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CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH WOODCUTS



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CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH WOODCUTS

CAMPBELL DODGSON, C.B.E.

Keeper of Prints and Drawings

British Museum

363

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THE thanks of the Publishers are due to all the artists who kindly submitted specimens of their work for selection by Mr. Campbell Dodgson, to Mr. Noel Rooke for invaluable advice and assistance, to Miss Vivien Gribble for designing the cover, and to Mr. Herbert Furst for permission to include Mr. Edward Wadsworth's "Yorkshire," which was originally designed for Mr. Furst's series of "Modern Woodcutters."

I N T R O D U C T I O N

WOOD-ENGRAVING is the oldest of all the processes of graphic art which aim at yielding impressions, as distinct from the decoration of surfaces with engraved designs, a practice known to Palæolithic man. The discoveries of Sir Aurel Stein have thrown new light upon the antiquity of its use in the East. But even in Western Europe wood-engraving has a history extending over more than five hundred years ; in fact, next year we may celebrate, if we please, the quincentenary of the earliest actually dated woodcut, the " St. Christopher " of 1423, now in the John Rylands Library at Manchester. Long before this wood-blocks had been cut for the purpose of printing patterns on textile fabrics, but it was only when paper came into general use, late in the fourteenth century, that the print, as we now understand it, obtained a chance of separate existence. The development of the woodcut, in the earliest specimens of which we recognise the Gothic style of about 1390-1410, out of the printed pattern was followed before very long by the development of line engraving out of ornament engraved by the goldsmith upon vessels of silver, and that of etching out of the armourer's practice of decorating plates of steel by designs bitten in with acid. Of these two processes, the first came into use about 1430-40, and the second quite early in the sixteenth century. Every century contributes its process : the seventeenth, mezzotint ; the eighteenth, aquatint and stipple, and quite at its close lithography, which the nineteenth century was to develop in the hands of Goya, Daumier, Manet, Whistler and Forain. But all through the centuries the use of the woodcut persists. I must not say that in all it flourishes, but it shows itself capable, again and again, of a vigorous revival after temporary eclipse and neglect. It has never surpassed in popularity and wide diffusion, and in the high level of excellence attained at the climax of the period, the achievements of the first great age of wood-engraving, which lasted continuously from its first introduction till about 1580. In every Western country, but notably in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and France, the production of woodcuts, both in the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, was enormous, and a very large proportion of them was of fine quality. Throughout that period separate woodcuts, sometimes of large size, were being sold for a great variety of purposes—as devotional images, portraits, commemorations of historical

events, and illustrations of all the subject matter, allegorical, mythological, scientific, instructive or amusing, that was in favour with a public of various ranks and educated in various degrees. And throughout the last century of that period, from about 1470 onwards, the woodcut enjoyed a supremacy without rival as the process for book illustration, till the competition of the copper plate, engraved or etched, became serious, and finally drove the woodblock out of the field. In the fifteenth century we rarely know the names of the illustrators, and it is generally uncertain whether the designers of the blocks also actually cut them; but there is little doubt that in the culminating period, which may be placed at about 1490 to 1530, the practice was established in the Teutonic countries that the designing artists, many of whom were among the greatest painters and draughtsmen of the age, such as Dürer, Cranach, Holbein, Baldung, Burgkmair and Lucas van Leyden, drew the designs upon the block and employed professional woodcutters to cut the wood so skilfully that the result was practically a facsimile of the pen and ink drawing. There are some German artists, notably the leading painters of the "Danube school," Altdorfer and Huber, who may be exceptions to this rule; but the evidence becomes still stronger as the sixteenth century advances and signatures are more frequent, that there was usually this division of labour. A double signature is often met with, the initials of the draughtsman being accompanied by a little pen, and those of the cutter by a little knife, both of which implements may be seen in use upon the block in two of Jost Amman's well-known series of woodcuts (1568) illustrating various trades, arts and crafts. About the practice in the Latin countries at this period we are less well informed, Italian and French woodcuts being much more rarely signed than the German, Swiss and Dutch. We seldom know the names of the artists who designed the book illustrations; but in Italy, at least, we know that it was a very general practice for drawings and, later on, even pictures, to be reproduced by professional woodcutters.

That was the case also in the seventeenth century, when wood-engraving enjoyed more favour in the Low Countries than elsewhere. After the original woodcuts of Goltzius (d. 1617), the most striking examples are those of Jegher, who was chiefly a reproductive engraver, especially after Rubens, and Christoffel van Sichem. But some good original woodcuts were produced at this period in Holland. The best known are the portrait heads by Livens, but a few other painter-engravers less known to fame, such as Dirk de Bray, did excellent woodcuts from their own designs. In Italy the Bolognese revived

the sixteenth century practice of reproducing in several tints the washed drawings of painters.

In the eighteenth century the woodcut was not much used except in vignettes and head-and-tail pieces for the decoration of books, but towards the end of it there was another remarkable revival of the sixteenth century practice of engraving in chiaroscuro, or *camaiëu*, as it is called in France, where it has recently been revived again. John Baptist Jackson, who worked in Venice, and afterwards in Battersea, produced a fine series of woodcuts in colour after the Venetian painters, Rubens and others, while the English amateur, John Skippe, and the Italian, Zanetti, imitated the drawings of Parmigiano with a skill almost equal to that of his contemporaries.

Late in the eighteenth century (his earliest work dates from 1770) comes Thomas Bewick, the first English original wood engraver of note, whose name is associated with a technical innovation of great importance, the substitution of actual engraving with the burin on hard boxwood cut across the grain ("the end of the wood") for the older practice of cutting with a knife "on the plank," *i.e.*, on the surface of the softer wood sawn in the direction of the grain. This practice became traditional; it persisted among wood-engravers of the professional school all through the nineteenth century, and until, in the twentieth, the art of wood-engraving, as handed down and taught in the trade since Bewick's day, became practically extinct, succumbing to the competition of rapid photo-mechanical processes. Some of the old professional wood-engravers yet survive, but few traces of their handiwork can be found; it has been driven from the newspapers and magazines into the humbler pages of illustrated trade catalogues.

The great thing to notice about this whole nineteenth century practice of wood-engraving is that it was almost without exception reproductive. As in the days of Dürer and Holbein, so in the days of Northcote and W. M. Craig, of Menzel and Richter, of Gavarni and Gustave Doré, of Millais, Keene, and Tenniel, of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Walter Crane, the artist drew his design upon the block or, at a later time, had it transferred to the surface of the block by photography, and took no further part in the production of the woodcut till a proof was submitted to him to be touched for alterations. It was the business of the professional wood engraver, the Dalziels, Swain, Linton, and a host of others, to preserve the artist's drawing with absolute fidelity, leaving his lines standing by cutting away the intervening spaces, or, at the most, to interpret the artist's intention, and convert a slight sketch into a finished engraving

in black line, or to translate a wash drawing into white line with the graver, a process which gave scope for some degree of originality, and was developed to its extreme of rather tiresome perfection in the United States.

This general statement about nineteenth century engraving admits of certain exceptions. Originality breaks out now and again, whether in the humbler form of broadsides and advertisements and illustrations to chap-books, ballads, and children's story books, or in the work of those rare artists who chose to learn the craft of wood-engraving for themselves, and engrave their own designs without employing a professional hand as interpreter. Blake, who drew and cut his illustrations to Thornton's *Virgil*, and Blake's disciple, Edward Calvert, who engraved a few small exquisite pastorals of his own design, are the chief of these rare exceptions. There is hardly another case of original wood-engraving to be met with in England till about 1890, though Lepère, the pioneer of the revival of original wood-cutting in France, had begun his career much earlier than that; it was not till about 1895, however, that he relinquished the practice of engraving for that of cutting on the plank, the method adopted for most of his work from that time onwards.

In England, apart from a few modest ventures in *The Hobby Horse* (1886-1892) which published some original woodcuts by Herbert Horne, the modern woodcut made its *début* in *The Dial* (1889-1897) in the books illustrated by Mr. Ricketts and Mr. Charles Shannon before the foundation of the Vale Press, and in the portfolios of woodcuts by Mr. Lucien Pissarro (1891) and Mr. T. Sturge Moore (1895), which they published at the Vale, Chelsea. William Morris had used woodcuts, of course, in many of the Kelmscott Press books, but they were reproductive woodcuts, by W. H. Hooper and others, from designs by other artists, and when Morris made experiments, long before this, in cutting blocks himself, the illustrations which he engraved for a projected edition of "Cupid and Psyche" had been designed by Burne-Jones. The Birmingham school of illustrators, which followed in the tracks of Morris, did not contribute very much to the development of wood-engraving. With the exception of Mr. Bernard Sleight, most of this group confined themselves to making designs in the woodcut manner, which were reproduced by process. Somewhat later than this Mr. Gordon Craig, standing quite apart from this group, engraved beautiful decorations on wood for *The Page* and *The Mask*, and Mr. Brangwyn is another of the older artists, detached from those of whom I shall have to speak, who have done remarkable work on wood.

The artists of this older generation, the original wood engravers of

the "nineties" and the first decade of this century, are not represented in this volume of Contemporary English Woodcuts, though some of them have continued their work to the present day. The selection is intended, rather, to convey an idea of the variety of talent and accomplishment possessed by a younger generation, which shares in that impulse to use the wood-block with knife or burin, as the means of expression, which has spread all over Europe in the last few years, and especially during and since the War. The extensive exhibition arranged last January in the Pavillon de Marsan at Paris by the Société de la Gravure sur Bois Originale afforded a better survey than any other which has yet been held of the wide range of contemporary wood engraving, though the Teutonic and Slavonic nations were hardly at all represented. It is regrettable that English artists did not respond more largely to the invitation to participate in this exhibition. The few isolated groups of British work failed to make much effect amid the great mass of French, Italian and Belgian woodcuts. This anthology may claim, in such measure as its limited scope admits, to make amends for the omission, and to show that the younger English artists of to-day are capable of holding their own when judged by a European standard. Some of them, I suppose, are in touch with the contemporary work of Parisian artists and consciously influenced by it, but for the most part their work is a native growth of English or Irish soil. Scottish artists, who have distinguished themselves so much in etching, have not, so far, worked much in other processes; Strang and Bryden are the only Scots who have achieved much on wood, and their work belongs to the past. It must be understood that here, and throughout this survey of recent and contemporary wood-engraving, I confine myself to the discussion of black-and-white work done by traditional European processes and printed with oil-colour. The Japanese method of wood-cutting on the plank and printing with water-colour from several blocks, introduced about 1895 by Mr. Batten and Mr. Morley Fletcher, is still in active use and practised by a number of artists in Edinburgh as well as London, but the woodcuts produced by this process cannot be printed in the typographic press or used for book illustration. Mr. Sydney Lee, the senior of the contributors to this volume, is, I think, the only artist of the group who has used this method as well as the European process, and the Japanese method is purposely omitted, without any disparagement of its merits being intended, from the scope of this introduction.

Many of our contributors, including Mr. Sydney Lee, belong to the Society of Wood Engravers which was founded in 1920, or to the group

which, without being actually members of that Society, have contributed to the two annual exhibitions which it has already held at the Chenil Gallery. But the selection has by no means been confined to that group, nor is it by the desire, or the fault, of publisher or editor that certain artists who might naturally be expected to contribute, are not represented. The alphabetical arrangement of the woodcuts by the artists' names which has been adopted, as the fairest to all concerned, results in some startling contrasts which will be accepted, it is hoped, as evidence of an impartial desire to recognise the validity of widely different tendencies in modern art. The "Cubist" or "Post-Impressionist" element is represented by Mr. Gibbings, Mr. McKnight Kauffer, and Mr. Wadsworth, some of whose most typical work was unfortunately excluded by the large size of the blocks. Less geometrical and rigid in its use of lines and masses, but also thoroughly modern, is the art of Mr. Rupert Lee and that of Mr. Ethelbert White, who makes ingenious use of motives furnished, I dare to conjecture, by the chap-book and the willow-pattern plate. Mr. Haggren and Mr. Dickey are among the engravers who rely very much upon the effective use of white lines and spaces. So, too, does a less known but very modern and original engraver, Lady Mabel Annesley, a recent pupil of Mr. Noel Rooke at the L.C.C. Central School of Arts and Crafts, who draws her inspiration from the mountains of her own County Down. Mr. Rooke himself, represented by examples of his earlier and later woodcuts, has discovered a vigorous treatment of mountain forms. Mr. John Nash is represented in a tamer and more domestic mood than he himself would, probably, choose as typical, by the exquisite renderings of fur and flowers which he must blame the writer for preferring to some of his more recent landscape woodcuts. Mr. Eric Gill, the greatest master of the cleanly engraved white line defining with rigorous economy black spaces rendered expressive by this exactly calculated definition, is not represented here, but something akin to his method may be observed, applied to animals, birds and vegetation, in the work of Mr. Eric Daghish. The older tradition of English illustration may be traced in the graceful "Echo" of Mr. Nightingale, and in the specimen which we give of Miss Marcia Lane Foster, latest scion of a family whose artistic traditions go back, through Richard and William Lane, to Gainsborough. Mr. Greenwood excels in the delicate and minute work in white line upon black, which has also won the admiration of many collectors for the earlier wood engravings of Mrs. Raverat. The two specimens given here of this artist's work have been chosen partly for their size and importance, partly

because they have been less often exhibited or reproduced than her little pastoral landscapes, her "Nativity," or her subjects from old ballad poetry, which have been so justly praised. Miss Gribble and Miss Pilkington are among the other women artists who practise wood engraving with zeal and success; the former is now turning her attention to book illustration, in which English engravers of the modern school have hitherto achieved smaller results than their contemporaries in France.

All these artists alike, however diverse their vision, their taste or their accomplishment may be, use the wood block and the graver or knife in a strictly orthodox manner as the medium and tools with which to express themselves directly. They cut their lines or spaces as they go on; they design in terms of wood engraving, instead of reproducing in another medium a design which has been already produced as a picture or a drawing. The few specimens given here of their original work on the wood will lead collectors, I hope, to enquire for others, and to realise more fully than they do that woodcuts, as well as etchings or lithographs, can be taken seriously as prints worth choosing and buying, whether to be cherished in the portfolio or to be framed on the wall.

CAMPBELL DODGSON

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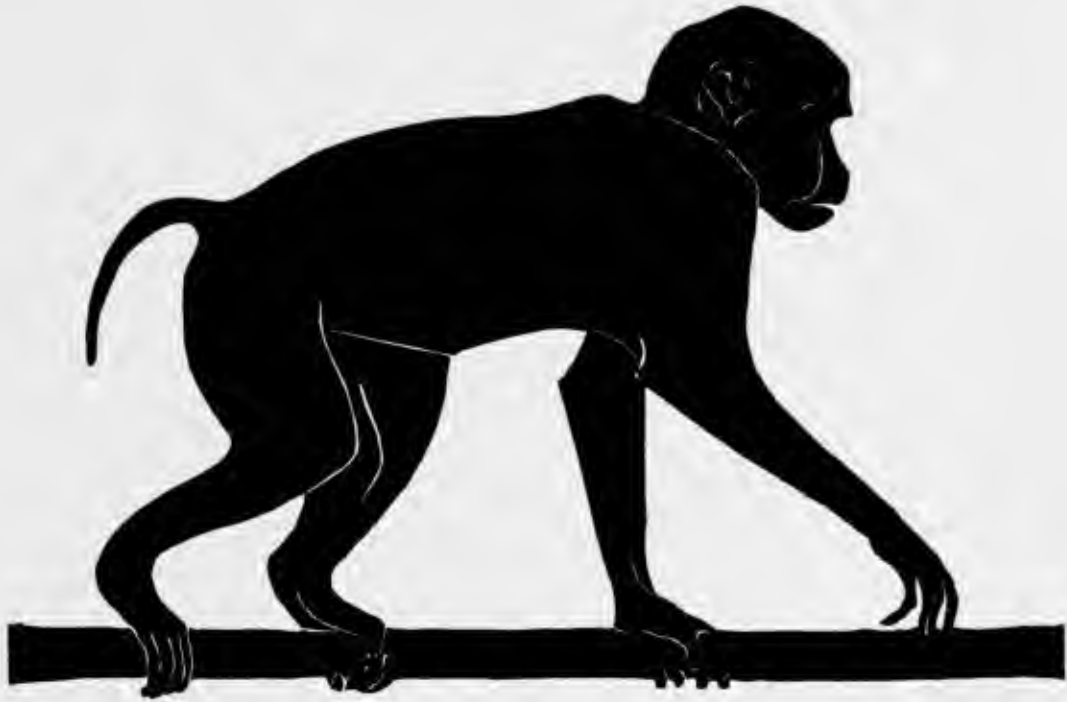
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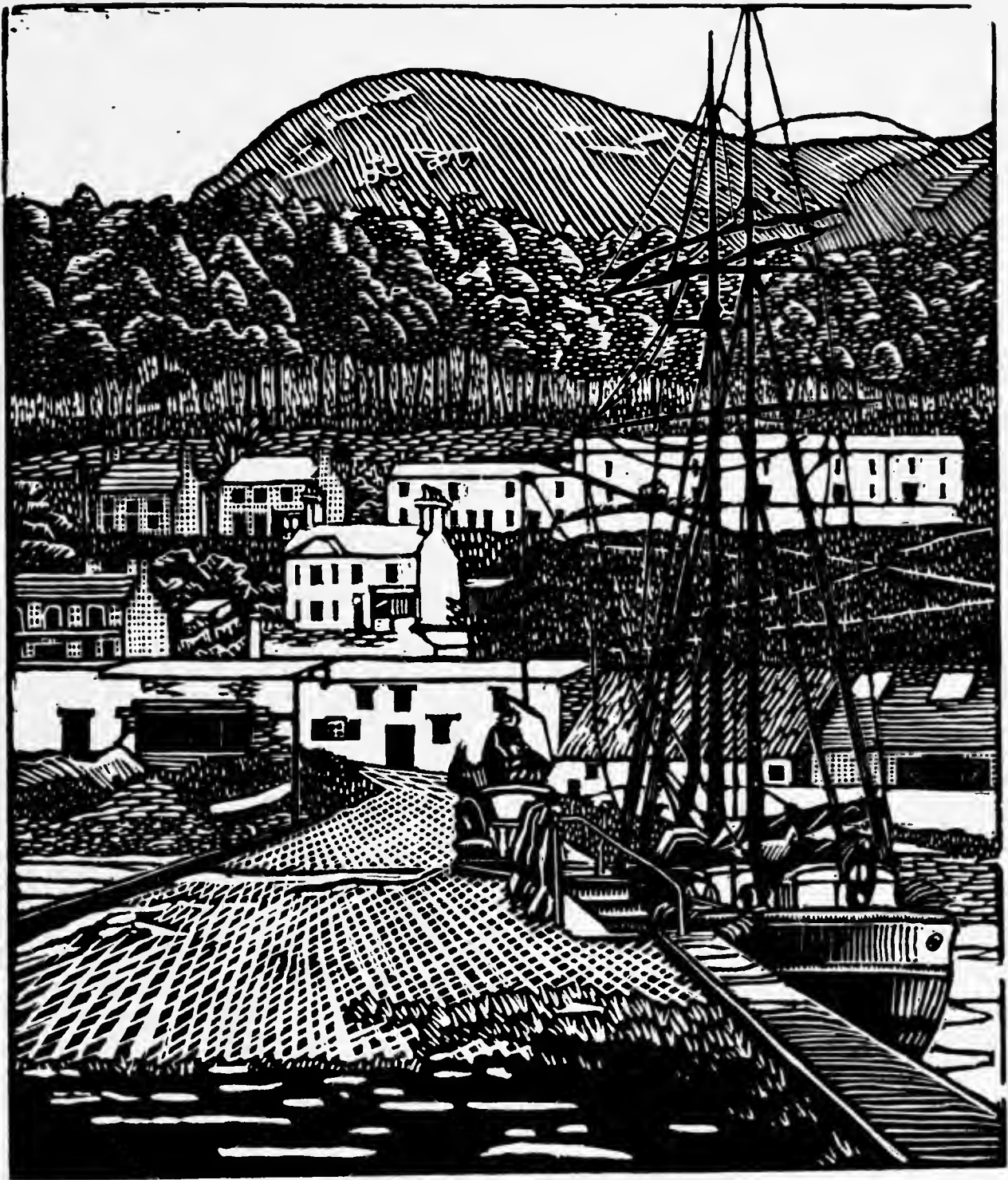
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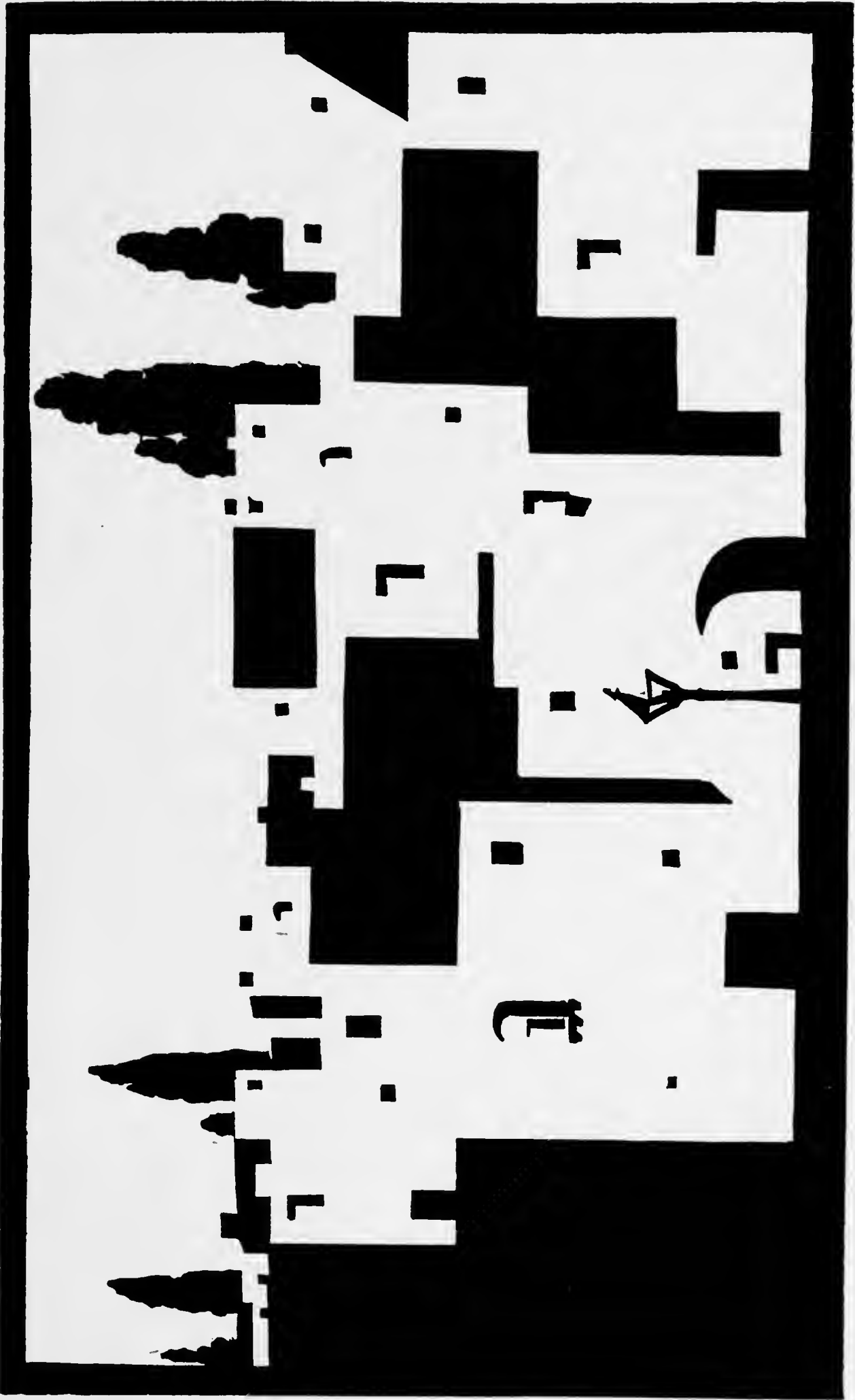
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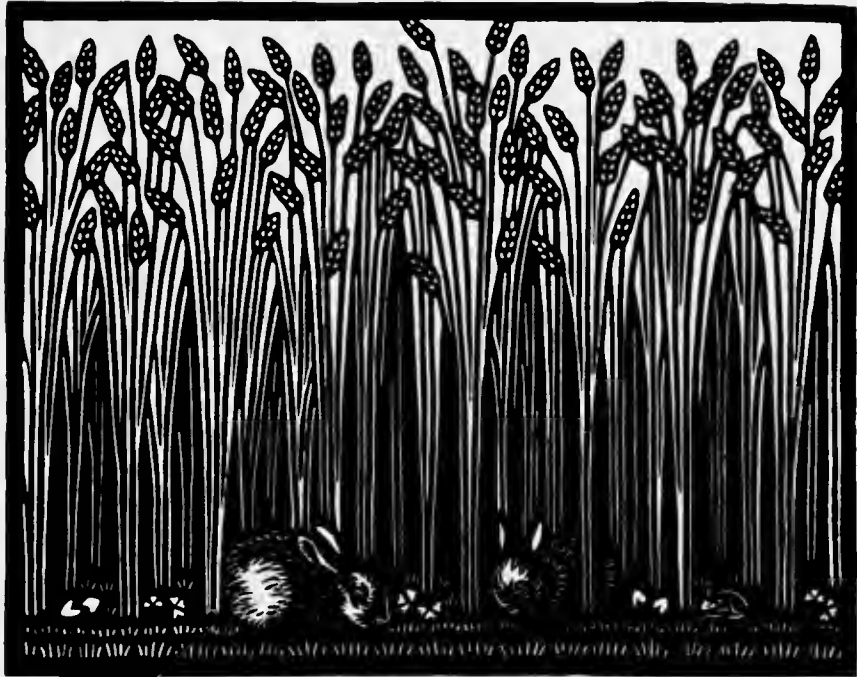
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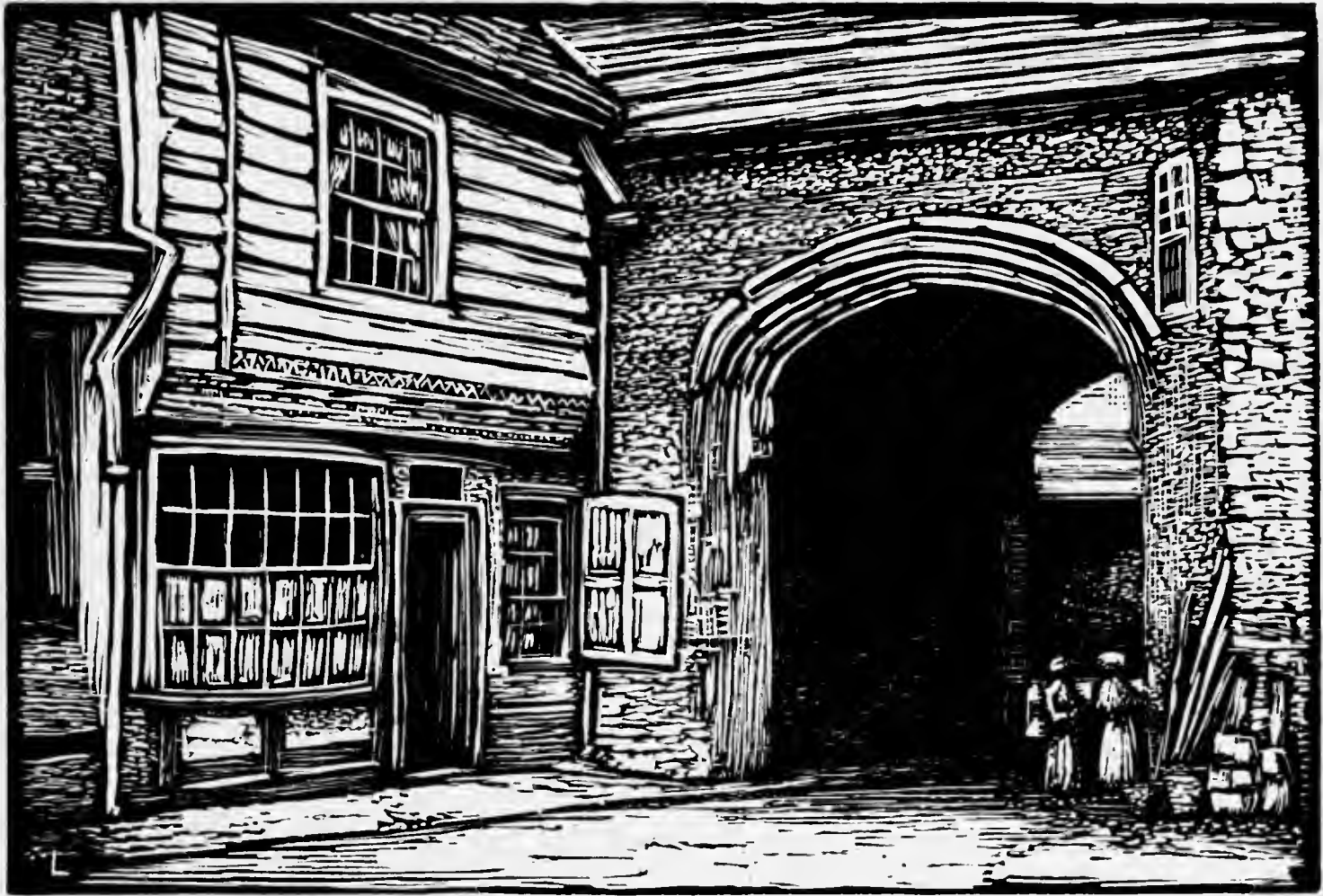
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(*By permission of Mr. Herbert Furst*)



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