illustrated, single-handed, the whole of Shakespeare's plays—certainly not under the like conditions.

Gilbert's appearance in the world of art was coincident with the foundation of illustrated journalism, and thus it happened that popular art owes more to him than to any other living artist. But the way was prepared beforehand. The ground was ready for the seed that has since produced such an abundant harvest. Charles Knight had shown in the *Penny Magazine* that it was possible to use illustrative art in connection with cheap periodical literature, and give the people something better than the prize-fights and murders that decorated the pages of the newspapers of that day.

The revival of wood-engraving by Thomas Bewick stimulated the cultivation of black-and-white art in a remarkable manner. Before Bewick's time wood-engraving as a living and independent branch of art was unknown in England. He it was who opened up a new pathway in the field of popular art, and he was certainly the pioneer and promoter of that "curse of illustrations" which Mr. Harry Quilter says afflicts the world of art in the present day.

It was Bewick who first developed the legitimate resources of wood-engraving, and in that way he supplied an important element in the foundation of illustrated journalism. From his school, and that of his contemporary Branston, have come the chief practitioners of English wood-engraving in the Victorian age. The best of them all still survives in the person of W. J. Linton, who, though not a pupil of Bewick, has been the steadfast advocate of Bewick's method, both in theory and practice.

Bewick was a born artist. That was the great secret of his success, combined with a perfect knowledge of what his art

was capable of producing. Many of his successors have excelled him in mechanical dexterity, but that is of little avail in the absence of artistic feeling.

Now that photography has brought about a revolution in reproductive art, there is a danger of wood-engraving being extinguished by automatic processes. Yet I hope the art that is coëval with printing will not be allowed to die. The old "block books"—the first books ever printed—owed their existence to the art of the wood-cutter, and ever since those ancient days it has marched hand in hand with the kindred art of printing. The good service of the past may be continued in the future, and in capable hands wood-engraving may still be useful in the diffusion of popular art.

Many years had to elapse after Bewick's revival of the art before wood-engraving began to be used as a means of popular illustration. One or two newspapers adopted it on special occasions, but it was not until the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge began its operations, and Charles Knight took the lead in illustrated literature, that wood-engraving began to be extensively used in a cheap and popular form.

I regard Charles Knight as the moving spirit of illustrative art in connection with the cheap periodical literature of to-day. He set the ball rolling when he started the *Penny Magazine*, and he kept it up by the numerous illustrated works published by him. He and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge deserve the credit of inaugurating a new era of popular art.

Hitherto the art of illustration had been confined to expensive books, but no serious effort had been made to reach that large class which had little money to spend and not much time for reading. The *Penny Magazine* supplied that want, and its success proved that the working man's intellectual capacity was capable of appreciating something better than the pot-house and the political club. The *Penny Magazine* was projected and launched in 1832, when pot-houses and political clubs resounded with the harangues of demagogues who sought to enlighten the working man on the subject of Reform.

Charles Knight offered the working man entertainment of quite another sort. He wished to wean him from the violence of party discussion, and the stimulating details of crime and suffering which filled the contraband newspapers of that day. He wanted to purify his tastes and elevate his understanding, and it cannot be questioned that he succeeded.

DON QUIXOTE'S NIECE AND HOUSEKEEPER.

At that time the working man knew nothing of the fine works of antiquity in painting and sculpture. He had never heard of Raffaelle's cartoons—*The Laocoon*, *The Dying Gladiator*, *The Apollo Belvidere*, *The Portland Vase*—until the *Penny Magazine* published wood-cuts of these masterpieces. He knew nothing of the works of our own Hogarth—*The Marriage à la Mode*, *The Rake's Progress*, *The Laughing Audience*—until he saw

AFTER THE BATTLE.

engravings of them in the *Penny Magazine*.

In like manner the working man was made acquainted with the noble works of architecture of the Continent, as well as our own English cathedrals. Castles and abbeys of historical interest, subjects of natural history, portraits of great men—all were brought to the homes of the country labourer and the town mechanic, to say nothing of other classes, and all at the price of one penny a week.

It is not too much to say that the "penny public" of that day knew nothing of these things until the *Penny Magazine* enlightened them. I venture to assert that the working man of the early thirties, when he went on a holiday to Hampton Court, or visited what was then the nucleus of our National Gallery, looked with additional interest on the pictures he had seen reproduced in the *Penny Magazine*, a publication that distinctly marks an epoch in popular art. In those days the art of wood-cut printing at the steam press was in its infancy, and the blocks were printed from stereotype casts. The engravings had therefore to be executed in a style to meet the conditions of rough and rapid printing. Nevertheless they presented a fair idea of some of the most famous works of art, ancient and modern, and were not without their value in the indirect art education of the people.

The *Penny Magazine* is now forgotten, and I only revive its memory here because it was really the first attempt, in a cheap and popular form, to make the ordinary English public—the masses—acquainted with the higher forms of art in painting and sculpture. It represented the vanguard of the pictorial press, an institution that has not yet reached the limit of its influence on popular art.

Charles Knight attributed the decay of the *Penny Magazine* to the appearance of illustrated newspapers. He at first thought an illustrated newspaper was an impossibility, from the difficulty of producing pictures and news concurrently so that they should both be fresh; but he lived to see the entire success of the new departure in journalism. There can be no question that this success was greatly owing to the appearance at the right moment of an artist who was fitted in every way to meet the requirements of the new enterprise.

This artist was John Gilbert, who was then at the beginning of his career. He possessed all the qualifications necessary in the development of the new branch of popular art. He could draw on wood, he was a rapid worker, and with a bold and free pencil he handled all kinds of subjects with equal facility. It mattered not whether it was a street mob or a Court ball, a civic banquet or a desperate battle, they were all dashed off with a force and vigour unequalled, and in a manner exactly suited to the rapid engraving and printing of an illustrated newspaper. There never was a better instance of the right man in the right place when Herbert Ingram secured the services of John Gilbert.

And it was not only in topical subjects that Gilbert was so excellent. For thirty years the popular art of the day abounded in examples of his powers as a designer, both as a recorder of facts and an illustrator of fiction. He had long made his mark in black and white as an artist for the people—had become a distinguished painter and President of the Water-Colour Society, and had earned the distinction of knighthood—before the Royal Academy woke up and recognised his merits. He was then invited to join that select body, who thus, in some measure, atoned for having "skied" his pictures in his early time.

Those who have been accustomed to regard Gilbert only as a painter of standard-bearers and knights in armour will be surprised at the wide range of his powers as displayed in the pictures he has presented to the art galleries of London, Liverpool, Birmingham, and Manchester. The impression made upon the spectator by any one of these pictures, when exhibited singly at the Royal Academy or elsewhere, was probably small in comparison with the striking effect when we see a number of them collected together. Now, the genius of the painter is realised in full force, just as we were enabled to form a just conception of the genius of the late Frank Holl, when a number of his works were brought together in the rooms of the Royal Academy. A notion, entertained by many persons, that Frank Holl could only paint funerals and other sorrowful subjects was speedily dispelled.

It is so in these collected works of Sir John Gilbert, who shows as much versatility in his pictures as in his black-and-white work. We have plenty of waving banners, glancing spears, and glittering armour; but we also have imagination, poetic feeling, and weird picturesqueness. He delights to paint the picturesque incidents of warfare

rather than to depict its horrors. In *The Battle of the Standard* and in *The Morning of Agincourt* we see the armed hosts at their devotions before the conflict; and in the impressive picture entitled *After the Battle* we have the survivors of the stricken field in the foreground, while the groups of dead and wounded are scattered over the distance. This work is as fine and poetic a battle-piece as was ever painted.

Gilbert is as much at home in scenes of Courtly pomp or priestly splendour as in the dread solemnity of a field of battle. He loves to riot in velvet and gold, where he can dazzle and delight the eye with gorgeous colour. In *Henry VIII. and Cardinal Wolsey* and in *The Cardinal on his way to Westminster Hall* we have examples of this phase of the artist's powers. Cardinal Wolsey has always been a favourite subject with the painter, whose love of Rubenesque colour found ample scope for indulgence in its treatment. His fondness for, and skilful management of, scenes and personages distinguished by magnificence and splendour of raiment is also well shown in the picture entitled *The Bishop*. He is equally at home in domestic subjects—witness his *Don Quixote's Housekeeper and Niece;* while his feeling for the weird and poetical

HENRY VIII. AND CARDINAL WOLSEY.

is seen in *The Witch*, in *The Charcoal Burners*, and in *The Knight-Errant.*

But it is in the *Enchanted Forest* that Sir John Gilbert has allowed his imagination an equal place with his love of martial picturesqueness. Here we have two mail-clad warriors passing through a forest glade, whose recesses are filled with fairy forms of every size and shape. Gnomes are lurking among the branches of the trees, and graceful sylphs float in the air around the bewildered knights. It is a veritable Midsummer Night's Dream, where the artist has given full freedom to the play of his exuberant fancy.

THE ENCHANTED FOREST.

Among the pictures given to Liverpool and Birmingham, *The Slaying of the Dragon* and *The Return of the Victors* still further illustrate the painter's versatile genius.

What place Sir John Gilbert may occupy hereafter in the history of British art it is difficult to say. The gifts of pictures to the four largest cities of the Empire will enable posterity to form a just estimate of his merits as a painter, while his contributions to the popular art of the Victorian age will place him at the head of that numerous body of artists who have made illustrated journalism so popular.

But this popularity of illustrated journalism is, according to Mr. Harry Quilter, one of the greatest evils which assail art at the present day.[1] If this be so, then Sir John Gilbert is the chief offender among a crowd of delinquents. He has injured and not benefited English art by lending himself to the cultivation of a form of art which is at once ephemeral and pernicious.

I cannot believe it. As an old agent in the diffusion of popular art, I take comfort in believing what another writer has said of the illustrated newspaper—that it is the most living and most artistic agency of our times. Mr. Quilter concedes that it may, on the whole, impart some sort of harmless pleasure and be a sort of indirect art education to thousands of readers. Illustrated journalism aims at nothing more. It will never make Michael Angelos, Raffaelles, or Titians; but if it cannot create genius it has helped to develop it. Not a few English artists

[1] See the *English Illustrated Magazine*, vol. x. p. 701.

of the first rank, besides Sir John Gilbert, have made the practice of popular art the stepping-stone to higher things. The art education of many a young painter has been improved and promoted by working in black and white—to say nothing of the help such work has been to them in other ways.

A BISHOP.

If the illustrated newspaper fulfils no other function than to impart harmless pleasure and help in the art education of the people, its influence is sufficiently beneficial to warrant its existence and encouragement. All popular art must, from the nature of things, be more or less of a temporary and ephemeral character, and is subject to the universal law of change. Perhaps there should be no such thing as *fashion* in art, but there *is* nevertheless. The Pre-Raphaelite era is succeeded by the era of Impressionism; one school carries detail and high finish to excess; the other ignores both. The budding artist of to-day has no hesitation in pronouncing the art of thirty years ago to be old-fashioned; and thus the laws of art, unlike the laws of nature, are ever changing.