

## JAN STEEN (1626—1679)\*

By E. C. ALLEN.

It is just ten years since we had this delightful Dutch artist for our 'Picture Study,' so I suppose there will not be anybody to whom he comes for a second time, but I hope in one or two homes there may be a coloured reproduction not available nowadays. But I have some notes on the colours from the Dutch Exhibition, which will help to make our photogravures more vivid.

Jan Steen was born at Leyden and studied under the landscape painter Van Goyen. But though his touch was light and his mastery of masses of light and shade excellent, his real forte was figure-drawing. He made many studies of his master's pretty daughter, and married her, with her father's sanction and a good dowry. The young people were happy and prosperous. Orders were plentiful and their home comfortable. But Jan Steen had a roving mind, as well as eye. The men and women of the ale house and the countryside were quite as acceptable to his brush as the silks and satins of his wife and her friends. He painted whom he pleased, regardless whether the picture was saleable or not. One suspects old Van Goyen frequently settled his son-in-law's debts and gave them another chance. But steady

\* Picture Study for Autumn Term.

work seemed impossible and at last he became an inn-keeper, probably delighting in the variety of characters that this occupation brought to his notice. His pictures were sold quickly for what they would fetch. Then more idleness and gaiety, till the accumulation of bills made another spasm of work necessary.

Dutchmen have always been fond of flowers. To them we owe some of the most beautiful flower pictures we have. Our first picture, 'Jan Steen and his Wife,' shows that this versatile artist could paint flowers with the faithful care such delicate subjects demand. This is in the early days of comfort and soft living. The wife's gown is of satin and fine muslin. There is one of the elaborate rugs brought from the East, which figure in so many Dutch pictures of the period. The vase of tulips and roses is of delicate tinted glass. But the main interest will be in the three figures. The artist father, intent on his drawing, the boy, watching, with a critical appreciation, and the mother, called to lay down her embroidery frame—there it is on the table—and file a soft crayon for the artists to work with. To us, perhaps, she does not seem beautiful, but to her husband she always remained so, and he painted her over and over again, delighting in her white skin and fair colour. The boy is also fair, and was often his father's model. Not that I think his genius required formal 'sittings.' He caught a pose, a character, a beauty, an oddity, and seems to have drawn them without effort. Notice the pipe—but I think it is a recorder—on the table. Jan Steen was no mean musician, and played the violin as well as other instruments.

We have another picture of the family before Mevrouw Steen discarded her silks for the more useful homespun suitable to an innkeeper's wife. This is 'The Parrot's Cage.' The tablecloth is still there, the handsome chair in which the child was sitting, and the table. But the scene is the kitchen. Two men sit and play backgammon. The one on the left holds the dice in his hand; the other, with sword and plumed hat, holds his hand poised as he considers his move. The man with the pipe looks on. The child sits on the floor now, holding his kitten back from too close an interest in the oysters. He is eating something with a spoon from the crock beside him. At the stove stands the cook, her broad, jovial face creased in a smile as she tosses some com-

Jan Steen by E.C. Allen from *Parents' Review* Vol. 52, 1941. This article describes three of the paintings in the *Riverbend Press* set; *The Parrot's Cage*, *Our Daily Bread*, and *The Feast of St. Nicholas*. We were unable to find usable versions of the remaining three paintings described. We selected some wonderful replacements we think families will enjoy.

ment to the players, none of whom pay her any attention. When first painted, the picture roused much attention, as it was considered almost insulting to paint a woman's back and so little of her face. But notice what a lovely line Jan Steen gets with her neck and shoulders, and the curve of her cheek and chin. It is one of those green parrots with a red tail. The woman's dress is blue and her coatee yellow. There are endless details to study. Who can find the artist's signature? The dark piece of furniture that throws up the figures so well is probably an armoire in black oak. The rod with the wheel at the end, over the stove, is perhaps part of the turn spit, but it seems a complicated stove, with those cross-pieces. But the boarded floor and the handsome ornamentation over the doorway makes me wonder if it is the kitchen, or perhaps only a room in the artist's house where they were living at the moment.

In 'Grace before Meat,' our National Gallery picture, we have a room that might very well be the kitchen of a large inn, with a door into the garden. Here we have the artist again, but not now concerned with his children. The boy is older and the little sister at the adorable toddling stage. Again the colour scheme is blue and brown, the woman's apron looped over a blue skirt. The artist sits at the end of the table, cutting a hunk of brown country bread. The boy holds his hat in his hand, while he waits for the little one to finish her grace, but her eyes are more intent on the spoon before her than the words she should say. He has still the same merry face and sunny hair, and a bunch of golden curls escape from the little one's bonnet. As I said before, the children stand to eat. Children did not sit at table with their parents, even in Utopia. There is a round wooden platter on the table, and a dish of some sort of stew. Behind the woman is a blue pottery jug, and the dog licks the rim of a brown earthenware pot, in which probably the stew was cooked. The toy is some sort of bat and ball game, like our old-fashioned stool-ball, but it looks rather 'battered' by usage. It is a charming scene, full of subdued, quiet light. Notice how the people are all grouped together, and the sense of space given by the distant open doors and the light coming from the lower left-hand side, where evidently there must be a much larger open

door or window. Some day I hope you will greet this as an old friend in London.

Our next three pictures show Jan Steen in quite a different mood. As his choice of the duties of an innkeeper showed, he was at home in the country, among the oddities of country life. Our second National Gallery picture, 'The Old Pedlar,' is the sort of group he loved to paint. It is quite small, little larger than our reproduction, but full of light and life. Notice the prop the pedlar has let down to hold his tray. Each of the half-dozen figures is a character sketch that misses nothing of strangeness or humour. No accessories draw attention from the figures. The old woman tries if her new spectacles will enable her to read the news-sheet. The labourer, resting on his door settle, roars with laughter at her efforts. The dwarf behind the pedlar tries to conciliate the disagreeable plough boy. The little child, a dear little figure, wants some gay toy the pedlar disentangles from his tray. Look at the man's 'clouted shoon,' stuffed with straw to protect his feet. The boy wears a yellowish leather jerkin over brown sleeves, and the child's dress is blue. Jan Steen's lessons with Van Goyen were not wasted, as we see from the meticulous care with which the gnarled branch is drawn. How he must have enjoyed painting it!

The next picture, from a private collection, is more serious, but quite as careful and beautiful. None of the figures are beautiful in 'Our Daily Bread,' but the little group of homely peasants in their humble home, giving thanks for their simple fare, is full of that quiet charm that arrests our attention immediately. There is a coarse brown loaf, cheese, yellow with red rind, and a piece of cold bacon. Not even a fork, but the meat held together by a skewer. Probably the barrel has brine in it, or salt at the bottom, and the meat will be put back in it and covered with that rough brown cloth. Something hot is in the jug, which is blue—probably coffee. What is the verse hanging on the wall? It is in Dutch. With a magnifying glass you can read some of the words: 'Drei Dinger . . . minein Godt . . . Rickdoms . . . in diese drei . . . Jan Steen, 1660.' This is the translation, sent to Mr. Mansell by a learned Dutch picture dealer, which he gave me ten years ago:

' Three things do I ask without more ;  
 Before all to love God and our King ;  
 No excess of worldly treasures  
 But so much as the wise man wishes ;  
 An honest life in this world.  
 All is included in these three things.'

A beautiful motto to hang in any house. That is a branch of bay fastened to the bell, which also has letters on it, ' Wilkom,' I think, possibly meaning welcome. That is a pink shell on the shelf, and a quaint candlestick, with the candle held in a clip. Notice the practical window, with the shutter going right back outside and the glass doing the same inside, and the vine leaves coming in. A beautiful scene of piety and peace.

Our last picture is very different. It is full of noise and fun, ' The Feast of St. Nicolas,' who is the Santa Claus of modern days.

More than one family have gathered for the festival, I should think. There is our little boy again, and the little sister, who has found a doll in her shoe, for St. Nicholas puts the children's toys in their shoes, not their stockings, in Holland. And there is the naughty boy who has found a birch rod in his, to his great chagrin. It seems to me the three behind Grannie must be pointing at the parrot. The floor is littered with gingerbread cakes, nuts and apples, and a great flat cake with a pattern in sugar on it is propped up by Grannie's stool. How vivid is the expression on each face, how natural the grouping: the servants laughing at the naughty boy and kind Grannie coaxing the little one to show her doll. One expects she has a present for the naughty one hidden somewhere.

And so we leave the work of this great artist, who seems to have got such fun out of his short life, and given so much pleasure. Some writers say he was only forty-two when he died, but others that he lived till 1689.

This quotation is from a very old ' Dictionary of Painters ' (1805) I have just received as a present. I think the appreciation is just and apt :

' In designing his figures he shewed remarkable judgment and skill ; for, at the first sight, one may perceive a proper dis-

tion of the ranks and conditions of the persons introduced in his subjects, the difference between a gentleman and a boor, or of those in high or low stations, by their forms, their attitudes, their air or expression ; so that in this respect he appears worthy of being studied by other painters. His works did not bear an extraordinary price during his life, as he painted only when he was necessitous, and sold his pictures to answer his immediate demands. But after his death they rose amazingly in their value, and are rarely to be purchased, few paintings bearing a higher price, as well as on account of their excellence as of their scarcity.'

I hope you will enjoy the Austinian blend of patronage and appreciation, and be glad the author thought the artist could recognise a gentleman!