J. van Krimpen, the typographer

Part One

To Max and Wilma, most gratefully

SOLITARY APPRENTICESHIP

J. van Krimpen’s development as the Compleat Typographer, bicontinentaly revered, seems to have begun when he was twenty years of age. He had just successfully finished his four years’ training at the drawing-board as a pupil of The Hague’s academy in 1912, and was facing the hazardous future of the newly qualified artist when his lingering acquaintance with the arty girl, a bookseller’s daughter, who was to become his first wife got a new impetus and had its unsought consequence for his career.

His beloved’s somewhat older sister, devotedly employed in an arts and crafts shop and writing about her specialty, was the fiancée of the poet – a minor one as history would make evident – and lettré J. Greshoff, Van Krimpen’s senior by four years. Greshoff was not only impassioned by literature; he was fervently enamoured of the Book Beautiful and even belonged to the initiators of what the Dutch generally wish to regard as their first private press post William Morris’s revival of the phenomenon. This youthful enterprise, De Zilverdistel, was not a printing office at all in its first stages, but had its books printed by, for instance, Joh. Enschedé en Zonen with the historic types preserved in that ancient house, and at first without tokens of typographical renascence. After some years J.F. van Royen, as the secretary general of the Dutch postal service a pivotal figure for the rebirth of good printing over a long period, replaced the founders and finally started his own printing office, soon renamed Kunera Press and using its own types, designed by Lucien Pissarro and S.H. de Roos. The publishing venture of Greshoff and the two fellow poets who were the original partners must not be underestimated however: the importance of their editions, at least some of them, is unquestionable textwise, as were those issued in roughly the same epoch by the older poet and classicist, P.C. Boutens, another amateur of deckle-edged paper and vellum.

Van Krimpen was already an eclectic reader of verse, and not only by his contemporaries and compatriots. Moreover, he loved books and valued their serviceability, as became steadily more apparent during the growth of his mastery. The climate of design in which he happened to begin in 1912 was
predominantly one of adornment, of embellishing the compositor's output. Respectable products of typographie pure were scarce at the time, especially in the Netherlands. It is most likely that Greshoff, after the brothers-in-law in spe had become friendly, gave Van Krimpen the first commission he ever received. After Greshoff, who had tried to make a living through newspaper work in a small way, had ended his association with De Zilverdistel, he combined his journalistic experience with his innermost devotion to the commonwealth of letters, and became the sole editor of a new monthly for book-lovers, readers and bibliophiles alike, entitled De witte mier and based on a German example, Hans von Weber's Der Zwiebelfisch.

In its beginning, the periodical was typographically influenced by the dogma of rectangularity ad absurdum preached by the not inconsiderable writer about the aesthetics of printing, J.W. Enschedé, not a partner in the Haarlem firm but belonging to the glorious family. This Enschedé's hold on the trend he championed was fortunately limited, possibly because it was identified with the Amsterdam printing house he mainly co-operated with, and almost certainly also by the increasing impact of De Roos's more broad-minded articles and striking creations, practically the earliest by a veritable typographer. The type used for the first six numbers of De witte mier was a German one, the rather new Nordische Antiqua, later rebaptized Genzsch-Antiqua. It is not the least surprising that De Roos's Hollandsche Mediaeval was preferred to the rather restrained Nordische Antiqua as soon as it was launched (the year was still 1912); it became the regular type beginning with the November issue and remained so until 1914, when publication of De witte mier was interrupted. The Hollandsche Mediaeval's introduction indubitably celebrated its appropriateness to the ebullient style then in vogue, with De Roos as its begetter.

In the following months, the layout of the covers underwent some interesting experiments with the new type by a hesitantly attributable hand, showing influence from De Roos's handling of it. The cover for March 1913 convincingly shows a glimmer of what was to appear in Van Krimpen's work from the late twenties on: the spacing of capitals to further the agreeable transparency in harmony with the text proper in amply leaded lower-case. The title-page of De witte mier's second volume shows the same notion. Van Krimpen had, albeit with the unwittingness of the beginner, generated a trait that would later characterize his craftsmanship.

Van Krimpen did more for De witte mier. For its second year (its third and for the moment last volume) the cover was lettered by hand – awkwardly from lack of experience, and with Hollandsche Mediaeval as its unavoidable model. Van Krimpen would cherish the undulating serifs of De Roos's capitals for some time, including the slab serifs of the A and M. But he widened his scope and ripened into his own individual style at a stunning