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MONOGRAPHS ON AMERICAN WOOD ENGRAVERS

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This is the sixth installment of a series of monographs on the work and personal characteristics of those wood engravers who in years gone by contributed to the fame of this art in America

XIII—FRANK FRENCH

TO look backward upon a career of fifty years or so of consistent artistic endeavor, with health and intellectual powers still unimpaired, must be a source of gratification to Frank French. At the time of his early manhood there was much beautiful wood engraving done in this country, especially for the illustration of fine gift books, but since then he has witnessed, and taken part in, the changes in the evolution of art here generally, and especially in what is known as the "New School" of wood engraving.

Born in Loudon, N. H., in 1850, French's inclination toward wood engraving received its first stimulus from a page in the old *Scribner's* monthly, now *The Century Magazine*. Later, when on a visit to Boston armed with a letter from Henry W. Herrick to Mr. Foster Cross, the latter showed him the first wood block he had ever seen and gave him a few verbal instructions in the mysteries of the art. Going to work himself, without further help, French engraved two little blocks which resulted in his engagement by Colonel John B. Clark, of the *Mirror and Farmer*, Manchester, N. H., to work on that paper for one year. He, however, remained there two years, until his association with the American Tract Society, New York, when he had the advantage of working under that excellent engraver and inspirer of enthusiasm in others, Elias J. Whitney. Here it was that he studied the work of the eminent English engravers—all apostles of the white line—Slader, Quartley, Vizitelli, and W. J. Linton. About 1876 or 1877—the date is uncertain—John G. Smithwick, for whom French had engraved several blocks, invited him to a partnership, which association continued until Smithwick's engagement as superintendent of the vast department of Harper &

Brothers, a position which he filled for many years with singular ability.

Following the example of E. J. Whitney, whose relations to his apprentices were more than perfunctorily commercial, these partners would close their workroom on Saturday afternoons that they and their pupils might all go sketching together. This practice, we may add, was the habit of some other engravers, and the sympathies thus engendered between them and their young assistants was conducive to enthusiasm and many happy memories in years to follow.

During their period of collaboration, Smithwick and French engraved for the *Harper's Magazine* a number of E. A. Abbey's drawings, and those of other illustrators coming into prominence, as Howard Pyle, Jessie Curtis, W. A. Rogers, Chas. S. Reinhart, William Hamilton Gibson, and A. B. Frost; also Thomas Moran, the latter being a veteran of immense productivity. His name, in books and periodicals, appeared so long ago as to seem lost in antiquity. Today, we understand, he is still painting his favorite mountain scenes in the west. This connection was continued by Frank French after the dissolution of partnership, and his subsequent activity shows a large range of magazine subjects, besides a considerable number of his own original compositions, including a volume entitled, "Home Fairies and Heart Flowers," published in 1886. A series of large blocks for proofs only appeared from time to time as "The Mistletoe," "A Day with a Country Doctor," "A New England Farm," "The Bloom," "A Winter Bouquet," "The Brook," etc.

Constantly alive in his artistic endeavor, French started an art club at Brick Church, N. J., which was styled the "Carbonari." Quite a large group of engravers were here

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enabled to study painting under the direction of W. J. Baer.

French has written entertainingly of his happy experiences with a little group of fellow-engravers who camped out on the banks of the Connecticut River at Hockanum Ferry, just under Mount Holyoke, near Hadley. Here in that beautiful country they found inspiration for subjects to be rendered by the graver, some of which are to be found in the pages of *The Century Magazine*. It is said that engravers in metal regarded the art of the wood engraver with some contempt, as so much easier than their own severe line work. "Woodpeckers" they called the wood engravers. French accepted the challenge and designed a device of a woodpecker, with the initials O.W.W.—"Original Workers in Wood." This signet the engravers applied to some corner of their compositions. This calls to mind a charming piece of engraving by French of a woodpecker, after a drawing by Jas. C. Beard, dated 1882. The rich color and feathery texture of the bird are delightfully suggested.

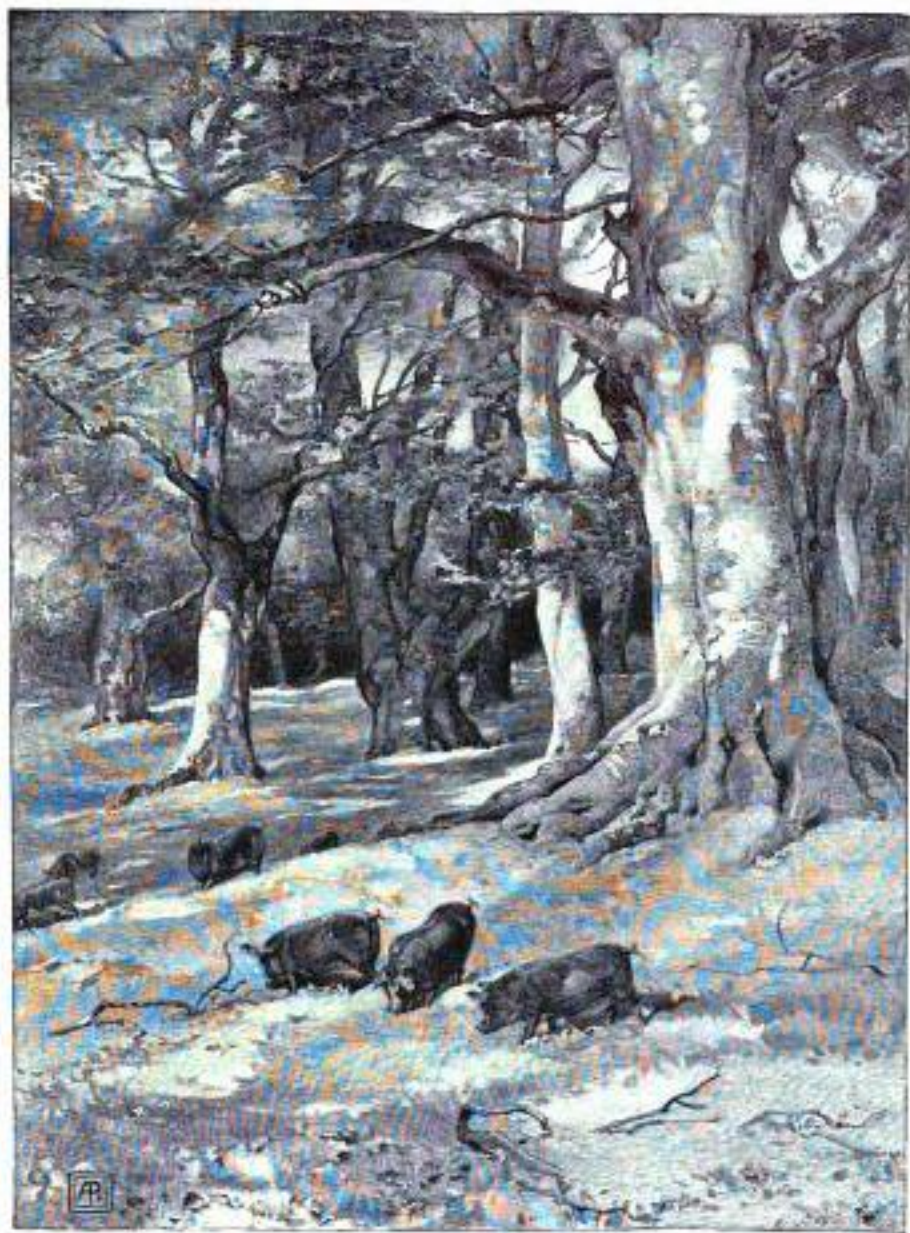
Frank French, of course, shared in the honors bestowed upon the engravers as a body for their subjects in "The Portfolio" of the Society of American Wood Engravers, and he is naturally proud of the fact that No. 1 copy of the fine edition of "The Portfolio" was subscribed for by the members of the Society and presented to him in recognition of his services as chairman of the committee on publication. His own subjects in "The Portfolio" show, in their diversities, his range of treatment. "Lacing the Sandal," after the painting by F. D. Millet, is exceedingly interesting in its variety of textures enveloped in an atmosphere of light and air, with a judicious use of the cross—or white—line as an aid in rendering the texture of the diaphanous drapery with a suggestion of the limbs beneath its folds. The whole effect is one of great delicacy and refinement.

In the engraving "In the Enemies' Country," after the painting by Gilbert Gaul, the line treatment is adapted to the rendering of the effect of the wind-swept sky, and the painter-like handling generally sustains the claim we have elsewhere advanced that the distinguishing feature in the character of the work of the men of the New School of American Wood Engraving is its perception, and power in suggesting the qualities of painting.

For some years Frank French has done little or nothing in wood, but a considerable number of portraits and landscape paintings witness to the activity of his brush. Among the portraits is one of W. C. Fittler, the water-color painter, and another of recent date of Alonzo—commonly known as Zo—Elliott in his uniform. This character is known as the author of the music to the "Long, Long Trail." Other portraits are Charles J. Joy, ex-Congressman of St. Louis, Dr. Charles W. Page and daughter of Hartford, Conn., Congressman Cyrus A. Sulloway—called the "Tall Pine of the Merrimac"—now in the State House, Concord, N. H., and three presidents of the State Senate, also in the State House.

French was for many years a member of the Kit-Kat Club, New York, and is still enrolled with his fellow artists in the Artists' Fund Society. He was admitted to the Salmagundi Club, New York, on his merits as a painter.

Besides his membership in the Society of American Wood Engravers, he was also allied with the American Association of Wood Engravers originated in 1889. Both these bodies are long since defunct. French was on the jury of selection for art of the Paris, Chicago, and St. Louis Expositions. A bronze medal was awarded him at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1892-93; a silver medal at the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, in 1901, and a gold medal at the World's Fair in St. Louis, in 1904.



IN THE BEECH WOODS

Engraved by Frank French from the drawing by Alfred Parsons. Courtesy of The Century Co.

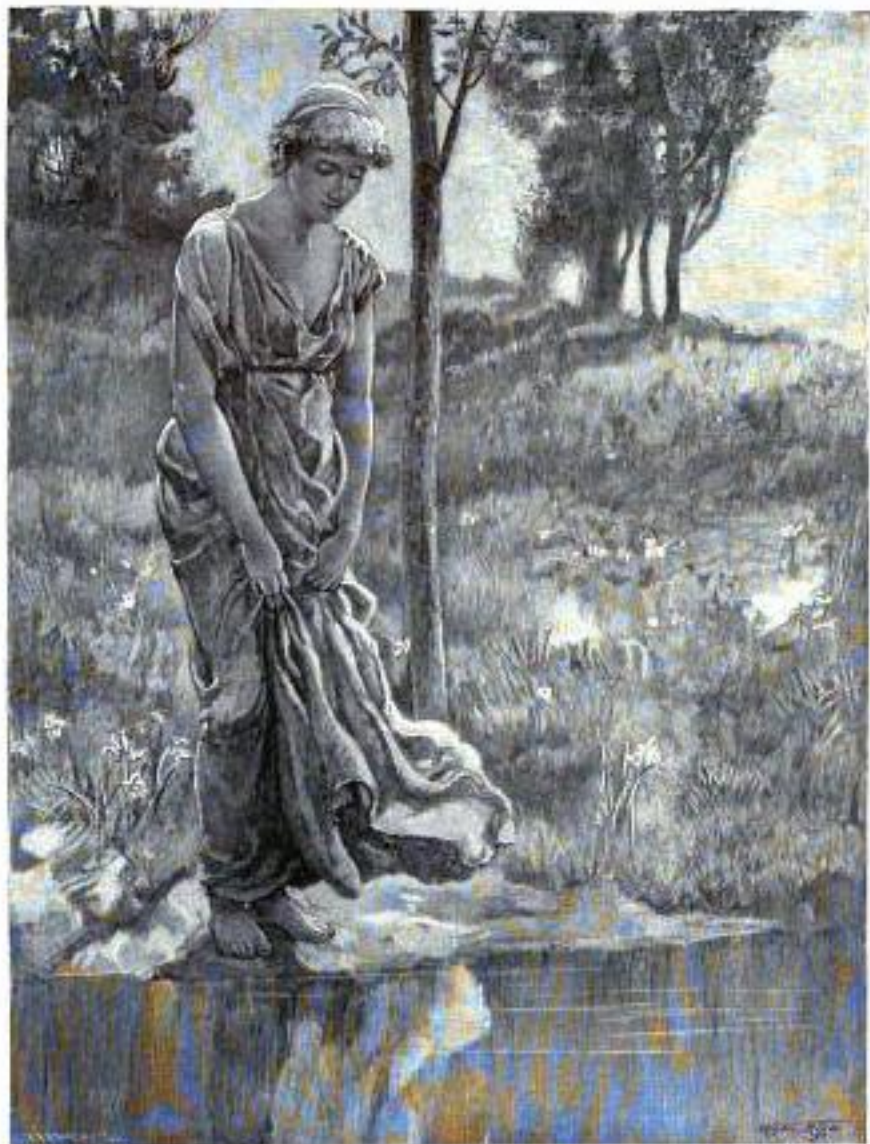
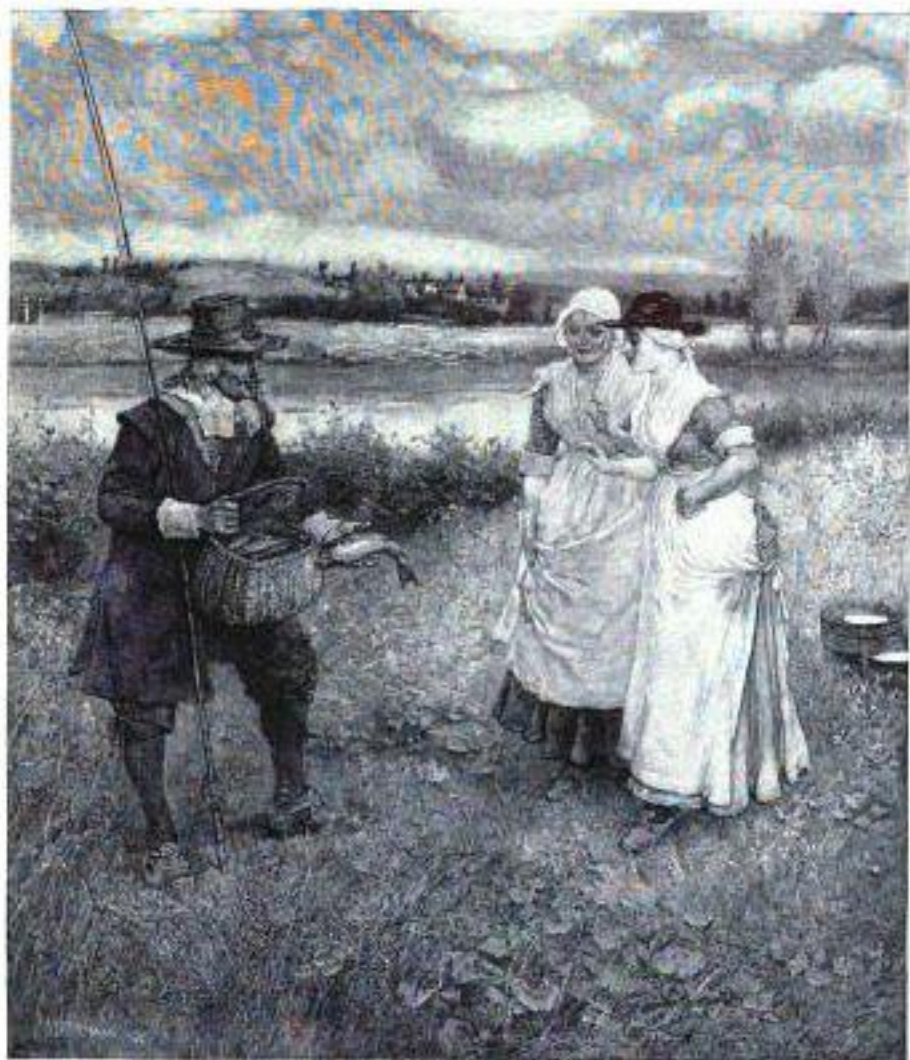


ILLUSTRATION FOR THE "LAMIA" OF KEATS

Engraved by Frank French after the drawing by Will H. Low. Courtesy of The Century Co.



ISAAK WALTON AND THE MILKMAID

Engraved by Frank French after the painting by George H. Boughton. Courtesy of The Century Co.



"Many a perfume breathed
From plants that wake when
others sleep:
From timid buds that keep
Their odour to themselves
all day
But when the sunlight dies
away
Let the delicious secret out
to every breeze that roams
about "

EVENING PRIMROSES

Engraved by Frank French after the drawing by William Hamilton Gibson. Courtesy of Harper's Magazine