EDWIN AUSTIN ABBEY: THE MAN AND HIS WORK: BY LOUIS A. HOLMAN

It was at a dinner of the Lotus Club in New York that the late Edmund Clarence Stedman said: "Although there is no frontier to the field of art, it has many provinces, and every province would be glad to claim Mr. Abbey as its own." Abbey had essayed work in one province after another: the province of illustration, pen and wash drawings, the province of paintings, water color, pastel and oil, the province of mural decoration, historic and symbolic. In each province he had attained conspicuous success. Yet when at that same dinner he was referred to as "the master workman," he said with that genuine modesty which was his always: "I have achieved very little. The fields of art stretch out in boundless leagues where I have worked. I am but a beginner." And in this last sentence I think we find the key to the career of Edwin Austin Abbey, the most talked-of artist before the English-speaking world today. His career was marked by one success following hard upon the heels of another with almost miraculous precision.

Close student and hard worker as Abbey proved himself, he found time for his friends and for play. I question whether there ever lived an American artist who had a greater host of intimate friends. Why? It is hard to put down in cold type just why this is so. Perhaps little more can be said than to repeat the words so often heard of late: "Abbey was a most lovable man." If we question further, one will say that he was "the soul of generosity." And this trite phrase is not to be taken as referring only to material things. He gave away sketches and drawings with a lavish hand; he spent quite all the fifteen thousand dollars received for "The Holy Grail" in models and costumes and research work, and every manner of thing, that the paintings might be worthy the place they were to occupy; the extent of the plan for the Harrisburg decorations was enlarged at his request so that it was virtually a gift to his native State of work, measured by the rest of it, worth thirty thousand dollars; but there was something greater and more unusual than these acts imply when Abbey was called "the soul of generosity." Artists will say that when he criticised their work he always searched for something encouraging to say, that he was exceedingly considerate of everybody's feelings, that he would forgive any fault in a friend, and in short that there was found in him an excellent spirit, wonderfully generous in its opinion of all his fellows. Another friend will tell that he was instinctively refined, and that he had a manner which would have won him his way into palaces even if he had
started life as a hod-carrier. Another friend will call attention to
the fact that although Abbey did practically all of his work in Eng-
land and frankly said he could do it better there, he never consid-
ered himself an expatriate, never lost his American accent or man-
ner. Some other friend will say that the reason Abbey was so popular
was that he had such a keen love for all good, clean sport. He
loved baseball, for instance, with the devotion of an American boy.
Because he could not, in England, easily bring together enough men
to play this game he took up and enthusiastically followed the next
best thing—cricket. He had a ground prepared at his Gloucester-
shire house, and himself became president of the club. Other friends
will tell of his infectious smile, of his ardent democracy, of his lively
sympathy, of his reliance upon work rather than upon genius.
Perhaps, however, there was nothing about him which made
such a universal appeal as his alert sense of humor. Abbey’s nick-
name in his New York days was “Chestnut.” It was from one of
his stories that this designation for a long-drawn-out or an old story
came. Edward Strahan in “A Book of the Tile Club” gives the
facts.

“O
N HIS first presentation among the people on the other side
of the ocean * * * he had been immediately asked what
stories he knew. He gave them unpublished Mark Twains,
recondite Artemus Wards, and Lincolns before the letter, in ex-
change for their Blue China Ballades and Blaydes of the college
period. Then he bethought him of his chestnut story, a time-hon-
ored jest of his Tile Club days. Taking his courage in both hands
he poured it out with an air of conviction and good faith before a
large dinner-party. Now the Chestnut Story is one of those inter-
minable, pointless humbug narratives which the French call a scène,
eternally getting to the point and never arriving there; exciting vast
interest and calculation in regard to the chestnuts on a certain tree;
promising a rich and racy solution in the very next sentence; straying
off into episodes that baffled the ear and disappointed the hope.
This tale could be prolonged by him when he was at his best for a
good part of an hour, without ever releasing the attention or satis-
fying the expectation. As time wore on, the more solemn and prac-
tical of the guests would look at each other gravely; * * * At a
given moment the tableful would perceive the crux and burst into
horse laughs. * * * And there would be one delicious, venerable
Englishman who, when all were roaring, would confess that he was
always slow at catching the point of American humor, and would
ask his neighbor to oblige him by telling what it was all about. * * *
"BLANCHEFLEUR:" A DETAIL FROM THE DECORATION OF THE HOLY GRAIL, BY E. A. ABBEY.
Copyright 1898 by E. A. Abbey: From a Copley Print.
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"CORDELIA;" FROM ONE OF E. A. ABBEY’S STUDIES FOR "LEAR."
"DEATH OF AMFORTAS:" A DETAIL FROM THE DECORATION OF THE HOLY GRAIL, BY E. A. ABBEY
THE WORK OF E. A. ABBEY

English literary men, * * * began to use the title in their writing as a type of an endless or unsatisfactory yarn. And the word Chestnut, crossing the sea, returned again to the land of its birth, and became the accepted definition of what is tedious, old and interminable."

In conclusion, Strahan quotes Abbey as saying:
"Boys, * * * what do you think? I gave the Chestnut last Wednesday week to a tragedian, a proctor, a bishop and a baronet. And they swallowed it for thirty-seven minutes by my watch."

Born in Philadelphia eight years before the Civil War broke out, Abbey was in school at the time when men's thoughts were chiefly on the great struggle. His two years' art training were over before the paralyzing effect of war had passed. He was in a very real sense a self-made man, as severe a critic of his own work and as exacting as any master could have been. He, however, always gave the credit for his success to his merchant grandfather, a man of fine artistic feeling, who like Abbey's own father spent many a day at his easel. A friend who called on Abbey while he was at work on the coronation picture has recently recalled some of the conversation.

"Abbey," said the caller, "it is a great work and a great chance; but tell me, how did you get it?"

"Through my grandfather," said Abbey.

"I see by the papers that you are also to decorate the new capitol of Pennsylvania. * * * Did your grandfather get that commission too?"

And Abbey gravely replied: "If I do the work he will be the cause."

I have seen a photograph of Abbey taken when he was eight years old. With dreamy unconsciousness he had posed himself at a table, not with a toy but with paper and pencil. When he was but fourteen, it is said, "Oliver Optic's Magazine for Boys and Girls" published a rebus of his designing. He began drawing on wood for a wood engraver when he was sixteen. During this period he was studying art at night with Isaac L. Williams and in the Academy of Fine Arts, under Christian Scheussch. A sketch called "The First Thanksgiving" submitted to Harper's Magazine was accepted. This brought him a pleasure that the great commissions of later years never equalled. (If the sketch was ever published, it has escaped me.) This triumph eventually resulted in eighteen hundred and seventy-one in his joining the staff of Harper's Magazine, and coming under the direction of Charles Parsons, a water-colorist of prominence, then chief of Harper's art department. Parsons was a stimu-
THE WORK OF E. A. ABBEY

lating man. Not only Abbey, but many another famous in American art owes his success to walking in the way Parsons pointed out. Here, too, he came in contact, among a dozen others, with W. L. Sheppard, then one of Harper’s best men, now almost forgotten, and Charles S. Reinhart, who then and for several years after gave much greater promise than did Abbey. In New York at this time, too, were Harry Fenn, beginning his brilliant and unique career, and Alfred Fredericks, one of the best illustrators of the time. A little later came other men who have attained unusual prominence in art: W. T. Smedley, John W. Alexander, A. B. Frost, Frank Du Mond, Howard Pyle and Joseph Pennell; and each one counted Abbey as his friend.

Great and strongly characteristic as were these men, one looks in vain for record of their influence upon Abbey. Some have said that the work of Fortuny had great effect upon him, but he himself told a friend, from whom I have it, that the style of his pen-and-ink work was the result of a close study of some of Adolph Menzel’s published about eighteen hundred and forty-two.

THE New York engravers complained bitterly of Abbey’s work. It was “dirty;” it contained too many little lines, impossible of reproduction. So indeed it has always been with Abbey. He never “drew for reproduction.” When the mechanical processes came in, it was the same old story. The rough paper which he liked and used, and continued to like and use, gave a broken, soft line, in the drawing artistically beautiful, but for purposes of reproduction very bad. On this account I doubt if we have ever seen the full delicate beauty of any pen-drawing by Abbey except perhaps the large reproduction in Joseph Pennell’s “Pen Drawing and Pen Draughtsmen.”

Hopkinson Smith puts into the mouth of one of his characters these words about the youthful Abbey: “He was a clean-cut, manly, lovable fellow, winning friends for himself wherever he went. It was delightful, I remember, to watch him in those days. He was like a child over his prices, unworlly to a degree. It had been the love of doing the thing that had held and impelled him, not the money he got for it,—and it is so still.”

In the July Harper’s, eighteen hundred and seventy-one there is a poem accompanied by a number of illustrations done by several of the staff. Among them is one signed by Abbey. After this his work appears frequently. It is almost painful to think of the man who became the greatest illustrator of Shakespeare, and the acknowledged authority on Mediæval costume, having to illustrate articles
such as "The New York Post Office," "The Yale Expedition of Eighteen Hundred and Seventy," "The United States Treasury," "North Bolivia," etc.

In eighteen hundred and seventy-three Abbey was Harper's humorous artist, and illustrated the "Editor's Drawer." To have his name appear as the illustrator of an article in those days, one had to be a good deal of an artist. So far as I can find, "Porte Crayon" (David H. Strother), whose name appeared at the head of an article and in the index of the April Harper's, eighteen hundred and seventy-two, was the first person to be so honored by this publishing house. Imagine a publication using illustrations by Howard Pyle, Charles S. Reinhart, W. A. Rogers, Harry Fenn, W. T. Smedley, William Small (the Englishman) and Edwin A. Abbey, and never calling attention to the fact! The number and titles of the illustrations were always painstakingly given, but the men who made them were ignored. I think it was the middle of eighteen hundred and eighty-one before Harper's awoke to the fact that it was hiding several lights under its bushel. Since then its artists have shared honors with its authors.

Abbey's illustrations in the Harper's December, eighteen hundred and seventy-eight, give, I feel, the first distinct promise of what was to come. Next year the Herrick drawings began to appear. They showed Abbey no matter-of-fact illustrator of another man's ideas, but one who himself walked in heavenly places seeing with the eyes of a poet.

He drew all his figures from life and his backgrounds and accessories from nature. This constant study and comparison of his work with nature itself was the reason for his rapid advance. In just ten years from the appearance of the first Herrick illustration, Joseph Pennell, than whom there is no better judge of illustrative work, deliberately and with emphasis, pronounced Abbey the greatest of living illustrators.

He had gone to England the year before to make the Herrick drawings, and, except for short visits, he never returned to America. He found life in England more stimulating. "I don't mean to imply," said the artist once in speaking of this, "that all talk you hear abroad is a continuous and dazzling feast of intellectual joy, but * * * I should say that students in special lines are more numerous. Although one might not see much of the world of art and letters for months, that world is easily accessible. I lead a very quiet life: am obliged to do so in order to get through the amount of work I have under way and in contemplation. Living being less expensive, I can allow myself much more time over my work, and
THE WORK OF E. A. ABBEY

can spend money for materials of study that would be swallowed up in rent, taxes and wages in very short order in New York."

ENGLISHMEN soon forgot that this genial, brilliant man was a foreigner, possibly because he was supremely happy in the land of his adoption. He was everywhere held in high favor, and honors showered upon him. He became one of a notable group of American artists: Sargent, Millet, Boughton, Shannon and Whistler (if we may call Whistler an American), who found in England a sympathetic artistic environment. Abbey materially aided in increasing the esteem in which his fellow countrymen were held.

To one who is familiar with the parish churches, the manor houses, the lanes, the hedgerows and flowers of Herrick's country, it is easy to understand the spell they cast over Abbey. There is a story that he once tried to break away from the witchery of it, but after his household goods had reached America he weakened and the unpacking was not done until they got back to England.

At Broadway, in Worcestershire, Abbey found friends and there he lingered, gathering material for his drawings. A friend of his told me that in the wonderful garden of Russell House, the home of Frank Millet, he had often seen, on the same morning, each painting from his own model, Abbey, Sargent, Millet, Alma-Tadema and Alfred Parsons. It was at hospitable Russell House that Abbey first met Miss Mary Gertrude Mead, of New York, who later became his wife. Here, too, he had the good fortune to meet Alfred Parsons, and Alfred Parsons had the still better fortune to meet Abbey. Then and there began that wonderful collaboration, the result of which for many a year charmed the artistic world.

Successful, from every point of view, as were the illustrations for Herrick, and Goldsmith, and Shakespeare, all of which came from Abbey's hand as spontaneously as fruit from a tree, he yet longed to be a beginner again in other fields of art. It was not that he might make a fortune or win applause, but that he might have the joy of wandering in a new region, which to him looked as inviting as did the delectable mountains to Bunyan's hero. He bought an ancient house at Fairford, Gloucestershire, some fifty miles south of Broadway. Here he built a large studio and entered the lists as a painter of English romance and history.

In eighteen hundred and ninety-one he began the famous "Holy Grail" series for the Boston Public Library. Five years later his "Richard, Duke of Gloucester and the Lady Anne" won him his A.R.A. In two more years he became a full Academician. The work, however, which brought Abbey his greatest recognition in
England was his painting of the coronation of Edward the Seventh, by "command" of the king. It is interesting to find that the painter of Queen Victoria's coronation was Charles Robert Leslie, who was brought up as was Abbey in Philadelphia and studied at the same school. We recall, too, that Benjamin West, also from Pennsylvania, was the court painter to George the Third. The honor to Abbey was a distinguished one and he appreciated it. At the coronation itself he was given a point of vantage from which, for a few moments, to view the ceremony which he was to picture for all time. He was equal to the task. The painting was a success, but the making of it was a painful process for the artist. The King and Queen gave him no trouble, but many of the peers and peeresses were exasperating beyond words in their utter disregard of appointments, in their vanity and ignorance,—some of the ladies, for instance, insisted, not only on full portraits, but on their long trains and all their jewels showing. We are reminded that in the days of Rembrandt the members of the so-called "Night Watch" gave a like exhibition of petty human qualities when they quarreled with Rembrandt over just such points.

Securely fastened to the walls of the Boston Public Library are fifteen beautiful panels, too well-known to need description here. "The Quest of the Holy Grail" shows, as many persons believe, the work of Abbey at its zenith. Further than this, the paintings are not more securely attached to the walls than are these same persons attached to their conviction that here is shown the greatest and best that American mural art has produced. In the State Capitol at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, are eight mural decorations by the same hand. The New York Tribune contends, and it is not alone in this contention, that at Harrisburg, in his native State, "Abbey built the monument to himself, as an artist, into which he poured his best devotion and his highest abilities." Who shall say which is the greater monument? Surely it cannot be decided now with four of one lot not yet in place.

All Abbey's drawings, paintings, pastels, practically everything he had done, played its part in developing his hand, his mind and his soul for the task of visualizing the great legend of the Holy Grail, which, although symbolic in itself, was treated realistically and clothed in the garb of the Middle Ages. On the other hand the work already at Harrisburg is of such a widely different character, being wholly symbolic subjects treated in a modern manner, that he was compelled to leave the well-worn road and blaze out a new one. This was what he delighted to do, but are we reasonable in expecting that he would meet with immediate and permanent suc-
cess? Perhaps so, for he was no ordinary man. Yet some of our editors are saying that Abbey was "not a great artist, but a conscientious worker, who met with a measure of success!"

On one of the decorations at Harrisburg, Abbey has put this quotation: "Art deals with things forever incapable of definition and that belong to love, beauty, joy and worship, the shapes, power and glory of which are forever building, unbuilding and rebuilding in each man's soul and in the soul of the whole world." With these words in mind it seems hasty to try now to pronounce judgment on even the Boston paintings. When the "building, unbuilding and rebuilding" of our ideas of art has gone on for a few years we shall see all of Abbey's work by a truer light and in a saner way. In the meantime I feel confident Abbey will hold his place as one of America's foremost colorists, as one of her rarest draftsmen, as the most poetic painter of Mediaeval subjects in his time, and as the greatest illustrator that America has yet produced.

TO THE DONOR OF SUNDRY APPLES

MAY every day that makes the year
As luring to your eyes appear
And fragrant to your sense, as those
Your apples streaked with gold and rose:
Like them in beauty manifold
Be curved and exquisite to hold—
All flavored with the wind and sun,
And brimmed with sweetness every one.
Could ordinary mortals know
The western orchard where they grow,
And watch the artist hours put on
New saffron and vermillion,
How master a more delicate art
For joy to ripen in the heart?
Or who could covet after these,
Mere gold from the Hesperides?

GRACE HAZARD CONKLING.