

## SOME DUTCH CHARACTERISTICS.

[Written for THE CONSERVATIVE.]

A study of Jan Steen's pictures of Dutch home-life some two hundred years ago proves that in his day the noses of his countrymen were quite as fantastic as they are now. Without their pendulous, heavy organs of smell, the artist's half-drunken fiddlers and peasants would not make one smile half so much as they do. It is well that the average Dutchman is good-natured, for if he were naturally disposed to be a prey to his passions, there would be something discordant in the broad comedy of his face.

Many of the country dames and maidens of Holland look as if they had been brought up on soap and water; their faces glisten quite preternaturally; their pots and pans, their tables and benches, all bear witness to their cleansing ardor. A fly in the butter, or a footmark on a floor just scrubbed would, I doubt not, cause them great annoyance. Winter is a time of trial to them. The snow, at least in the country, is so spotless that it must put them out of conceit with the results of their own domestic washing.

Of course, different standards of cleanliness prevail throughout the different provinces of Holland. It is one thing to be in the "home" province, of which Amsterdam is the capital; quite another to be in Drenthe, the frontier province bordering on Hanover, where the peasants are very poor, and have to wrest a livelihood from peat morasses, which, in this country, would be considered irreclaimable. In Drenthe I have been in more than one house, the floors of which were grimed with mud that would have seriously disturbed the mind of an American farmer's wife. Moreover, in one of these houses the owner, his daughter and two sons were drinking coffee out of cups that were far from clean; and the lace head-gear which the women wore over the silver plates with which custom bids them cover their foreheads would have been improved by a hearty introduction to the wash-tub. As a rule, however, it may safely be said that soap is in greater demand in the land of dikes than in any other country which I have visited; and a well-known English laundry soap is advertised to such an extent that the placards weary one's eyes.

An inscription on the little house at Zaandam, in which Peter the Great lived for a time while he was learning the shipbuilding trade, will I think, bear excellent adaption to suit the Dutch character. The inscription says: "Niets is den grooten man te klein."—(Nothing is too trivial for the great man.) I propose to compliment the Dutch people by changing the words to, "Nothing is too great for these small men;" and by applying them to the inhabitants of the Netherlands, to whom

in the past, the United States have been so much indebted.

At first sight it may appear that the mind of the Dutchman is more apt to be engrossed by the care of little things than of great. The Dutch domestic artist with an immense appreciation of details is better known in America than the Dutch artist with conceptions like Raphael's or Michel Angelo's. But it ought to be enough to hint at the history of Holland to prove the contrary. Further, where else in the wide world can we find such gigantic works of their kind as the dikes with which the Dutchmen keep the sea from invading their land? Where is there such industrious reclamation of square miles of country, which in other regions of the earth would have been regarded as hopelessly good-for-nothing to the end of time? The "polders"—cultivated beds of drained marshes or lakes—are now among the best lands in Holland. And nothing more astounds a visitor to the wilds of such provinces as Drenthe, than to discover in the midst of vast expanses of flat country which seems valueless, except for the stacks of peat which stand upon it, settlements of hundreds, even thousands of men who have fought with the barren land and have conquered it, in the same way that their more inventive brethren have compelled the sea to obey their commands.

I would draw attention, in this connection, to the penal institutions between Meppel and Heerenveen. It seems genuine wisdom in the authorities to make the state prisoners do for the worst part of Holland what nature seems to have neglected to do. Eventually the whole country will be cultivated; and at no distant date one will be able to travel from one end of it to the other without finding a barren spot of any size.

In writing of the Dutch as "small" men, I would limit the application of the word to the men of Holland itself; for the Frieslanders and the people of the neighboring provinces are as different from the dwellers between the mouth of the Maas, and the town called "The Helder," as are the giants of Kentucky and the New Yorkers. They are much taller and more stalwart, and their faces have hardly anything of that farcical cast which causes one to laugh at the plebeian Dutchman of Rotterdam or Amsterdam. It is a dreadful charge to make, but the love of truth compels me to say that the average Dutchman has no legs to speak of, just as his wife has no waist worthy of the name, and his daughter no ankles. When seated *pater familias* is not conspicuously Lilliputian; when he stands up, you soon notice that nature has played a wicked trick upon him in abbreviating his thighs. Of course, however, she has compensated him in other

ways. She has made him almost as broad as he is long, and has given him such a faculty of patience and long-drawn industry as ensures him as much chance of happiness as the most energetic of tall men has at his disposal. To a vast number of Dutchmen to sit in a "trekschuit," or passenger canal-boat and travel at the rate of about two and a half miles an hour for twenty or thirty miles, with a landscape that differs not at all during the entire journey, is the height of bliss; and I, as a student of racial pathology, venture to suggest that this method of traveling, tedious as it would be to most Americans, might lessen the number of neurotics and dyspeptics, of whom the great republic has so large a supply. The Dutchman takes with him some tobacco to chew or some cigars to smoke, and when the craving for stimulants assails him, he will probably take a glass of gin. Finally, having apparently absolved himself from all obligations to be polite, he has succeeded in becoming what many great men have failed to become—a contented man.

The Frieslander is not such a comatose individual. I refer to him especially when he wears his winter humor. In summer he is enthusiasm itself, this enthusiasm being of the agricultural order, pivoting about the cheese and butter which he makes and sends to the English market, and the beef which he fattens on the broad fields with which nature has so liberally endowed his native land. There is a picture in the museum of Leenwarden, the capital of Friesland, which shows that in 1480 A. D. there was a certain amount of refinement in this remote corner of Europe. It shows us a Friesland family eating dinner—is not that a subject after the heart of a Dutchman?—and it is noticeable that the women of the house are sitting at the table, as if they were under no obligation to wait upon their lords and masters. The costumes and even the details of the *menage* are very much less coarse than one would have expected them to be. There is a fine fat capon upon the table, and from it one's thoughts go to the many farm houses about the province, in one of the barns of which it was probably fed through a luxurious summer in the first and only year of its existence.

It is in winter, however, I feel sure that the Frieslander is most apt to draw himself up to his full height, and to breathe with the greatest contentment. Certainly, it is very likely to be "rare lousy" weather. Gone then for a while are all the green fields whence the honors of his butter and cheeses—which have fetched such good prices in various markets—have proceeded. Bound rudder and sail are then the chocolate and black boats in which the Frieslander passes so many agreeable summer hours, whether in helping to convey his farm-