

SIX PICTURES BY JEAN FRANCOIS MILLET.

By E. C. ALLEN.

JEAN FRANCOIS MILLET is perhaps to the English public the best known of the group of artists usually alluded to as "The Barbizan School." The son of a peasant farmer, when his difficult term at Paris was over, he returned to the life and land he knew, and painted that grand series of pictures of the arduous, painful, unremitting toil of the French peasant. We in England, on small or great farms, in rich or poor counties, have almost no idea how the French farmer, his wife, his son, his grand-child, wages an unceasing war with a barren, unyielding soil, literally to turn stones into bread. Their tools are few and poor, and of a primitiveness that we have long forgotten. Even in Normandy, the Norfolk of France, threshing is still done with a flail, harrowing with hand picks, and tethered cattle are scattered over the stubble.

Some years ago, a large and very fine reproduction of the "Man with a Hoe" was exhibited in a shop window in Bond St. It seemed to me as if a creature from another world paused in his labour to watch strange, alien idlers drift past him. For a long time I used the picture as a spur.

We all know "*The Angelus*" and "*The Gleaners*" so well that we hardly look at them now. Every year there is a shower of them on Calendars and other less appropriate places. And beyond a passing impression of yellow, bent backs, and bright skies, familiarity has bred contempt. The sense of high, wide places, the artist's passionate love of his country and his people, the dignity and beauty of heavy, painful, unceasing work done in the spirit of submission that is yet free, and humility that is still independent, these have left us almost, belittled to a sentiment. Let us look at these pictures set for the children's study this term with a fresh eye, and try and find in them the life of which we know so little; yet from which we can learn so much, and which is so beautiful.

I will take *La Becquée* first.

It is the dinner hour. To the children a most important time of day. To-day the meal consists of a bowl of 'potage.' I should think almost a purée, as the spoon is too shallow to hold much liquid. The three dear little people sit on the dorrstep, and the mother carefully shares what she has provided between them. Her attitude is full of tender solicitude, reminding one of Correggio's tender Madonnas, and her tenderness is caught by the furthest child, who seems to want to help the middle one to lean forward to get its share.

The farm is old and poor. In the distant croft the farmer struggles with the ground and his blunt clumsy spade.

French farms are so like English ones, and yet so different. The doorway and the window here, for instance. Its height is most unlike what we should build; nor is there any of the characteristic litter we should have. The poverty seems to come to the very door, and that one anxious hen accentuates it. Yet the children are tidy, and plump; and the gentle mother wears a kerchief and keeps her hair clean with another folded tightly over it. What dear little children they are, with their small sabots and sweet little caps! The whole picture seems full of peace and sunshine and love.

Suppose we take "*The Shepherdess*" next.

Here are "forty feeding like one." No extravagant formless wandering at will, but a compact mass that eats its way steadily over this barren and dry land, led by a Rebecca of the Plains, kept in rank by an alert dog of boundless wisdom and unknown breed.

La Becquée gives us the 'vie intime;' this picture gives us at once the wide, wide horizon, that is as good for the soul as the eye. With tireless fingers and patient feet she moves, this Daughter of the Land, leading her flocks lowly over the stubble; and they follow, missing no green leaf, no dandelion head or weed of the desert that can yield its reluctant juiciness to their incessant searching. This is a picture, I think, of peace and industry, joined with a beauty that is rare and arresting. How modest is that figure in its concealing cloak and close cap! How sweet the down bent face, intent on the work of the moment. The sun pours down, the backs of the sheep seem to shimmer with heat; with that curious indifference to climate so often to be remarked in peasants of all lands, she has not discarded the heavy cloak that will be so welcome when the sun goes down and that biting wind awakens from under the horizon and finds the weak points of the unwary. Her shepherd's crook may be needed then, to keep all the flock close together and be sure that all are

safely folded. They are not at all beautiful sheep. They have none of the opulence of South Downs, nor the grace and vivacity of our black-faced mountain sheep,—nor the wild wilfulness of the little welshmen. They are newly shorn, the ugliest time of a sheep's life. But their position in the picture is so splendid. They are such an immense detail on that vast plain. Far off, two horses drag a harvest load. Of what can it be?, one wonders, as the thistle heads, dandelions, weeds, tufts of couch grass, and stones, make themselves plainer? But this girl has got leave to work in the world. She does not lift her eyes to the distance, nor question to-morrow, nor search for meaning nor question the why nor the whither. Her life seems like that of a daisy, that opens its eye with thankfulness and closes it with peace.

I think I should like to have this picture in a small town room, simply for the sunshine and the sense of space. I hope all teachers impress upon their children the real size of these pictures. Sometimes one finds suddenly that they have a quite wrong idea that the picture itself has neither size nor colour. On the other hand it is comforting at times to find a child who really thinks of the picture in terms of quite accurate understanding. Particularly let them notice the beauty of the foreground. Its variety and the wonderful management of the light. Each tuft stands up, but there is nothing laboured nor artificial in the arrangement. It is just a field—a poor one such as we have seen dozens of times, but never with eyes that saw its beauty so vividly as now.

One can hardly go away from that hot sunshine and patient, graceful figure, to our next picture,—“*The Well.*”

We are very far from an English farm here. I have often wondered why well-heads are not beautiful and interesting in our farms and villages. They are practical,—and sometimes suggestive, but they do not show the same love of the shrine for Sister Water that we see in Italy and France. Perhaps water is too common in England. It is everywhere. We hardly know what its value is.

Look at this beautiful thing here. The lines, the proportion, the suggestion of stability and permanence, the sense of coolness and mystery. Here are worn steps and a moss-grown apple-tree; thatch, and massive lintels and a wide doorway. Beautiful battered brass pots being filled from the well-bucket, a duck and a hen drinking in the pool of spilt water, and the feeling that this is just a bit of ‘every-day.’

Not everyone could have a well like this in their yard. This is a prince of wells—nay, a patriarch—hoary, of much experience. Holding many secrets and adding yearly to its beauty.

I think the curved door is beautiful, and the startling vivid-

ness of the woman's quaint white cap, evidently the shape belonging to her “*département,*” against the cool darkness of the well's shadow. All these beautiful peasant women have a homely daintiness about their dress, a touch of neatness, a sense of beauty entirely French. The children will notice the half sleeves this one wears to keep neat the sleeves of her white blouse. And what could be more practical than sabots? Sabots are graded, and those of the two who set out for their work in the next picture are very different from the neat affairs Mere Toinette wears to keep her feet dry at the business of drawing water. Such are shed at the house-door and blacked every now and again.

But the two who are “*Starting for Work*” wear the rough wooden implements of the very poor. Filled with straw and tied on with string, they are all the foot-covering these workers know, except perhaps felt or carpet slippers for Sundays. Hardly that even, for the peasant's Sunday is much such a day as his Monday, with the addition of Mass and the subtraction of field work. The farm goes on all the same. But let us get higher than these people's feet. What beautiful limbs he has, and what a graceful free carriage! There seems something wistful in his silent gaze, although his features are so strong and firm.

Yet it is quite an ordinary little round girl's face that looks out from the shade of the heavy basket. Just a peasant girl who has worked hard all her short life, and looks forward to working still harder when she is a wife. Only she does not look forward at all. Hardly even from season to season or from month to month. Her life is like that of a flower. It grows, it blossoms, it fades, it is gone. Only this is different. A simple, perfect trust in the goodness of God runs through the life of the maiden. Did not the Blessed Virgin also work? There is a wonderful grace about the upright poise of the girlish figure, matching the free stride of the youth at her side. I like the fancifulness of his tiny beard, and the strength of his easy swing, unchecked by the sabots. The shapeliness of his limbs is displayed rather than concealed by his ragged trousers and workman's blouse. But there is a something very attractive in the set of that old sun-scorched hat. Have you not sometimes met him on a country road? And with what a flourish has that hat come off to bid you “*good-day*” and indicate your line of route, or offer a lift in his ramshackle vehicle.

But I must leave these two—only I love them so—setting off in the gay dawn of Life's Morning, and go on to *Le Vanneur*. For how many hours a day would an English labourer stand thus and winnow corn? It seems to me this is the embodiment of dogged uncomplaining strength. Of labour

without any other aid than man's muscles and his fixity of purpose. When at the end of the day, the winnower looks at the sacks of grain filled by himself, by the work of his arms, his back, his legs, his fortitude, his rectitude, his patience, he may indeed feel with the Creator that he looks upon his world and it is good. The barn is rather dark and very quiet. The man works alone; filling his clumsy sieve from the pile, shaking it out on his knee, pouring the grain carefully into the measure, and the measure into the sack. For how long? From dawn till dark, till the grain is all winnowed.

It is a beautiful study in colour and devotion. The golden grain, the lighter chaff. The warm darkness, the soft roughness of the sacks, and the sun-burnt strength of the man. Plenty of yellows and browns, with warmer hues of deep red in the earthen measure and his sun-burnt feet. He himself is quite plain, almost stupid-looking, but his work is beautiful and his life dignified.

And so we come to the close of the day,—the rapid setting of the sun, the rising of the mists, the orderly housing of the animals, the grateful blessing of night and Rest.

"*The Sheepfold*" is a grey picture. The sheep are grey, the land is grey—so are the clouds and the haystack and the mists that drift over the sun. I think there is a feeling of haste, given perhaps by the raised stick in the shepherd's hand. It was not so the gentle shepherdess led them out in the morning. The dog watches and waits. The sheep drift in with the mist. Not too willingly, but as sheep do. It is a soft and gentle picture, full of charm and suggestion. Half-tones everywhere. The crowded animals inside the fold guessed at rather than seen. The stragglers outside hardly visible because our eyes are dazzled by the sun. Only we know they are moving, drifting to their place, and that the sun will set on them all enfolded and made safe for the night. Such a short night to these "Workers before the Lord," that the genius of one of them has spread before us in these and many other wonderful pictures of Labour made beautiful by Fortitude.

CHILDREN'S PORTFOLIO OF PAINTINGS.

RULES.

1. All drawings to be packed flat.
2. All drawings to have member's name, age, and address on the back.
3. All drawings sent in by one member to be fastened together by a clip or pin or string. When a piece of paper for criticism is added, it is appreciated.
4. All work sent in must be untouched by anyone but the member, but advice and instruction may be freely given.

5. All drawings to be sent to Miss Allen, 1, Valentia Road, Hoylake, Cheshire, on or before 1st June, 1921.

May I again urge on the members of the Portfolio the importance of punctuality in sending on the Portfolio? So much disappointment is caused to those who come late in the list by having to wait so long they have forgotten what the drawings were about. A week should be long enough for four members. It very seldom is. I write this on 1st March and the Senior Portfolio has only been to *eight* members since 1st January. The Juniors have done a little better, and nine members saw the Portfolio in February—about half the number that should have seen it.

May I again ask you to remember to send me the postcard? When I have to write to two or three people to find the Portfolio it means sometimes a week's delay.

SUBJECTS FOR JUNE.

Seniors. 1. An illustration for this verse:—

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure;
But the least motion that they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

2. Signs of the Times.

Juniors. 1. An illustration for:—

"The tailor shot—and he missed his mark—
He shot his old sow right through the heart."

2. Your own hand holding a pencil.

Suggestions. I should like the seniors to read the whole poem first. It is by Wordsworth and begins "I heard a thousand blended notes." Try to give the impression of tangled under growth—and sunshine. Remember it will be spring with periwinkles out, and the leaves not very thick on the trees, nor very dark. Leave no white specks on your paper, and get a nice Constable sky.

For 'Signs' you may do inn-signs, shop-signs, advertisements, posters, toys, interiors, costumes, Roman remains, flint implements, old women, anything to which the title could apply. A begging dog or a laden postman. Let me have careful drawing, and clean cut work. The Juniors may put in the carrion crow and be sure the poor sow's ears are big enough. She may be black or pink or spotted. You can leave out the tailor if you like, and only do the sow and the crow. But put them in a real place—a field or a sty, with ground and sky.

When you draw your hand, don't forget the shadow it will make on the paper, and that one side will be darker than the other; and that there are bones in your fingers and thumb.

E. C. ALLEN.