

Six Pictures by Albrecht Dürer.

BY E. C. ALLEN.

ALBRECHT DÜRER was born in Nürnberg in 1471. He was the second son and third child of his parents. His father was a goldsmith, a worthy, hard-working man, who did his best for his eighteen children, few of whom lived to grow up. In fact, Dürer tells us that only three of them survived childhood; his brother, who became a goldsmith like his father, and the youngest of all, who was apprenticed to Dürer himself. Their father's daily speech to his sons was that "they should love God and do rightly towards their neighbours," and we have every reason to believe that the eldest of them did so. At his father's death, he took his mother to his own home, where she lived for the rest of her life. He had no children himself and tradition says was not happy in his married life. His wife does not seem to have appreciated the delicate, mystical side of her husband's genius, but to have regarded him merely as a money-making machine, overtaxing his health and showing small sympathy with the finer shades of his character. The *Portrait of a Young Man* from the Prado is generally considered to be Dürer himself. It was painted in 1498, 4 years after his marriage. One does not feel, studying the long, gentle face, that the artist would be difficult to live with; the whole expression is benignant, the mouth generous, with full curves. His fair curling hair falls on to his bare neck and there is something of satisfaction in his pose, as if he were secretly a little proud of that elaborate jerkin braided with black, the exquisite bit of lace on his

shirt, and the very becoming droop of his cap 'to match.' The hands are revealing; big knuckles, with square-tipped sensitive fingers. They are capable, workman's hands, with a facility for handling tools and a purposefulness that agrees with that firm chin and upright pose.

Suppose we take next the "*Adoration of the Magi*" from the Uffizi. The likeness between the head of the artist and that of the young king is at once apparent. It has frequently been remarked that Dürer bore a great resemblance to the conventional pictures of Christ, especially the Italian ones of the period.

Like all Dürer's pictures, this one is crammed with detail. The only simple thing in it seems to be the figure of the Madonna. At first it gives one almost a feeling of confusion, but gradually things sort themselves and one realizes the order governing everything. The "Madonna group" comes first; a gracious womanly figure, full of unhurried grace, she holds her little child to receive the homage of the Magi with the utmost self-possession. The old man kneeling at her feet is entirely wrapped up in his devotion; a little puzzled perhaps at the reception he gets (note his down-curved eyebrows) but allowing nothing to impair his dignity. There is something almost ludicrous in the manner in which the Babe touches—in fact, clutches, the casket just as a baby would try to hold a glittering, novel toy. Behind stands the second group—the two kings. One a mass of jewels and embroidery, holding a richly embossed and chased vase in one hand and his feathered hat with the other. He awaits his turn to do homage, and turns to look at the offering of the third, the negro king, whose vase is much simpler, as is his costume, and whose attitude is one of very charming diffidence and humility. Below the steps waits a servant, and I am not sure if he is controlling some animal with curving horns, or trying to close a sack with a metal or bone top like a huge hand-bag. I think the latter. In the distance halt the usual cavalcade. The background is ruins, masonry, arches, drains, doorways, a rickety stable; but there is order even here. There has been some definite plan followed; the perfect arches form the side and front of a building, and there is an obvious discrepancy between the noble plan on which they were

built and the slovenly carelessness of the woodwork. Everywhere are growing plants and young trees, weeds of sturdy growth and no particular beauty. On a piece of stone right in the front are the painter's initials and date—1504, so this is one of the early works. Detail seems to have been added for the sake of detail, and the grotesque is not wanting. How strange is this instinct for the grotesque, almost the horrible, in one who saw and drew so nobly. Almost as if his pen or pencil expressed a thought, an idea, a relief, that self-control—chivalry—convention, who can tell what? refused to let him vent in any other way. Again and again we find it in his early work, in some of his noblest compositions. Here you will see below the ass's head, gentle, contemplative,—is the head of a colt or foal, with the upper lip curled up showing the gum and teeth, in an ugly snarl. It is an ugly gesture, still more ugly for its setting. It may be fun, but it seems rather a German sort of fun.

I am glad there is nothing of the sort in the next picture, the engraving of *St. Christopher*. Our reproduction is very good and clear. The picture is simple, rather a relief after the complexities of the other. The sturdy saint struggles through the water, urged on by a particularly chubby child. His pine-staff bends with the forces of the stream, and the creaming foam makes a curious mass in front, but the journey is nearly over. The good hermit on the other bank holds the torch steadily, the flame burning clear and straight in miraculous despite of the storm. It is a great drawing;—physical strength working in obedience to divine law. There is conscious effort in every line and curve. Effort almost without hope, certainly with no thought of gain. The Christ-Bearer made the crossing because he was called, for no wage or greed of gain:—only a patient looking forward to some distant revelation when he might see the strongest Power in the world and worship it. He has no idea he bears that Power on his weary shoulders now. The whole drawing is done with all Dürer's accustomed care and delicacy, every detail beautifully finished, the little landscape beyond the river, the old hermit, the saint's dress, his curly beard, and strong hands. One feels the inspiration must have grown with the work.

Very different again is the next picture, the *Vision of St. Eustace*. The legend tells that in his degenerate days, the saint went hunting on Good Friday. The stag he was chasing turned suddenly and faced him; it had a crucifix between its horns, and the Christ spoke to him and asked why he was taking his pleasure on this day when he should be remembering the death of his Saviour. He afterwards was martyred. The engraving is undated but is supposed to be about 1514. It is one of the most beautiful Dürer ever did, full of delicately finished detail and wonderful drawing. The saint is not at all the type of dissolute worldling the legend would lead us to expect. It is a fine, grave, scholarly face, the very best type of the mediaeval German. He kneels before the miraculous stag in an ecstasy of devotion holding up his hands in adoration and supplication. He is girt about with all the trappings of a "jäger"—a noose, a poniard, a sword, something that might be a horn. His hat, though elaborate, is practical and so are his leggings and his sleeves. We may presume he wears the usual hunting dress of the period, including the gloves. (I almost think that is a hooded falcon perched above the saddle bow.) The horse is eminently wise and calm; the hounds, quite unconcerned. The landscape tapers up to a beautiful bit of hill scenery, crowned with the keep of a castle, and with the church nestling at its side, as we have seen so often down on the Rhine. The dead tree in the middle is very characteristic. It is beautifully gnarled and knotted and echoes the curve of the horns in a wonderful way. There are all sorts of little bits to look at. The stream and the things that grow near it, the different expression of each hound, the road up to the castle, the buildings. Again nothing is chanced and everything has a purpose. Although the illustration for a supernatural happening, there seems less directly mystical in the drawing. It is obviously a work of imagination, but one misses the symbolism somehow;—unless it is so veiled I cannot see it. Those distorted trees? The prosaic dogs? Yet I cannot think it is as frank as it appears. But all Dürer's important work concealed rather than betrayed his thoughts.

At least the *Squirrels* are frank enough. What darlings!

How fat, how mischievous! What bushy tails and pointed ears and bright eyes! How wild they are, and yet how fearless! What wonderful paws and claws, and what nice deep smooth fur. Was there a zoo in Nürnberg, or did the artist escape from his house and his wife alone as Corot did, into the woods outside the town, sitting so still the squirrels came to feed beside him? I should like to think he did, or that they were tame ones kept by him as pets,—they look so fat and sleek. I think the children will love them better than all the others. I love them too, but I think I would rather live with the *Praying Hands*. They seem to lift one up like a Gothic spire does. They are so old, so gentle, so full of faith. Perhaps they were his mother's hands, whom he deeply loved, and of whom he says he "can never sufficiently set forth her praise," and who "in her death looked still more lovely than she was in her life." These hands are alive, very much alive, sensitive, kindly, gentle, that have known work and sorrow and bring up the soul with them to God. One would wish them to open and give us a benediction e'er we bid them good bye.