

# A POPULAR PAINTER:

MR. FRANK DICKSEE, R.A.

BY MARY ANGELA DICKENS.



AN age such as ours what a pleasure it is to consider for a moment a successful career! To-day is pre-eminently the day of struggle, the day of keen competition, the day—let us hope—of the survival of the fittest; and the clouds of failure, disappointment

and heart-break rise about us on every side. Even when it comes at last, success tarries often until middle age precedes it. It comes ungraciously, with the taint of hope too long deferred dimming its radiant beauty. It mocks at and eludes the eager hands outstretched to grasp it, and comes when the passionate capacity for its enjoyment lies starved or dead. With what content then, with what a warm-hearted sense that things do sometimes go right in this weary world after all, must one contemplate the even sequence of effort and success, repeated again and again, which makes the artistic history—taken in broad outline—of Mr. Frank Dicksee.

Peel Street, Campden Hill, is the address appended to Mr. Dicksee's name in the Academy catalogue. And Peel Street, Campden Hill, is a spot about as incongruous with the imaginative beauty of Mr. Dicksee's work as any spot on the face of the earth could be. Go up Peel Street at about four o'clock on a winter's afternoon—especially if the day has been wet and there is still rain in the atmosphere—and it will strike you as an excellent centre for the study of a sombre and rather commonplace realism. Through the gray haze, half fog, half damp, the little houses on either hand show vague and suggestive. Riotous children, just loosed from school, run shouting by you, adding their mite to the dark whirlpool of London life. Away at the end of the street a great block of buildings rises

darkly. There is open space beyond. And if you are lucky enough to get two or three red sunset clouds against the threatening gray of the sweep of sky, these will complete a picture eminently suggestive to a certain class of mind—but not, as one would have said, to that intensely beauty-loving type to which Mr. Dicksee's imagination surely belongs.

If you could get into Mr. Dicksee's studio, however, the instantaneous change of atmosphere—æsthetically speaking—would give you a sense of contrast so keen as to be an emotion in itself! You might make a few trite reflections, if you felt so disposed, as to the superiority of man to his surroundings,



*From a photo by]*

*[W. & D. Downey.*

MR. FRANK DICKSEE, R.A.

the influence of mind over matter, and so forth. And then you might fall to studying the importance of background in art.

For Mr. Dicksee's studio is essentially a background and a workshop—and a man's

workshop. There are the ordinary simple provisions for comfort in the shape of armchairs—since even the most industrious worker must relax at times, and visitors have to be taken into consideration. But these details modestly fulfil to perfection the requirements made of them and otherwise produce no noticeable effect. The tone of the colouring is very quiet—as befits a background—and it is very rich, for you get an impression that the walls are hung with beautiful dull tapestry. It is lighted up here and there by bits of burnished steel; conspicuously by a full suit of armour from which that note of gleaming light, repeated again and again, seems to radiate.

Against this background any amount of fancies might form themselves; such fancies especially as seem to haunt Mr. Dicksee—fancies lovely with the charm of romance or beautiful with a more sombre dignity. Here no such dream, forming itself in the imagination, would find itself either rudely dissipated or crowded out. And here, day after day, Mr. Dicksee's work is done.

Mr. Dicksee's powers as an artist come to him by right of inheritance. Even in his early youth he encountered none of those obstacles which beset the path of the boy to whom artistic gifts come as if by a freak of nature. We have all seen something of the thorns by which the path of such an one is beset; the doubt with which his performances are regarded; the regret, sometimes half concealed, sometimes rising into active opposition, with which his turning from the safe professional paths of his father is considered; the lukewarm enthusiasm which his passionate industry inspires. Or there is the other alternative; when the artistic scion of an inartistic house is regarded as a prodigy, is petted and pampered until his unhappy head is hopelessly turned and the sense of proportion dies within him. Both cases are bad, and both were spared Mr. Dicksee. He had the good luck to be born into an artist's family, and it was further to his advantage that his artistic bent followed that of his father. Mr. T. F. Dicksee was a painter of considerable repute, and Mr. Frank Dicksee's earliest recollection is of his father's studio. He does not remember the time when he was not always drawing, and he says of himself that he got through all the drudgery of his work while he was still a boy at school and before he realised that it was drudgery. When he was seventeen years old he executed, in his father's studio, a drawing which gained him his admittance into the Academy schools,

and from that time followed a period of close study. In 1872 he gained the silver medal for a drawing from the antique. In 1875 he gained the gold medal for a picture of Elijah confronting Ahab and Jezebel in Naboth's vineyard. In 1877 "Harmony" appeared in the Royal Academy.

But it is not to be supposed that these results were lightly obtained—that heaven-sent genius came, saw, and conquered without effort or labour. Few men, probably, have worked harder than Mr. Dicksee worked during these years. He studied, as has been said, in the Academy schools, and he worked also, on alternate days, with Henry Holiday at decorative work, cartoons for stained glass windows, and so forth. Besides all this, he did a great deal of illustrating work. One of his best known pictures, "Evangeline," was developed from a sketch made at this time for one of a series of illustrations of Longfellow's poem. And after his evening classes at the Academy he would come home to models of his own, and work sometimes far into the night. Certainly his success was well earned.

And what a success it was—the success made by "Harmony"! Mr. Dicksee was only three-and-twenty at the time, and it was his first picture—the first, that is to say, which came altogether from his own imagination. The subject of the picture which gained him the gold medal had been set to all the students by the Academy council, so that the picture was necessarily painted, to a certain extent, to order. And "Harmony" was one of the most popular pictures—perhaps the most popular picture—of the year. It was hung on the line in the middle of the first room, and it was bought by the council under the terms of the Chantrey bequest.

Four years after "Harmony," in 1881, Mr. Dicksee was made an Associate of the Academy; and ten years later he was elected to full membership. For some time he was the youngest member of the Academy. Only an artist, perhaps, can fully appreciate all that is involved in such recognition by his brother artists.

There is a little story connected with the face of the girl in "Harmony" which is interesting for the testimony which it bears to the extreme quickness of eye and retentiveness of memory possessed by Mr. Dicksee. Some years before "Harmony" was painted, when he can have been little more than a boy, he was on a walking tour in Derbyshire with some friends. The rest of the party had already been to Chatsworth, but they



From a photo by

"THE MAGIC CRYSTAL."—BY FRANK DICKSEE, R.A.  
(Copyright strictly reserved.)

[Dixon.]

were pressingly anxious to repeat their visit for Mr. Dicksee's sake. It did not take Mr. Dicksee long to discover that this anxiety was not wholly concerned with his edification. There was a very pretty girl guide at Chatsworth, it appeared, and hence the outbreak of unselfishness on the part of his companions. The pretty girl guide is neither here nor there, except inasmuch as but for her existence Mr. Dicksee would probably not have gone to Chatsworth on this particular occasion. She and the young artists who

another party. Mr. Dicksee had just time to catch a glimpse—as he puts it—“of a cheek and a bit of nose beyond,” and the face thus pointed out to him was gone. The girl, it turned out, was a local village beauty. The pretty guide mentioned her name, and Mr. Dicksee thought no more about the matter. Years went by, and the idea of “Harmony” dawned in Mr. Dicksee's mind. And with it there rose insuperable difficulties in connection with the necessary model. Those who were to be had were not in the



From a photo by]

“THE MOUNTAIN OF THE WINDS.”—BY FRANK DICKSEE, R.A.  
(Copyright strictly reserved.)

[Dixon.

had already seen Chatsworth were going through the room with very scant regard for the treasures it contained, and Mr. Dicksee found it necessary to assert that he was a lover of the beautiful and must not be hurried.

“Oh! if you are a lover of the beautiful,” laughed the girl, “just look at that face—isn't it lovely?”

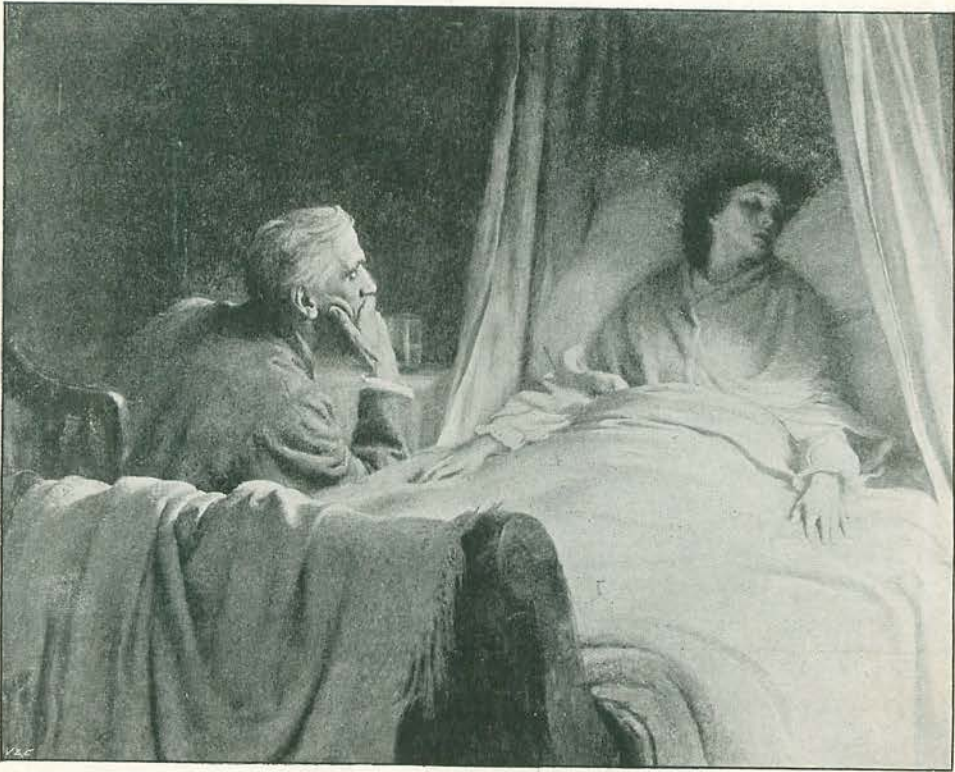
They were in a corridor at the moment which ran into another at right angles with it. And along the other corridor was passing

least what he wanted. At last there arose rumours of a new model, a widow, who was reported to be exactly the right thing. The young painter sent for her with many doubts. Directly he saw her he knew that he had found what he wanted for his picture. And he knew something else. He knew that he was looking at the face of which he had seen “the cheek and a bit of the nose” at Chatsworth years before!

The instinct for work is ingrain in Mr. Dicksee, and holidays—in the accepted sense

of the term—have little place in his life. He has a wide knowledge of English country scenery, and a great appreciation of and affection for it. But the idle enjoyment of natural beauty is not in his line. If you talk to him of the country, you find that there is hardly any typical form of English landscape which he does not know; and you will find also that there is hardly any place which he knows which is not associated for him with some detail, large or small, in one or other of his pictures. And if he finds

hand, but the exact moment, the exact effect of afterglow, was not so easily to be had. It is a phase of sunset beauty which lasts only a few moments. The dusk, which is already creeping over the land, creeps on over the sea and sky, and darkness falls. And darkness fell, over and over again, far too soon for the painter. The keenest interest, the most important work of the day, had to be compressed into that little space of time between sunset and darkness. Nature must be waited on, indeed, by those who would catch



From a photo by]

“THE CRISIS.”—BY FRANK DICKSEE, R.A.

[Dizon.]

(Copyright strictly reserved.)

himself in the country, with no actual necessity on hand for any particular study, he paints a landscape or a seascape, pure and simple, for sheer love of his subject and his art.

The sea and sky in the “*Evangeline*,” which followed “*Harmony*,” were studied at Lynmouth. To produce the effect which he had in mind, he needed a place where the sun set over the sea, and nowhere can such a sunset be seen to greater advantage than on the north coast of Devonshire. The Lynmouth sea and sky were ready to his

her subtlest beauties! And Mr. Dicksee waited on her day after day, or rather evening after evening, making study after study, and receiving the impressions which were to produce the desired result—a result, as everyone who knows the picture will remember, which amply justifies the patient toil bestowed upon it.

But if Nature exacted patience at Mr. Dicksee’s hands before the sea and sky of “*Evangeline*” were to be attained, she exacted active ingenuity and resource of him in another case. The scene of “*The Viking’s*

Burial" was studied at Seaton. The effect here produced is the reverse of that in the "Evangeline." The dead warrior is passing from the twilight on the land into the darkness which broods over the sea. But the difficulty in this instance lay in the point of view. To paint the picture as it presented itself to the eye of Mr. Dicksee's imagination it was necessary that the painter himself should be in the midst of the foam. Foam involves a considerable body of water, and to set up an easel in the midst of the sea is possible to no man, however enthusiastic.

either high and dry, or he and his easel were being washed away! Finally he was obliged to have recourse to a boat, held as firm as might be by two men and a rope! But even then the waves were entirely without consideration for their admirer, and the boat rolled and swayed in the most inconvenient fashion. "It was not very satisfactory," Mr. Dicksee says regretfully, if he speaks of the experience. "One could only make little studies." Painting under difficulties indeed!

His picture, "The Passing of Arthur," which was exhibited in the Royal Academy



From a photo by]

[Dizon.

Then saw they how there hove a dusky barge,  
Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern,  
Beneath them; and descending they were ware  
That all the decks were dense with stately forms,  
Black-stole'd, black-hooded, like a dream—by these,  
Three Queens with crowns of gold.—*Tennyson.*

"THE PASSING OF ARTHUR."—BY FRANK DICKSEE, R.A.

(Reproduced by the courteous permission of Mr. Arthur Lucas, the owner of the copyright.)

Mr. Dicksee's first attempt to overcome the difficulties of the position was made with the assistance of a bathing machine! But here complete failure awaited him! There is an inherent lack of poetry about a bathing machine which, even had it been all right in other respects, must have reduced inspiration to a somewhat low level! Mr. Dicksee's next notion was a plank run out over the water. But the difficulty experienced some time ago by Canute now stood in his way. The waves declined to accommodate themselves to his wishes by remaining where they were. The painter was

in 1889, was a continual source of attraction to the thousands who visited Burlington House. It was afterwards made still more accessibly popular through the beautiful mezzotint engraved by Mr. Gerald Robinson and published by Mr. Arthur Lucas. The engraver spent more than two years on the plate, which is a fine interpretation of a fine work.

If there is one interest, with reference to its favourite workers, which is always present in the public mind, and always legitimate, it is the interest in knowing how they work; by what methods and by what series of

infinite pains the admired result is built up. Everybody knows nowadays that works of art, be they of what order they may, do not spring full-blown into existence while their author idles. Everybody knows that they cost something; that a price—and sometimes a very long price—has to be paid for their production; that they exact their meed of toil and thought and effort from the artist only more relentlessly and inevitably than the worthy piece of labourer's work demands toil from the labourer. And interest in any achievement is necessarily warmer, quicker, and more intimate when we know something of the means by which it has been built up, something of the difficulties which have been conquered on the road. Mr. Dicksee's methods—as everyone will guess from what has been already said of him—are particularly interesting because they are particularly patient and painstaking.

The first stage of a picture, with him, is a sketch of it as it presents itself to his mind's eye, an imaginative sketch, subject only to his own insight. After this comes the touchstone of Nature, and the struggles with models begin; the trial and abandonment of one after another until the right one is found—she or he who falls easily into the required pose. Sometimes this he or she never is found, and then Mr. Dicksee recognises the fact that Nature does not approve of the pose in question, and it has

to be reconsidered and altered. Studies of all sorts and kinds are the next step; studies of drapery, studies of tone, studies of every conceivable detail. And all the time Nature is suggesting and revising, and all the time Mr. Dicksee is listening to her voice.

Speaking of the voice of Nature, by-the-by, reminds me of the voice of realism uplifted on one occasion by a small niece of Mr. Dicksee's. The subject was his diploma picture "Startled." It represented two young girls, disturbed while bathing, hurrying away, each carrying the filmy drapery of the ideal and picturesque type. Mr. Dicksee was explaining the picture to his little niece.

"They've been bathing, you see, in the river there, and when they hear the boat coming they are frightened, and they catch up their clothes and run away."

The small critic looked at the picture and looked at the painter.

"Where *are* the clothes?" she demanded.

Mr. Dicksee's days are working days, as has been said, but this little sketch would give a very false impression if it conveyed any idea of a recluse or a man of one idea. He is a "night bird" so far as society is concerned. But he is a night bird very well known in the world and universally popular. And his interests are only bounded by the subjects which chance to present themselves to him.

