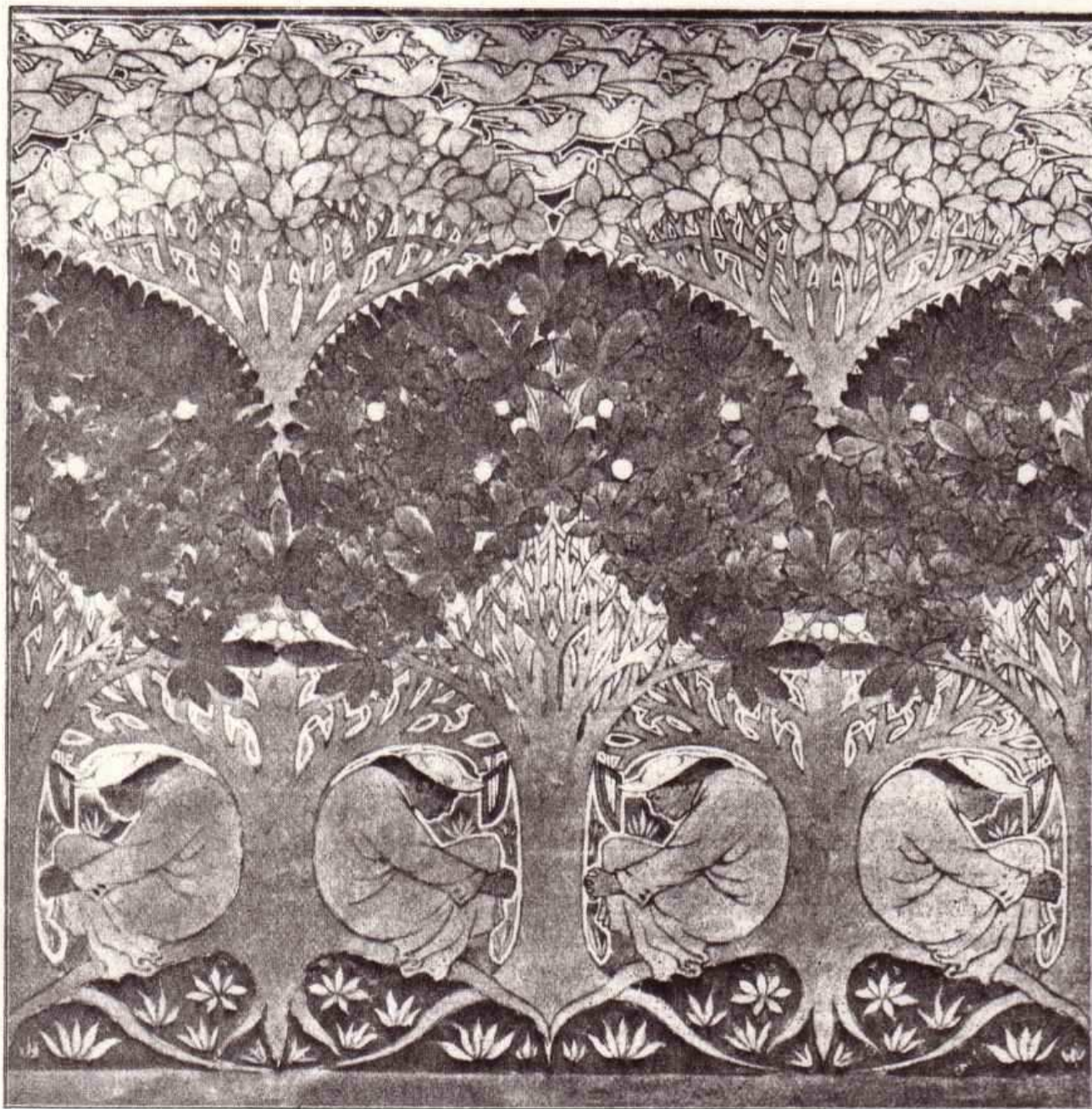


AN INTERVIEW WITH MR. CHARLES F. ANNESLEY VOYSEY, ARCHITECT AND DESIGNER.

So far as it concerns the general public, it is curious to note how the mere accident of his material determines the popular recognition of an artist. Oil paintings and pictures generally are signed, books and musical compositions are also inseparably associated with their authors; but architectural works, and the whole mass of deco-

for everything connected with it; yet even such partial recognition is so limited that it only serves to emphasise the general neglect of the individual designer. Possibly this is not an unmixed evil. At a meeting of the Japan Society lately, a young Japanese pointed out that where Japan was most artistic it was almost unconscious of the fact, and that then the work itself attracted more attention than its maker. "Here," he said, "if you want a new coinage your R.A.'s design it—it is illustrated in the papers, and generally talked about; in Japan, even to-day, when we have a new coin, we look at



DESIGN FOR A WALL-PAPER FRIEZE, IN EIGHT COLOURS. BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

rative designs, whether in carving, furniture, wall-papers, or the thousand and one applied arts, are entirely anonymous to the majority of people. True, a very important edifice is vaguely assigned to one architect, who is supposed to be responsible

it and see it is beautiful, but do not ask who made it." If therefore we need not censure the habit of judging most decorative work on its own merits, rather than as a factor in the making of its creator's fame, yet to those technically concerned

with the arts, the personality and opinions of a designer should be at least as interesting as those



"THE DEMON" WALL PAPER DESIGN
BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

of a picture painter. To-day interviewers have left little mystery connected with the professional life of our painters, and we know their appearances, their studios, their views (and their prejudices in many cases), as well as we know their works; indeed, in not a few cases it would be easy to find a person well equipped on all the anecdotal sides of modern art, who has at the same time no power of identifying an unsigned work by its own characteristic qualities.

In selecting Mr. Voysey as a typical instance of an artist whose designs are better known than is their author, it was a matter of doubt whether he would permit himself to be interviewed in popular fashion; indeed, his consent was only gained by representing to him that *THE STUDIO* was especially anxious to raise the appreciation of design, and to that end the maker of patterns must sacrifice himself for the good of his art, even as popular picture-makers have done for some time past.

The first thing notable in the old-fashioned little house that is situated in one of the pleasant bye-roads of St. John's Wood, was that it appeared exactly the right place for the abode

of a creator of beautiful patterns. Screened from the road, with its windows opening on a tree-bordered lawn, for all one saw or heard of the mighty city it might have been in the corner of a cathedral close. Within, passing directly to the studio, one saw it was obviously not merely a work place but a living place, the reticence of its decoration, its furniture bearing the unmistakable impress of the owner's hand, showing that the creed of the artist was the creed he lived. One of the most beautiful of his possessions—a rosy-faced, flax-haired lad of four, clad in a blue smock—seemed the very spirit of design in its native simplicity, and as a mere scheme of colour a thing not beaten by any of the charming patterns Mr. Voysey unspreed at my request. To be quite fair to a very patient host, it must be explained that the following interview, although mainly the artist's replies to my leading questions, includes quotations from a paper read to a meeting of art-workers.

As wall-papers represent a large bulk of Mr. Voysey's designs for commerce, it was natural to ask him for his idea of a good design for this material, which despite all attack seems still the clothing of most rooms. To this question Mr. Voysey replied, that in his opinion "a wall-paper should be always essentially a pattern, the repeat of which is



"SEA-GULLS" DESIGN. (REPEAT 14" x 10")
BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

recognised as one of its chief characteristics, rather than a pattern disguising the repeat and presenting in detail interwoven pretty bits known to the trade

as 'all-over patterns.' "In other words, you would have the limitations recognised exactly as when in stained glass an artist makes the lead lines a prominent feature, instead of trying to ignore their presence?" "Yes, I think that a wall-paper, even if more pleasing in an all-over pattern, is less disturbing when a more determined and simple expression of one or two ideas, unless of

course you are one of those unhappy mortals who never notice a design except to count its repetition. A wall-paper is of course only a background, and were your furniture good in form and colour a very simple or quite undecorated treatment of the walls would be preferable: but as most modern furniture is vulgar or bad in every way, elaborate papers of many colours help to disguise its ugliness. Although elaboration makes confusion more confounded, yet if you have but enough confusion the ugliness of modern life becomes bearable. Mr. Morris is credited with the axiom 'the smaller your room the larger the pattern you may put on your walls.' There

is no doubt that it is better to have large and bold than small and timid patterns, both in papers and printed or stencilled friezes. If you wish to reduce the effect of its scale and force, these can be modified in the colouring. Do not think that I place wall-papers first. Wooden panelling, whether polished or hand-stained, is best of all: next to that comes painted panelling, but as papers wear better than the plain wall, we must

permit them to exist on this ground. If, however, the room be a well-proportioned one and the furniture good, even if pictures are absent, the need for wall-papers is not apparent on æsthetic grounds; but in such a case the frieze may be treated with a pattern either printed or stencilled, not too engrossing, but yet sufficiently important. If stencilling be employed, I would insist on the importance of preserving

the ties which the work imposes, so that it is obviously a stencilled and not a painted pattern."

"You do not consider the ornament on a paper should be limited to strictly conventional foliage and purely ornamental motives?" "No, I do not see why the forms of birds, for instance, may not be used, provided they are reduced to mere symbols. Decorators complain of small repeats and simple patterns, because they are apt to show the joints, and because the figures may be mutilated, in turning a corner for instance. If the form be sufficiently conventionalised the mutilation is not felt; a real bird with his head cut off is an un-

pleasant sight, so is a rose that has lost half an inch of its petals; but if the bird is a crude symbol and his facsimile occurs complete within ten and a half inches' distance, although one may have lost a portion of his body, it does not violate my feelings. To go to Nature is, of course, to approach the fountain-head, but a literal transcript will not result in good ornament; before a living plant a man must go through an elaborate process of selection



"THE SEVEN SISTERS." PRINTED VELVET DESIGN (REPEAT $15\frac{1}{2} \times 16$)
BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

and analysis, and think of the balance, repetition, and many other qualities of his design, thereby calling his individual taste into play and adding a human interest to his work. If he does this, although he has gone directly to Nature, his work will not resemble any of his predecessors; he has become an inventor. The ordinary practice is to paraphrase a popular design, one that has sold well. 'We want something in this style,' the manufacturers cry: and so, instead of inventing a new pattern, the artist is called to translate one already popular, and re-adapt its essential qualities in a more or less novel fashion.

"It seems to me that to produce any satisfactory work of art, we must acquire a complete knowledge of our material, and be thorough masters of the craft to be employed in its production. Then, working always reasonably, with a sense of fitness, the result will be at least healthy, natural, and vital; even if it be ugly and in a way unpleasing, it will yet give some hope. The danger to-day lies in over-decoration; we lack simplicity and have forgotten repose, and so the relative value of beautiful things is confounded. In most modern drawing-rooms confusion is the first thing that strikes one. Nowhere is there breadth, dignity, repose, or true richness of effect, but a symbolism of money alone. Hoarding pretty things together is more often a sign of vanity and vain-glory than of good taste.

"Instead of painting boughs of apple-trees on our door panels and covering every shelf with petticoats of silk, let us begin by discarding the mass of useless ornaments and banishing the

millinery that degrades our furniture and fittings. Reduce the variety of patterns and colours in a room. Eschew all imitations, and have each thing the best of its sort, so that the decorative value of each will stand forth with increased power and charm, and concentrated richness will be more apparent with its simple neighbours.

"To produce healthy art one must have healthy surroundings; the first effort an artist should make is to sweep ugliness from him.

"The habit of being merely tenants, on short leases, of our homes has fostered the vice which crowds foolish and useless objects, bad in proportion and colour, into rooms ugly and uncomfortable in themselves. We pitch ornamentation in our rooms with no restraint. We have a language of ornament and yet nothing to say—charmed by its sound, we have let vanity feed on its own creations, and forgotten that the expression of deep and noble feelings would make decorative art once again full of life and vigour.



"BIRDS AND BERRIES." A WALL-PAPER DESIGN IN SIX COLOURS
(REPEAT $10\frac{1}{2} \times 16$). BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

"It is not necessary for artists to be bound merely to tradition and precedent, or to be crammed to overflowing with the knowledge of the products of foreign nations. They should each use their God-given faculties, and if they have thoughts worth expressing, the means to express them sufficiently are, and always will be, at hand. Not that we need shut our eyes to all human efforts, but we should go to Nature direct for inspiration and guidance. Then we are at once relieved from restrictions of style or period, and can live and work in the present with laws revealing always fresh possibilities."

An Interview with Mr. C. F. A. Voysey

Then Mr. Voysey showed me a portfolio of designs, some examples being those he has allowed

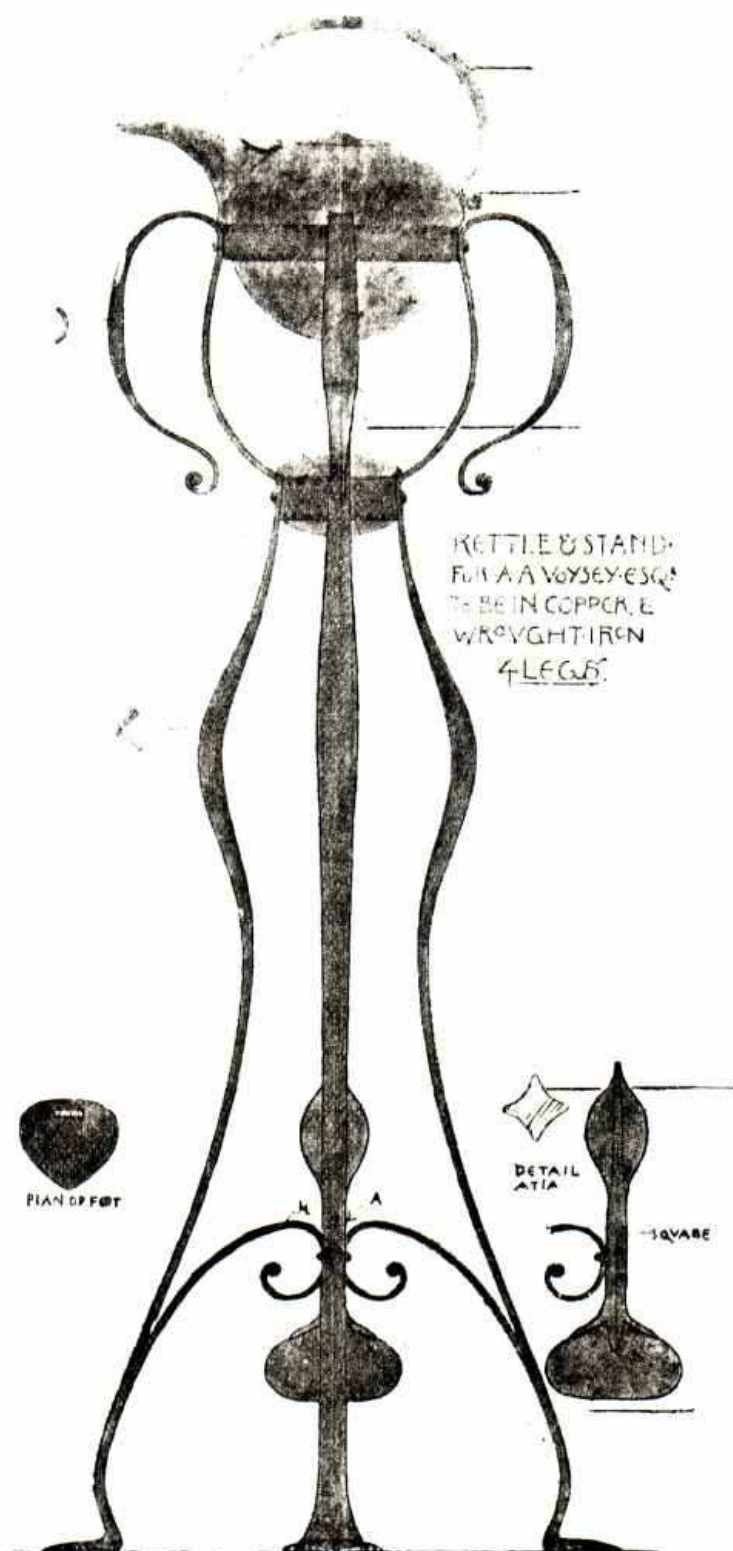


DESIGN FOR AN INLAID WORK BOX. BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

us to reproduce here. These have been chosen specially to display the artist's most individual work from his unpublished drawings; hence not merely is their copyright absolutely reserved, but no reader of *THE STUDIO* can at present hope to obtain papers or fabrics made from them. It must not be imagined that all the artist's work is built on the lines of these. The well-known "Trollius" paper made by Messrs. Essex, the "Buttercups and Daisies," and a host of good patterns to be seen in the best shops, bear witness to the variety and fertility of his invention. These, however, with the introduction of animal life and their boldly presented repeats are typical instances of his individual taste.

Some of the designs owe so much to their colour that it is necessary to convey some hint of their scheme to explain the black and white reductions. In the frieze (page 231) the bright yellow-green of the chestnut-trees is in perfect balance with the pale green of the upper row of tree-tops, the flights of sky-blue birds above, and the crouching figures in greys and blues below. The band of dark colour so noticeable in the reproduction is not felt in the gay yet soft colour of the original. In the design of "Birds and Berries" (234), the deep yellow of the birds, perched on pale green stalks among berries of salmon and creamy yellow, is balanced by the blue-green of the conventional leaf form, and the harmony kept without the least sense of "spottiness" which the black and white facsimile undoubtedly has. In the "Seven Sisters," the dull Venetian blue of the sea throws up the stems, trunks, and sails, which are an orange red, the hills being alternately brown and sage green. In "The Demon," a daring harmony in reds and yellows like a Gaillardia blossom is heightened by the cunning touches of dark green in the background, hardly noticeable without close

study. The "Sea-gulls" is much distorted, in the original the birds are a neutral grey-blue and in the same tone as the two blues of the conventional sea, their yellow-green bills being bright notes of colour. The most sumptuous, "Three Men of Gotham," recalls stained glass in its lustrous harmony: the sea is peacock green, the boats olive and sage green, the sails red and orange, the men a duller red, with the lightest touches in the yellow-green pennants, and white sea-birds like flashes of actual light in the sky between; it is not possible in words to convey the richness of the broken colour which ennobles this fine design.

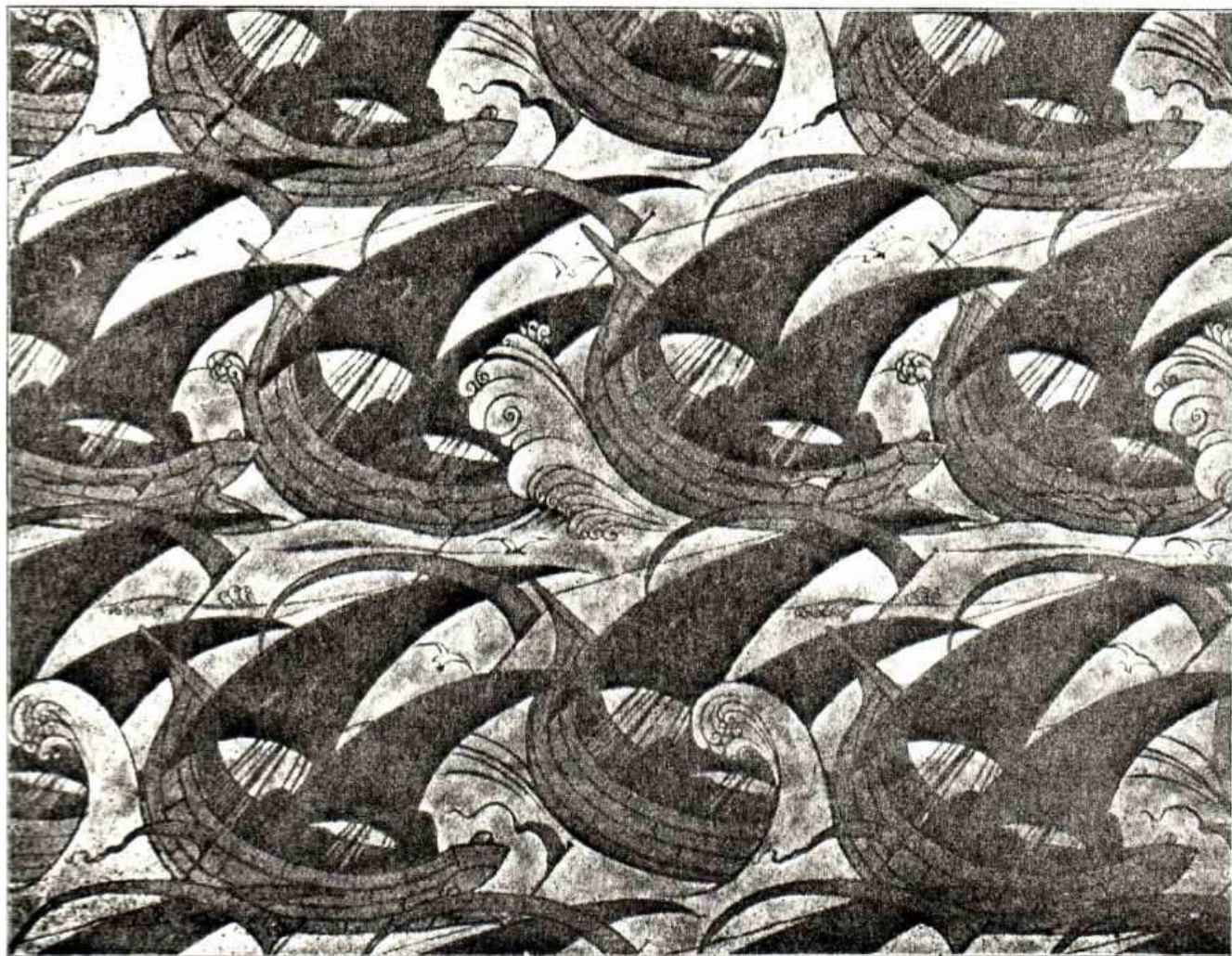


Among the most striking instances of Mr. Voysey's power to take a commonplace subject and impart to it distinct individuality, a design—not yet, I believe, executed—for a cottage piano, may be specially mentioned. In this the shafts which support the key-board rise on either side to the height of the instrument, with arrangements to hold candles, are the most prominent features, and give an architectural dignity to the otherwise commonplace piece of furniture, without in any way detracting from its utility, but, on the contrary, adding features for common every-day use. It is only just to the author of a very charmingly designed piano, made by Messrs. Bechstein, to note here that he worked out the same problem on not dissimilar lines, but the coincidence is purely fortuitous, neither artist having known the scheme of the other. This regard for utility, which is the basis of beauty, is apparent also in the design for the kettle stand in wrought metal we reproduce, which is both comely and substantial.

It is not fair to regard Mr. Voysey as a designer alone. An architect by profession, his chief occupation is still concerned with the building itself,

and a design for a cottage for an artist, no less than a mansion, wherein is the staircase reproduced on page 225, show that fertility of invention and a curiously individual quality, at once simple and noble, are as apparent in his architectural as in his graphic work.

One of the charms of the whole range of objects he has chosen is their domesticity—gorgeous enough for palaces, you would not find they rendered a twenty-pound house mean by their intrusion; on the contrary, they beautify all they come in contact with, unless placed next to vicious and vulgar ornamentation; but even then it is not Mr. Voysey's work that suffers. To be simple is the end, not the beginning, of design; complexity hides a multitude of shortcomings, simplicity shows boldly its faults no less than its virtues. The simplicity which is the highest effort is the selection of essential beauty from all possible ornament, reduced to its most direct expression. Like the poetry of the phrase "green pastures by still waters," you feel nothing can be added to the perfection of the description; and so in much of Mr. Voysey's work the flat tints and almost child-like



"THREE MEN OF GOTHAM." DESIGN FOR PRINTED VELVET IN SIX COLOURS. (REPEAT $14\frac{1}{2} \times 15$)

BY C. F. A. VOYSEY

Paintings in Birmingham Town Hall

rendering of the chosen forms are the result of the same employment of the right word, the right form, the right colour—without apparent effort—which if not high art, as people misunderstand it, is at least beauty, and a distinct effort to work as Nature herself works.



DETAIL OF STAIRCASE. (See page 225)

Before leaving, my host took me through his house, and although it would be out of place to speak of the various pieces of furniture, the clever adaptation of use to beauty, one could not but feel that here was proof of comfort and entirely domestic requirements combined with art in a way that made it remarkable. Stepping from its ordered simplicity into the streets, the first upholsterer's window pointed the moral still more plainly, and made one realise bitterly, despite the efforts of Mr. William Morris, of art-workers, writers, and lecturers, how wide a gulf still yawns between the furnishing of the house to-day as it might be, and the newly revived horrors of the Rococo, the Aspinall's superfluities, the cheap *bric-à-brac* and the costly—which are all more or less rubbish; and yet, ephemeral though they may be, usurp the majority of houses to-day.
