

AN OLD DUTCH CITY.



TWENTY minutes by rail from the heart of Rotterdam, or seventy minutes by steamer from the Boompjes, lies the most pictorial of all the old towns in southern Holland. Whether or not it be true that Rotterdam is more picturesque than Venice, Dordrecht is certainly more picturesque than Rotterdam. It is a typical Dutch town in almost every aspect. If it has not the historical associations of Leyden or Haarlem, it is cleaner than either, livelier than either, and, to all appearance, more prosperous than either. Grass does not grow between the stones of the principal street at Dordrecht, as it does at Leyden. That famous university city is a mere ghost of itself, an echo of the day before yesterday. Dordrecht is ghostly likewise, in a sense, for in the Middle Ages it was the wealthiest of Dutch cities, rivalling in its trade Amsterdam itself, whereas now it counts no more than some 25,000 or 30,000 inhabitants, and its trade is almost entirely in timber. But Dordrecht, although eclipsed, is not ruined like Leyden. The commerce has mainly gone, the population has dwindled, but there is not the sense of loneliness and emptiness which chills one at Leyden. Its streets are busy and full of attractive shops, the fairly laden tramcar runs from the river-side to the old gates, and there are no rows of empty or half-furnished palaces, as in the city of the siege.

Dordrecht is not a city of sights. It has no famous Cathedral, no Renaissance Hôtel de Ville, no museums, no historic remains in particular. Its interest is purely pictorial. I do not pretend to an extensive knowledge of Holland; but I am told by those who do possess that knowledge that this quaint old place is to this day more like an old Dutch city than any other south of the Zuyder Zee. I do know that, in the course of a long day's wanderings through the narrow streets and beside the shady canals, I counted less than a score houses which looked new, and that I took note of so many dozens of buildings bearing dates prior to 1650 that at last I lost count. Dordrecht is a paradise of old houses, brown, red, and yellow, brought together in tangled confusion, large and small elbowing each other like people in a crowd.

Dort is picturesque as approached by steamer from the river, but it is a picture indeed when first seen from the railway station. The railway is not ten years old at Dordrecht yet, and this is, of course, the newest end of the town. Two or three of the brand-new French villas which are such hideous abominations in the outskirts of every Dutch town, dot the road, and damp the ardour of the visitor. But soon the true Dordrecht reveals itself, lying straight

in front, the delicate spire of the cathedral rising from the midst of crow-stepped gables and autumn-tinted tiles. It is useless to adopt landmarks or to take bearings here. Make up your mind to be lost at once and you will have no further anxiety.

In Dordrecht there is something new, or rather something very old, in every street. The houses are tall and fantastically gabled, and as the streets are mainly very narrow, one can take a walk in the grateful shade on the hottest summer day. Nine-tenths of the houses are at least two hundred years old, and many of them are a century and a half older. In many of the busier streets and along most of the canals, the old gables lean tottering forward, as though to meet their venerable friends on the other side of the way. The builder's men were very gingerly demolishing a fine gabled old place, coloured a mellow russet-brown, which was in danger of falling down, owing to some settlement in the sandy shifting soil. Great figures of beaten iron upon the front attested that it was built in 1580. Every now and again, in the streets of Dort, I came upon a house large enough to have looked well in an English park. A double flight of steps, well-nigh wide enough for the passage of the traditional coach-and-six, led up to a massive front door, behind which, when it was occasionally open, I caught a glimpse of a hall ample enough to hold an "eligible detached villa residence." Sometimes a coat of crowded quarterings was floridly sculptured above the broken pediment of the door; sometimes a bit of allegorical carving ornamented the windows. There are very few old towns anywhere which have retained the olden homes of the departed merchant princes in such numbers or in such admirable preservation as Dordrecht.

Dort is a city of pictures, and some of the most effective of them are to be seen along the innumerable canals. The little drawbridges which span these green and sluggish waterways are the only places whence any view can be got of the narrower canals, which are bounded by the backs of the houses, as in Venice, and possess nothing in the shape of a sidewalk. On a sunshiny day, such as that which I spent at Dort, the canals, more particularly these narrow ones, strike one as picturesque beyond compare. This particular canal, about as wide as Paternoster Row, curves gently inward, the perspective being filled in with the oddest jumble of houses ever seen out of a picture. They are tall and short, coloured as diversely as Joseph's coat. Some of them have water-gates and steps leading to the canal, where a small boat lies idly moored. From this I judge that it is occasionally found convenient to "slip out the back way" in Holland, as it is nearer home. Beneath some of the houses there are black archways, frowning even in the sunlight, through which the water flows into the next canal. Many of the buildings are contorted as though in agony; some overhang the water, into which they seem ready to fall. Fantastic little bal-

conies, seemingly hardly large enough for the owner's long pipe and flagon of beer, are perched outside the windows. So vividly do they remind one of the embellishments of a doll's house, that one is startled when a servant-maid trips out upon the balcony and sets to beating a brilliant Eastern rug.

One long, narrow, tortuous street bisects the whole of Dort. It runs from the banks of the Maas, where the Rotterdam steamer lands you, right away to the Vuilpoort (the Dirty Gate) at the opposite end of the city. No other street leads anywhere, so far as I could discover, and this one soon takes us to the Market Place. There is nothing remarkable about this stony square but a fine statue of Ary Scheffer, who was a native of Dort. It was a very commendable thing for the Dordrechtens to put up a statue to their famous townsman ; but they need not have allowed it to become covered with contumely, in the shape of spiders' webs.

That French will carry one all over Europe is quite an idle legend. Since I made the acquaintance of Holland I know better. When I lunched at Dort I did

it in this wise. I first assaulted the landlord of the hotel in the most guttural of French, for I thought he would be more likely to understand French spoken with what I conceived to be a Dutch accent, than the elegancies of Parisian diction. But it was useless. I was courteously waved into a seat ; the landlord disappeared and presently introduced his little son, aged about twelve, who, between the whiffs of a cigar, informed me that he spoke French. I soon found that he had been taught one sentence in that language upon each birthday. He took my order for lunch with professional alacrity, but it was never executed. I got a lunch, and a very fair one too, for Holland, but of what it consisted I have never discovered—certainly not of what I had ordered. My young friend was very talkative, but our method of communication was cumbrous. Having come to the end of his French, he brought out a huge volume of dialogues in French and Dutch, and pointed to the sentences which most nearly represented what he wanted to say, and he desired to say so much that I

had to read most of the sentences in that book before he had done with me.

Let it not be supposed that, because it was never the scene of such thrilling events as have emblazoned Leyden and Haarlem upon the page of the historian, Dordrecht has no history. It is memorable as the birthplace of the Dutch Republic, one of the richest,



A DUTCH WINDMILL.



DORDRECHT: A CANAL.

strongest, wisest, most heroic states which have ever held sway in Europe. It was in 1572 that the first assembly of the States of Holland, which resulted in the foundation of the Republic, was held there, and within the walls of Dort during that memorable July was poured forth some of the fiercest eloquence uttered during the most tremendous struggle of modern times. The famous Synod of Dort was held in 1618, while prosperity still blessed the sluggish waters which surround her. Fifty or sixty years later, shortly after Cornelius de Witte, brother of the Grand Pensionary, had ceased to be Burgomaster of Dordrecht, his native place, our old city was the scene of the more or less fabled discovery by Cornelius Van Baerle, a member of a rich family of Dutch merchants, who are still represented in Holland, of the wondrous black tulip. To grow a black tulip was the dream of that day, as the discovery of the Philosopher's Stone had been the chimera of a remoter time. Dumas the elder has told with all his characteristic vivacity the troubled and slightly apocryphal story of how Cornelius Van Baerle gained the prize of one hundred thousand guilders (£8,000) for the bulb which the Prince of Orange christened *Tulipa nigra Rosa Barlaensis*.

Every one who goes to Holland should see Dordrecht, particularly if he does not intend to penetrate to the north of the Zuyder Zee. It is as characteristic a bit of Holland as Amsterdam or Haarlem. The traveller may see sights there, in the midst of that

environment of rivers, which he cannot count upon seeing elsewhere in the Netherlands. At the proper season of the year the rivers which flow into and around the town are blocked up with the huge rafts of timber which have been floated down the Rhine from the Black Forest. Timber is the staple trade of Dort now, and the hundreds of windmills in the outskirts are merrily occupied nearly all the year round in sawing up Swiss and German logs. The picturesque might almost have had its birth at Dordrecht. There is a flavour of the Dutch school about it, which the nativity there of Cuyp and Scheffer may perhaps account for. There is many a "bit" in the streets of Dort which might have been taken bodily from an old Dutch picture. Strolling in the outskirts of the town I came upon a smithy which looked familiar. Not that I had ever before physically beheld it; but it reminded me vividly of many a little masterpiece. The tall gables of an opposite granary threw the entrance into shadow which deepened into gloom within the open door. In the mysterious twilight the sparks flew vividly around the wiry smith, as upon an enormous anvil of ancient make he fashioned the heavy shoe of a draught horse. The scene lacked but two or three armed loungers at the door and a litter of rapiers, arquebuses, and dented breastplates, to recall an armourer's shop as it must often have appeared little more than two hundred years ago in the gabled streets of Dort.

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