

## Illustrated Interviews.

LVIII.—JAN VAN BEERS.

BY MARIE A. BELLOC.



VEN Paris, the most sceptical and *blasé* of cities, freely yields a thrill of wonder and admiration at the latest addition to her many marvels. M. Jan Van Beers has spent years of his life in designing and filling with countless artistic treasures the exquisite dwelling where he has at last betaken himself and his household gods. The whole universe, especially the mediæval and the Eastern world of art, has been laid under contribution, and yet the result achieved is singularly harmonious, and already, not only the owner's fellow-craftsmen of the brush, but architects, sculptors, and all those who delight in beauty, have made only partially successful efforts to penetrate into this House Beautiful.

The painter who has chosen to make himself delineator-in-chief of the Eternal Feminine as seen through *fin-de-siècle* opera-glasses has not indulged himself in any of the architectural prettinesses in which the modern Frenchman delights. There is nothing about the outside of the severely plain building giving the slightest indication of the luxury and wealth of detail within, and the visitor who ascends the stone steps passes without transition from the busy, sunlit Passy street into a dreamland of mystic Eastern beauty. As he walks with muffled footsteps across the ante-chamber into the octagon hall beyond, he little by little becomes aware that he moves, as it were, in a maze of beauty, cunningly contrived by one master hand, which, whether it takes the form of carving, painting, or drapery, seems to form a perfect whole.

A demure, quick-footed Brittany *bonne*, whose picturesque white cap recalls the provincial France which M. Van Beers has

ransacked for old stained-glass and tapestries, bids you wait while her master comes down from his studio to welcome you to his new home.

As your host, with his tall, well-knit figure, comes forward, it is easy to divine that some far-off strain of Spanish or Italian blood is responsible for the delicate, clear-cut profile, married so strangely to the dark blue, speculative eyes of a fairer race. "Well, you see, here I am at last!" he exclaimed, smiling. "I have said good-bye to Montmartre for ever; and instead of the cemetery where Heine lies, I have as next-door neighbour the Bois de Boulogne. Of course, I do not consider my house nearly finished; still, I confess it has nearly earned its title of 'Van Beers' Folly.' Tell you something of what suggested all that you see around you? Certainly; but I warn you that the enumeration may be too long for your taste. No, I cannot tell you to what period this building can claim to belong. I have tried to incorporate something of every period within its walls.

"Perhaps the most fantastic corner of my home," he added, drawing aside one of the yellow velvet curtains which draped the archways of the octagon, "is this little ante-chamber, and I need hardly tell you that all my child friends especially delight in it."

The reason why was instantly apparent. Between and round the slender columns, each exquisitely carved from designs taken from the Infante's Palace at Saragossa, play thirty tiny kittens, sculptured by the well-known animal sculptor, Courtier. Each little creature is a faithful portrait of some live kitten, and they all stand out in startling relief against a white background, as if only awaiting the wave of a magician's wand to



JAN VAN BEERS.  
From a Sketch by himself.





From a Photo. by]

THE OCTAGON HALL.

[Naar, Paris.

bring them all to life. Below this curious cattery a high dado forms the background to some fine engravings, drawings, and photographs, each signed, with the addition of a few words of friendly greeting, by M. Van Beers's French, English, American, and Belgian friends, including Bouguereau, Millais, Alma-Tadema, Wauters, Caran d'Ache, and so on. The ceiling, which belongs to the German Renaissance period, is studded with red electric globes.

"I confess to having taken more pains over the hall than I did anywhere else," observed my host, leading the way back there. "Each story—there are only two to this house—is

brought, as it were, here into harmony. The balcony is supported by Gothic figures taken from Flemish, Dutch, and French sources. As for those six cathedral stalls occupying the middle of the hall, they were exactly copied by one of my sculptor friends from the church at Dordrecht."

And then M. Van Beers explained to me at some length the history of what is certainly one of the most extraordinary candelabra in the world. Springing from the centre of the carved stalls seems to be a huge flowering fern, a kind of magnified lily-of-the-valley, with hanging red and white blossoms. The design was adapted from the famous candelabrum in Milan Cathedral, but here each flower

conceals an electric globe.

"You see, I have in every sense utilized the extraordinary power of electric light. Till quite lately it was practically impossible to produce certain effects of light and shade without running great risks of fire. Thanks to Edison and his disciples, the lighting of the world has been completely altered, and every day new mechanical improvements are taking place."

"I have heard a very extraordinary description of your dining-room!"

"Well, here again the electric light has enabled me to produce certain effects which are, I think, quite original. To begin with,"



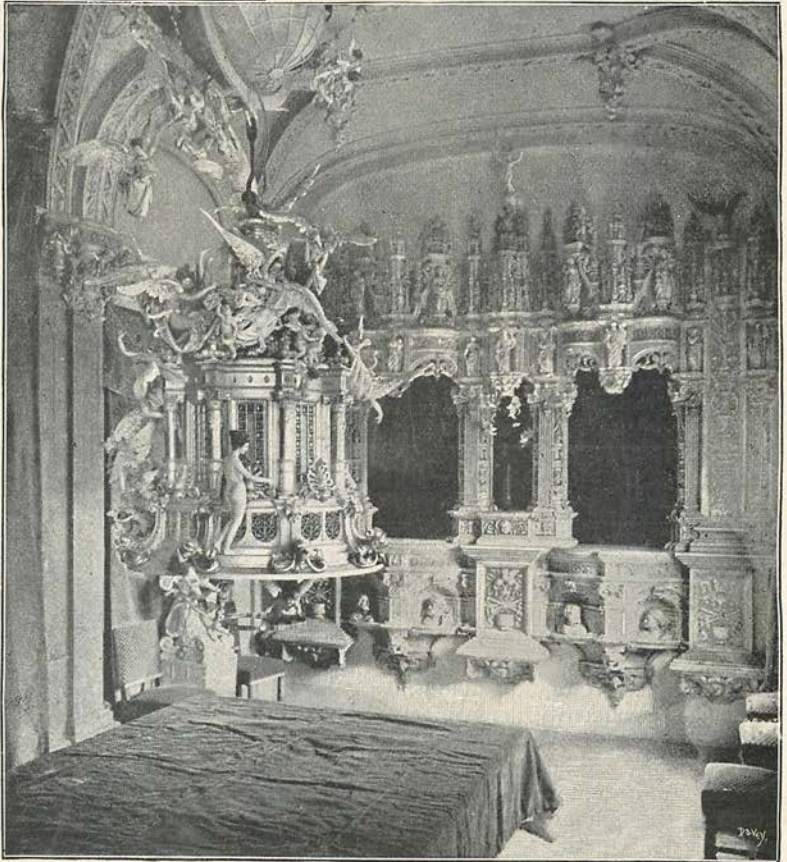


THE TERRESTRIAL GLOBE AT  
ENTRANCE TO DINING-ROOM.  
*Photo. by Nadar, Paris.*

drawing aside another of the gorgeous yellow curtains, "there are very few actual doors in my house. The dining-room, as you see, is separated from the hall by a carved gateway copied from a Norwegian church. The gateway is five yards in height, and painted canary-colour and gold, while at night a stream of bright rose-pink light plays upon it. Here is a statue, every portion of which is a plaster of Paris cast, taken from a living model of our first mother, Eve, standing under the apple-

tree holding in her left hand the fatal fruit, while she leans against the branch round which is twined the wicked serpent, who is whispering evil counsels in her ear. In more or less relation to this, shall we say allegorical group, is a terrestrial globe upheld on the heaving shoulders of Atlas. You will probably recognise that the first conception of this was taken from a German sculpture of the seventeenth century, now in the South Kensington Museum."

The scheme of colour in the dining-room is violet and silver, every shade from deepest purple to palest mauve being represented; even the windows, filled in with deep violet glass, are studded with round discs simulating amethysts. The dining-table was made after the artist's own carefully-thought-out design, of the finest plate glass and copper. From the interior come shafts of light, and the table-cloth used at night is transparent. M. Van Beers produced a considerable sensation some years ago in London, by giving



*From a Photo. by*

THE DINING-ROOM,

*[Nadar, Paris.]*





THE DINING-ROOM LAMP.  
From a Photo. by Nadar, Paris.

a dinner on a table of the same kind, but he has now much improved the lighting apparatus.

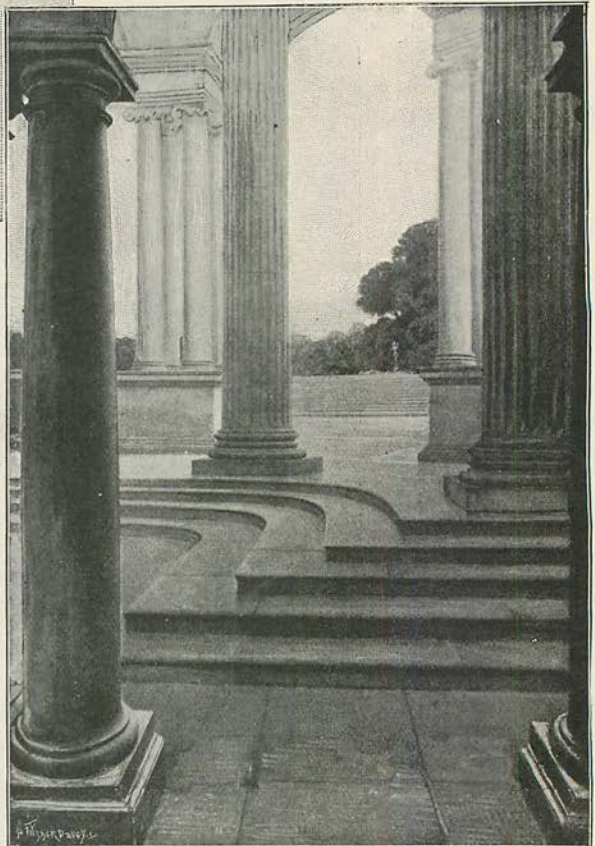
When every one of the twelve guests is served with the first course, the centre of the table sinks down out of sight, the void being filled in the twinkling of an eye with two flaps made of the finest ivory, embossed with metals and gems; and then, at an electric signal from the host, back slide the ivory leaves, and the table is once more seen to be complete, the centre laden with whatever may be the next course.

Over the centre of the table is a silver bell studded with mauve and white discs, each containing an electric lamp. The bell is suspended from a terrestrial globe, which is itself hung from a gold sun, fastened to the ceiling amid clouds carved in high relief. Bell,

globe, and clouds together form a Jacob's ladder for a flock of angels and Cupids. The blue, mauve, and white wings of the angels carry out the general scheme of colour in this fantastic chamber.

Close to the dining-room is the smoking-room, crimson in its general tone, draped with satin curtains, held up at the four corners by rabbits with golden heads, garlanded with red roses. The room is lighted by a luminous comet, fixed in the ceiling, which is in itself one of the marvels of the house, for it exactly reproduces the interior of the splendid Renaissance tomb containing the heart of Catherine de Medicis.

"Now, I think it is time we came upstairs," observed M. Van Beers. "You see, I have hidden away my staircase in a corner. Still, were all the curtains of the hall drawn back you would see it quite clearly, even from the ante-chamber. One of my friends declares that my house is like one of those elaborately carved Chinese puzzles, in which all the parts fit one into another. To my



From a Photo. by]

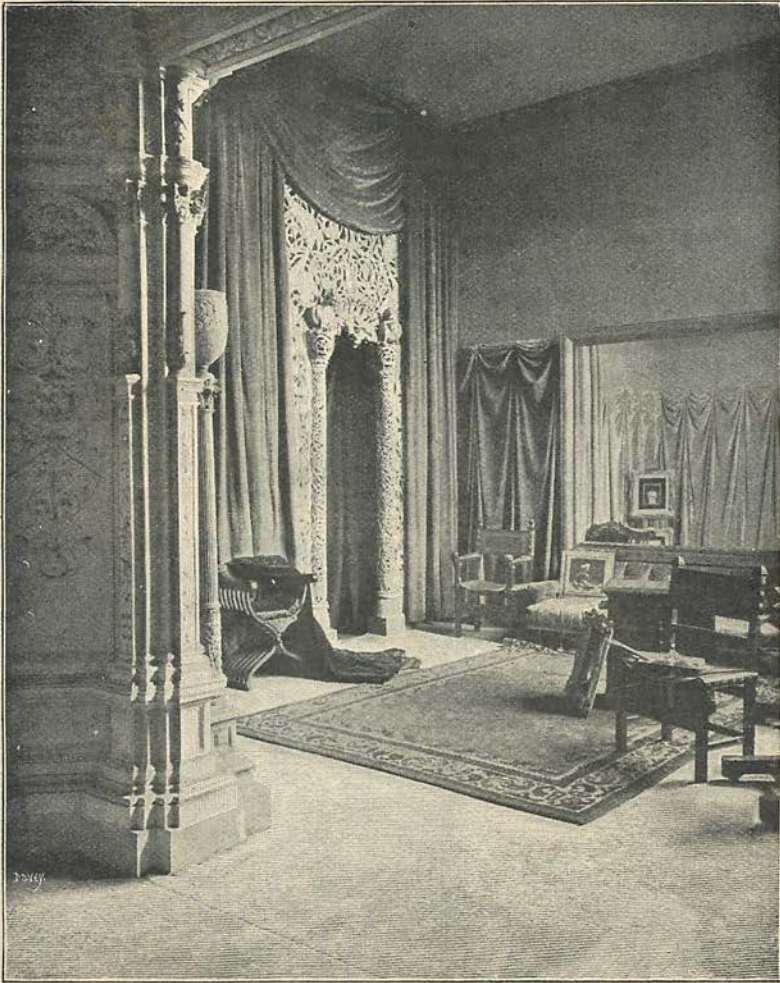
THE STAIRCASE.

[Nadar, Paris.



thinking, there is no reason why the staircase, even if hidden away, should not be as beautiful as the rest of a house. Here, you see, are statues of Astronomy and of Grammar, replicas of those in the Cluny Museum. This frieze is very original, and is copied from a little-known Renaissance design of dancing angels. You see, our broad-minded forefathers believed that every

that is, in comparison with the rest of the house; the large window filling up one side of the octagon is copied from one in the refectory of an old Breton convent. The walls of the studio itself are draped with green velvet, and the door leading through to the painter's little study is exquisitely carved. Fine shields, on which are embossed the labours of Hercules, the Judgment of Paris,



*From a Photo. by*

THE STUDIO.

[Nadar, Paris.

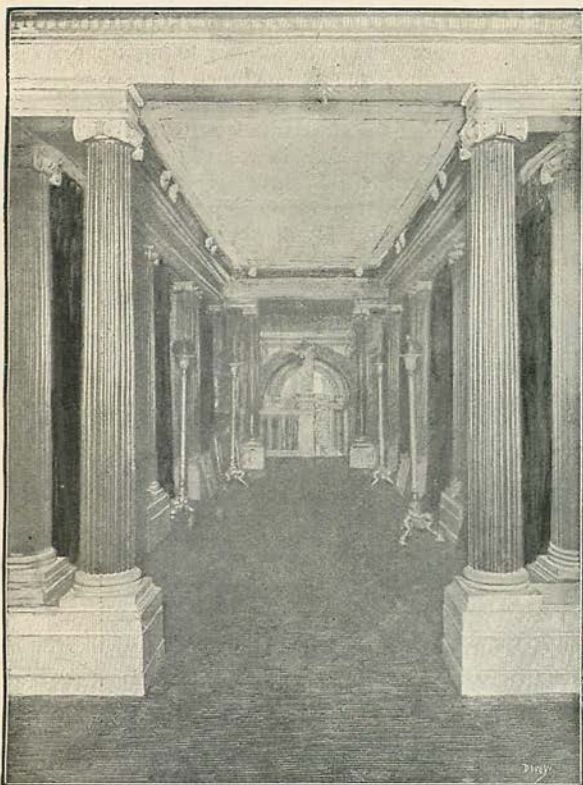
style of amusement would be permitted in Heaven! For a long time it was rather a puzzle to me how I should light my staircase. At last I solved the problem by placing a number of conventional blossoms, each of which held an electric globe, and these two Greek vases copied from some which took my fancy at South Kensington."

The studio is a lofty, plain room—plain,  
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and other mythological subjects, the cuirass of the Duke of Alba, and the casque of Francis I., are the only decoration.

From the top of the low, broad staircase stretches out what is certainly the most important apartment in the house, namely, the picture-gallery. Here are collected a number of those exquisite miniature paintings which have caused your host to be known among





From a Photo. by]

THE PICTURE-GALLERY.

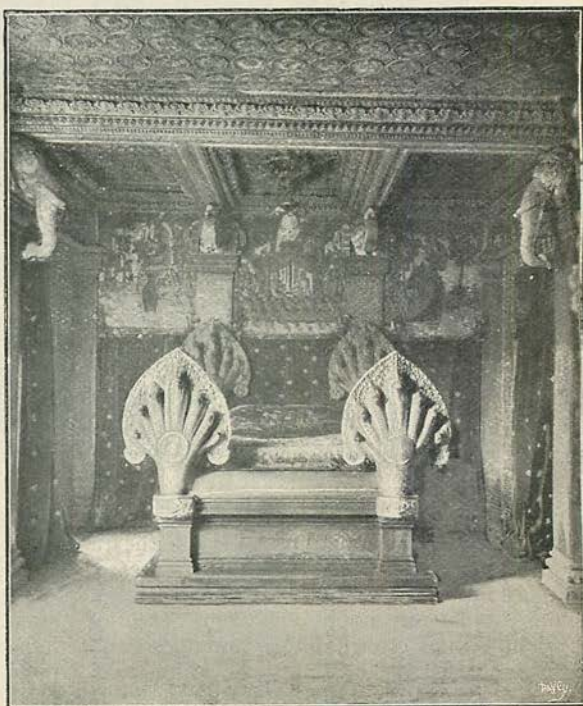
[Nadar, Paris.

his adopted countrymen as "Le Meissonier des Dames." Here again M. Van Beers has chosen to be nothing if not original. His picture-gallery is only lighted by artificial light. Draped entirely with dark purple velvet, the carpet being of the same colour, each painting has its own hooded lamp, and the mind of the visitor is not distracted by anything.

"Yes, both here and in my studio," said my host, meditatively, "I have had to curb my fancy. I wish, however, you could see my state bedroom, where the workmen are putting in finishing touches. It is the reproduction of a room in the Palace of Ang-Kor-Wat, and I really think it would gladden the heart of a Babylonian. The general scheme of colouring is orange, green, and gold. The bed, which is almost as large as the one at Ware, is composed of four gigantic carved leaves copied from a Hindu temple. Behind and above this

couch are coloured bas-reliefs. The room is lighted by a golden flower attached by arabesques to the looking-glass which forms the ceiling, and if more light were needed it could be obtained from two other blossoms held by Hindu gods standing on each side of the Indian panoramic landscape which fills in one side of the apartment. The walls are lined with apple-green velvet, embroidered with metal flowers and emerald crystals. Above the velvet runs a narrow dado, on which dancing Dervishes are sculptured in relief. The lattice windows are filled in with orange stained-glass, and both the bed-spread and carpet are of the same vivid tint.

"Then I have a Moorish room, which you have not yet seen. The floor of this room is of glass, and it is lighted from below. But I will not allow anyone to see any portion of this house which is not yet in perfect order. Already, notwithstanding the unceasing labours of my friend and architect, M. Lestrille, I have found that house-building is a very absorbing occu-

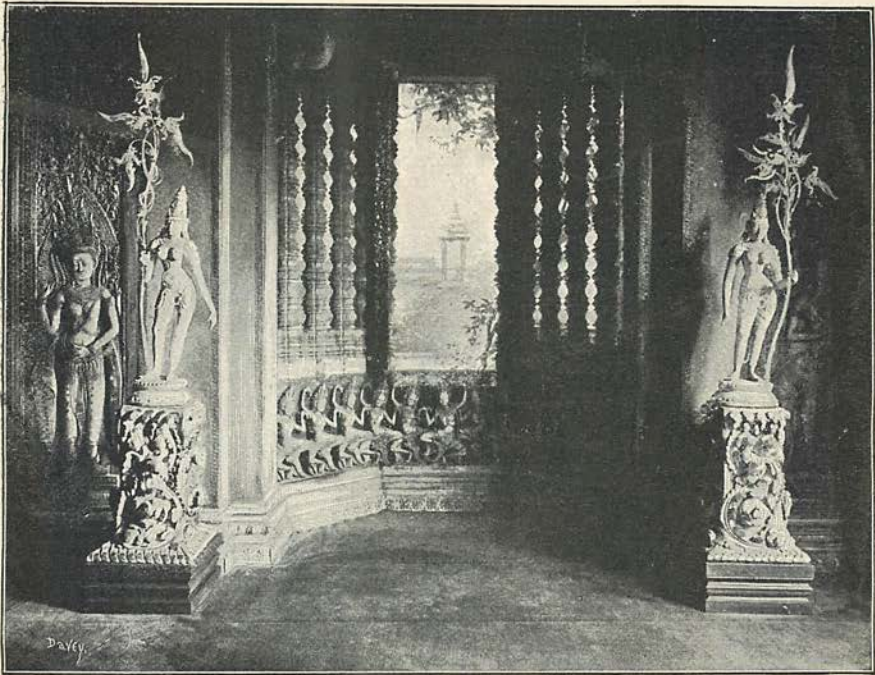


From a Photo. by]

THE BED.

[Nadar, Paris.





From a Photo. by]

AN ALCOVE IN THE BEDROOM.

[Nadar, Paris.

pation, the more so that I am naturally a lazy individual, though no one can paint harder than I can when I am in the mood for it.

"No, I cannot claim to be in any sense a Parisian save by adoption," he continued, in answer to a question. "On the contrary, my father was what I suppose you would style the Poet Laureate of Belgium, and I spent my early youth in dear, quaint old Antwerp. I was destined for the Bar, and I think my friends and relations were extremely surprised when I announced my intention of adopting Art as my profession. One of my earliest recollections is of the terrible scrapes I used to get into for covering my books with caricatures of my masters and schoolfellows. And so, in spite of the fact that a poor painter is still considered in Flanders something of a vagabond, I remained faithful to my intention, and when I was seventeen entered the Antwerp Art School as pupil of the famous Van Levis. In those days my great ambition was to be an historical painter. You know we Flemish are intensely patriotic, and I wished to emulate on canvas some of my father's fine work in poetry. I studied very hard, and there is now in the Ryks Museum at Amsterdam the picture which won me the gold medal. It is a reconstitution of the funeral of Charles the

Good. I introduced into the procession hundreds of figures, including my own. Heavens! how I worked in those days. This picture cost me in actual studio and model expenses nearly 15,000 francs, which was about the sum I received for it. Ah, at that time I should have been astonished if I had been told what much of my later work was to be."

And yet, in the brilliant and fantastic painter of womankind is still to be seen something of the original Van Beers, and in many of his later portraits—notably in those remarkable studies of some of his well-known masculine contemporaries—it is easy to perceive the influence exercised on him and on his art by the immortal portrait-painters of Holland and of Flanders.

"And what first made you turn to your present form of art, and style of painting?"

"Chance brought me to Paris. Can I say more? By way of recreation rather than anything else, I painted 'La Sirène,' a yachtsman helping a pretty girl into a boat. It was, though I say it, a charming picture, and on being exhibited in the Brussels Salon attracted considerable attention; indeed, far too much, for soon painters and critics were after me in full cry, declaring that the fineness of the work could not have been produced by natural means, and that I had painted over a photo-



graph. I at once took up the challenge, and offered to scratch out the dainty little head of my yachtswoman, or, for the matter of that, any other portion of the picture. If any trace of photography were discovered I should, of course, be ruined in every sense. If the evidence were in my favour, my

as they were, had their bright side. They made me understand who were my true friends. I have received not only kindness but generous friendship from many French and foreign artists, who were indignant at the way in which I was treated."

"And now, *cher maitre*, will you tell me



From the Picture by]

"L'ÉVENTAIL."

[Jan Van Beers.

traducers were to pay £1,000 to any charity selected by me. The offer was not accepted, but one fine morning the head of the principal figure was found to have been cut out. That is why," concluded M. Van Beers, smiling, "I always cover my pictures with glass.

"However, perhaps I should add that I reconstituted my poor 'Sirène,' and that the picture now belongs to a wealthy South American lady. These experiences," added M. Van Beers, seriously, "painful and odious

something of your methods of work? I suppose you have painted in your time every type of feminine loveliness. Is it true that each of these dainty little ladies has a counterpart in real life, or do you evolve your subjects out of your imagination?"

"Unlike my friend Caran d'Ache, I am a great believer in the possibilities of the living model. In fact," he observed, with a smile, "I am always on the look-out for pretty and striking-looking sitters. If an artist is fortunate enough to have secured a really beautiful



woman as the foundation of his picture, the accessories matter little, though I admit that I take considerable pains not only with the gowns, hats, and so on of my sitters, but also with the chairs or sofas on which they may be sitting, and the screen or landscape serving as the background. I always design the gowns of my models, whether I am engaged on a portrait or on a fancy subject.

"Few people realize how great a part clothes play in portrait-painting. It should surely be the aim of every painter, especially when dealing with the fairer half of creation, to produce a portrait which will look as well in five years as on the day it was painted. It is far more difficult to do this than might be imagined. Too close attention to the prevailing fashion of the day, for instance, will make an otherwise splendid bit of work look almost absurd after the lapse of a short number of years. No, the true portrait-

"It is not easy," he answered, laughing, "to evolve anything very artistic out of a chimney-pot hat or a shooting-suit. As for dress clothes, they must surely be the despair of every painter. Still, like most people, I find a certain fascination in the conquest of difficulty; and between ourselves, I am far prouder of my achievements in the way of masculine portraiture than I am of much of my other work. A pretty woman paints herself, as it were; but in the 'portrait of a gentleman' should be seen individuality and intellect—to say nothing whatever of genius, should your sitter be happy enough to possess this gift of the gods. It is almost impossible to give more than a glimpse of a woman's true nature in her portrait, for even the most futile and frivolous of modern dames wears a mask which effectually conceals her inner self from the world. That is not so with a man, and it is, after all,



From the Picture by]

A PORTRAIT.

[Jan Van Beers.

painter must arrange, with the help of his sitter's dressmaker, a costume as dateless as it is beautiful and becoming."

"And what are your views as to the vexed question of masculine habiliments? At one time, I fancy, you made a special study of the Paris *gommeux*, or dandy."

always easier to paint the artificial than the real."

"You are somewhat severe on your fair sitters, M. Van Beers."

"No, indeed! I am devoted to every form of *l'éternel féminin*. But you must admit that there is a great charm in mystery



and in the unknown. I always feel that the lightest-hearted little grisette, hurrying to her work in the morning, is far more than a match for me."

"And do you really pick up your models here, there, and everywhere?"

"Yes, indeed! I always have a considerable number of fancy compositions floating about in my mind, and when I see a suitable model, the scheme, as it were, takes definite shape. I do not by any means confine myself to pretty Parisiennes! Some of my most successful studies have been done during my short visits to London, and I am a devoted admirer of the American girl. By the way, I have painted a good number of notable ladies from the other side, including Miss Ada Rehan, Mrs. Brown Potter, and a host of society women. Americans have, in common with their French sisters, an extraordinary power of adapting themselves to the fashion of the moment, and giving every fold of their costume an individual and artistic touch. They make delightful sitters, and they are always pleased with the final result. You cannot wonder,

therefore, that I hope to welcome a great many *belles Américaines* to my new home."

"Do you ever paint groups, or do you confine yourself mainly to single portraits?"

"I am fond of painting a group in which only two people figure; but I am still searching for a pair of ideal lovers—a latter-day Romeo and Juliet. All I ask is that they should both be young and beautiful, and truly in love the one with the other. Is it not strange that so conventional a pair should be so

difficult to find in our modern life? As it is, when wishing to paint a love scene, I have to bring together two people who, though they may be Venus and Apollo, are absolutely indifferent the one to the other, and do what I may, I cannot coax Cupid to come to my assistance.

"I remember some years ago I had as a model an exceptionally beautiful girl. Very early in our acquaintance she confided to me the fact that she had a sweetheart, a fellow so extraordinarily handsome and distinguished-looking that all the leading artists in Paris were anxious to secure him as a model.

Without losing any time, I suggested to her how charming it would be for us all if her lover would consent to pose with her in a pretty *genre* picture. She was quite delighted, and promised to induce him to do me this valuable service for love of her. Imagine my feelings when, a day or two after, in tripped my lovely little model, accompanied by an uncouth monster whose only claim to notice was his extreme and repellent plainness! You see, love is blind. Romeo too often wastes his love on a plain

and uninteresting young woman; and Juliet, filled with the divine charity which is so feminine an attribute, accepts as her counterpart a lover who has not a good feature in his face. •

"As to the technical side of my work," he continued, in answer to a question, "I must at once admit my indebtedness to my friend Jacques Blokx, a distinguished Flemish chemist, whose colour factory is famed all over the world. He has made a lifelong



From a Sketch by]

"THE KING'S JESTER."

[Jan Van Beers.



study of the intricate subject of colour, and I am firmly convinced that he has discovered much of the science which is supposed to have died with the Old Masters. You see, there is no doubt that Michael Angelo, Rubens, and Velasquez made their own

Bloxx, who, in addition to preparing the most perfect and stable colours, has written a most valuable little work dealing with the question, in which he warns beginners against certain colours."

"And may I ask what these are?"



*From the Picture by]*

"ABANDON."

*[Jan Van Beers.*

colours, mixing and creating various tints on the palette itself. Nowadays, every shade can be found ready mixed, and too often the the most deleterious and fast-fading ingredients are used. Consequently, many a priceless picture becomes comparatively worthless after it has been painted twenty or thirty years.

"Of course, this problem has often occupied the minds of modern artists. I myself gave a good deal of thought to it at one time of my life, and I early made up my mind that it was on the whole far better to paint without a medium. Still, even that precaution would not have saved my work had it not been for

"Well, carmine extracted from cochineal should be avoided; also what are generally called Indian yellow, Prussian blue, and ivory brown. Certain colours affect one another. Cobalt blue must never be allowed to go near iron in any shape; vermillion—my favourite colour, by the way—must not approach white lead. But I myself work with a very few colours, and, as I said before, I always paint without a medium. During the last few years all my work has been done on mahogany panels; I think the effect produced, especially for my kind of painting, is preferable, when carefully seasoned wood is used, to that obtained on



canvas. By the way, I always varnish my pictures myself, and here, again, I am indebted to my friend Bloxx, who has, I believe, rediscovered the amber varnish which has preserved mediæval paintings through centuries."

"You probably have very little time for ordinary recreations and amusements?"

"Well, like most people, I have fallen more or less a victim to the cycling craze. At one time I used to ride a great deal, and, following the example of those round me, I always spend the summer in the country. It is there that I make studies for my back-grounds. I am very fond of landscape painting, and if I had more time I would devote myself more to it. Some of my pleasantest holidays of late years have been spent in England, where I have many kind

friends. I shall never forget a delightful visit which I paid to Blenheim. As you probably know, the late Duke of Marlborough was a great connoisseur and an art critic of rare capacity. Some day I hope to visit America. A considerable number of my pictures find their way to the States, and I confess to a special fondness for American sitters. One of the most successful portraits I ever did was that of a millionaire of Chicago tramway fame."

"One word more: Have you ever painted children?"

"Yes; one of my most charming sitters is the little daughter of my friend Jean Worth; but children are mysterious little creatures. Who can tell what there is in the heart of a child? I think, on the whole, I prefer the mamma as model."



*From the Picture by]*

"LES PETITS CHATS."

*[Jan Van Beers.*