# GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

## APPRECIATIONS AND CRITICISMS OF THE WORKS OF CHARLES DICKENS

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# Содержание

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## INTRODUCTION

These papers were originally published as prefaces to the separate books of Dickens in one of the most extensive of those cheap libraries of the classics which are one of the real improvements of recent times. Thus they were harmless, being diluted by, or rather drowned in Dickens. My scrap of theory was a mere dry biscuit to be taken with the grand tawny port of great English comedy; and by most people it was not taken at all – like the biscuit. Nevertheless the essays were not in intention so aimless as they appear in fact. I had a general notion of what needed saying about Dickens to the new generation, though probably I did not say it. I will make another attempt to do so in this prologue, and, possibly fail again.

There was a painful moment (somewhere about the eighties) when we watched anxiously to see whether Dickens was fading from the modern world. We have watched a little longer, and

with great relief we begin to realise that it is the modern world that is fading. All that universe of ranks and respectabilities in comparison with which Dickens was called a caricaturist, all that Victorian universe in which he seemed vulgar – all that is itself breaking up like a cloudland. And only the caricatures of Dickens remain like things carved in stone. This, of course, is an old story in the case of a man reproached with any excess of the poetic. Again and again when the man of visions was pinned by the sly dog who knows the world,

> "The man recovered of the bite,
> The dog it was that died."

To call Thackeray a cynic, which means a sly dog, was indeed absurd; but it is fair to say that in comparison with Dickens he felt himself a man of the world. Nevertheless, that world of which he was a man is coming to an end before our eyes; its aristocracy has grown corrupt, its middle class insecure, and things that he never thought of are walking about the drawing-rooms of both. Thackeray has described for ever the Anglo-Indian Colonel; but what on earth would he have done with an Australian Colonel? What can it matter whether Dickens's clerks talked cockney now that half the duchesses talk American? What would Thackeray have made of an age in which a man in the position of Lord Kew may actually be the born brother of Mr. Moss of Wardour Street? Nor does this apply merely to Thackeray, but to all those

Victorians who prided themselves on the realism or sobriety of their descriptions; it applies to Anthony Trollope and, as much as any one, to George Eliot. For we have not only survived that present which Thackeray described: we have even survived that future to which George Eliot looked forward. It is no longer adequate to say that Dickens did not understand that old world of gentility, of parliamentary politeness and the balance of the constitution. That world is rapidly ceasing to understand itself. It is vain to repeat the complaint of the old Quarterly Reviewers, that Dickens had not enjoyed a university education. What would the old Quarterly Reviewers themselves have thought of the Rhodes Scholarships? It is useless to repeat the old tag that Dickens could not describe a gentleman. A gentleman in our time has become something quite indescribable.

Now the interesting fact is this: That Dickens, whom so many considered to be at the best a vulgar enthusiast, saw the coming change in our society much more soberly and scientifically than did his better educated and more pretentious contemporaries. I give but one example out of many. Thackeray was a good Victorian radical, who seems to have gone to his grave quite contented with the early Victorian radical theory – the theory which Macaulay preached with unparalleled luminosity and completeness; the theory that true progress goes on so steadily through human history, that while reaction is indefensible, revolution is unnecessary. Thackeray seems to have been quite content to think that the world would grow more and more

liberal in the limited sense; that Free Trade would get freer; that ballot boxes would grow more and more secret; that at last (as some satirist of Liberalism puts it) every man would have two votes instead of one. There is no trace in Thackeray of the slightest consciousness that progress could ever change its direction. There is in Dickens. The whole of *Hard Times* is the expression of just such a realisation. It is not true to say that Dickens was a Socialist, but it is not absurd to say so. And it would be simply absurd to say it of any of the great Individualist novelists of the Victorian time. Dickens saw far enough ahead to know that the time was coming when the people would be imploring the State to save them from mere freedom, as from some frightful foreign oppressor. He felt the society changing; and Thackeray never did.

As talking about Socialism and Individualism is one of the greatest bores ever endured among men, I will take another instance to illustrate my meaning, even though the instance be a queer and even a delicate one. Even if the reader does not agree with my deduction, I ask his attention to the fact itself, which I think a curiosity of literature. In the last important work of Dickens, that excellent book *Our Mutual Friend*, there is an odd thing about which I cannot make up my mind; I do not know whether it is unconscious observation or fiendish irony. But it is this. In *Our Mutual Friend* is an old patriarch named Aaron, who is a saintly Jew made to do the dirty work of an abominable Christian usurer. In an artistic sense I think the patriarch Aaron

as much of a humbug as the patriarch Casby. In a moral sense there is no doubt at all that Dickens introduced the Jew with a philanthropic idea of doing justice to Judaism, which he was told he had affronted by the great gargoyle of Fagin. If this was his motive, it was morally a most worthy one. But it is certainly unfortunate for the Hebrew cause that the bad Jew should be so very much more convincing than the good one. Old Aaron is not an exaggeration of Jewish virtues; he is simply not Jewish, because he is not human. There is nothing about him that in any way suggests the nobler sort of Jew, such a man as Spinoza or Mr. Zangwill. He is simply a public apology, and like most public apologies, he is very stiff and not very convincing.

So far so good. Now we come to the funny part. To describe the high visionary and mystic Jew like Spinoza or Zangwill is a great and delicate task in which even Dickens might have failed. But most of us know something of the make and manners of the low Jew, who is generally the successful one. Most of us know the Jew who calls himself De Valancourt. Now to any one who knows a low Jew by sight or hearing, the story called *Our Mutual Friend* is literally full of Jews. Like all Dickens's best characters they are vivid; we know them. And we know them to be Hebrew. Mr. Veneering, the Man from Nowhere, dark, sphinx-like, smiling, with black curling hair, and a taste in florid vulgar furniture – of what stock was he? Mr. Lammle, with "too much nose in his face, too much ginger in his whiskers, too much sparkle in his studs and manners" – of what blood was he?

Mr. Lammle's friends, coarse and thick-lipped, with fingers so covered with rings that they could hardly hold their gold pencils – do they remind us of anybody? Mr. Fledgeby, with his little ugly eyes and social flashiness and craven bodily servility – might not some fanatic like M. Drumont make interesting conjectures about him? The particular types that people hate in Jewry, the types that are the shame of all good Jews, absolutely run riot in this book, which is supposed to contain an apology to them. It looks at first sight as if Dickens's apology were one hideous sneer. It looks as if he put in one good Jew whom nobody could believe in, and then balanced him with ten bad Jews whom nobody could fail to recognise. It seems as if he had avenged himself for the doubt about Fagin by introducing five or six Fagins – triumphant Fagins, fashionable Fagins, Fagins who had changed their names. The impeccable old Aaron stands up in the middle of this ironic carnival with a peculiar solemnity and silliness. He looks like one particularly stupid Englishman pretending to be a Jew, amidst all that crowd of clever Jews who are pretending to be Englishmen.

But this notion of a sneer is not admissible. Dickens was far too frank and generous a writer to employ such an elaborate plot of silence. His satire was always intended to attack, never to entrap; moreover, he was far too vain a man not to wish the crowd to see all his jokes. Vanity is more divine than pride, because it is more democratic than pride. Third, and most important, Dickens was a good Liberal, and would have been horrified at the notion of making so venomous a vendetta against one race or creed.

Nevertheless the fact is there, as I say, if only as a curiosity of literature. I defy any man to read through *Our Mutual Friend* after hearing this suggestion, and to get out of his head the conviction that Lammle is the wrong kind of Jew. The explanation lies, I think, in this, that Dickens was so wonderfully sensitive to that change that has come over our society, that he noticed the type of the oriental and cosmopolitan financier without even knowing that it was oriental or cosmopolitan. He had, in fact, fallen a victim to a very simple fallacy affecting this problem. Somebody said, with great wit and truth, that treason cannot prosper, because when it prospers it cannot be called treason. The same argument soothed all possible Anti-Semitism in men like Dickens. Jews cannot be sneaks and snobs, because when they are sneaks and snobs they do not admit that they are Jews.

I have taken this case of the growth of the cosmopolitan financier, because it is not so stale in discussion as its parallel, the growth of Socialism. But as regards Dickens, the same criticism applies to both. Dickens knew that Socialism was coming, though he did not know its name. Similarly, Dickens knew that the South African millionaire was coming, though he did not know the millionaire's name. Nobody does. His was not a type of mind to disentangle either the abstract truths touching the Socialist, nor the highly personal truth about the millionaire. He was a man of impressions; he has never been equalled in the art of conveying what a man looks like at first sight – and he simply felt the two things as atmospheric facts. He felt that the mercantile power was

oppressive, past all bearing by Christian men; and he felt that this power was no longer wholly in the hands even of heavy English merchants like Podsnap. It was largely in the hands of a feverish and unfamiliar type, like Lammle and Veneering. The fact that he felt these things is almost more impressive because he did not understand them.

Now for this reason Dickens must definitely be considered in the light of the changes which his soul foresaw. Thackeray has become classical; but Dickens has done more: he has remained modern. The grand retrospective spirit of Thackeray is by its nature attached to places and times; he belongs to Queen Victoria as much as Addison belongs to Queen Anne, and it is not only Queen Anne who is dead. But Dickens, in a dark prophetic kind of way, belongs to the developments. He belongs to the times since his death when Hard Times grew harder, and when Veneering became not only a Member of Parliament, but a Cabinet Minister; the times when the very soul and spirit of Fledgeby carried war into Africa. Dickens can be criticised as a contemporary of Bernard Shaw or Anatole France or C. F. G. Masterman. In talking of him one need no longer talk merely of the Manchester School or Puseyism or the Charge of the Light Brigade; his name comes to the tongue when we are talking of Christian Socialists or Mr. Roosevelt or County Council Steam Boats or Guilds of Play. He can be considered under new lights, some larger and some meaner than his own; and it is a very rough effort so to consider him which is the

excuse of these pages. Of the essays in this book I desire to say as little as possible; I will discuss any other subject in preference with a readiness which reaches to avidity. But I may very curtly apply the explanation used above to the cases of two or three of them. Thus in the article on *David Copperfield* I have done far less than justice to that fine book considered in its relation to eternal literature; but I have dwelt at some length upon a particular element in it which has grown enormous in England after Dickens's death. Thus again, in introducing the *Sketches by Boz* I have felt chiefly that I am introducing them to a new generation insufficiently in sympathy with such palpable and unsophisticated fun. A Board School education, evolved since Dickens's day, has given to our people a queer and inadequate sort of refinement, one which prevents them from enjoying the raw jests of the *Sketches by Boz*, but leaves them easily open to that slight but poisonous sentimentalism which I note amid all the merits of David Copperfield. In the same way I shall speak of *Little Dorrit*, with reference to a school of pessimistic fiction which did not exist when it was written, of *Hard Times* in the light of the most modern crises of economics, and of *The Child's History of England* in the light of the most matured authority of history. In short, these criticisms are an intrinsically ephemeral comment from one generation upon work that will delight many more. Dickens was a very great man, and there are many ways of testing and stating the fact. But one permissible way is to say this, that he was an ignorant man, ill-read in the past, and often

confused about the present. Yet he remains great and true, and even essentially reliable, if we suppose him to have known not only all that went before his lifetime, but also all that was to come after.

From this vanishing of the Victorian compromise (I might say the Victorian illusion) there begins to emerge a menacing and even monstrous thing – we may begin again to behold the English people. If that strange dawn ever comes, it will be the final vindication of Dickens. It will be proved that he is hardly even a caricaturist; that he is something very like a realist. Those comic monstrosities which the critics found incredible will be found to be the immense majority of the citizens of this country. We shall find that Sweedlepipe cuts our hair and Pumblechook sells our cereals; that Sam Weller blacks our boots and Tony Weller drives our omnibus. For the exaggerated notion of the exaggerations of Dickens (as was admirably pointed out by my old friend and enemy Mr. Blatchford in a *Clarion* review) is very largely due to our mixing with only one social class, whose conventions are very strict, and to whose affectations we are accustomed. In cabmen, in cobblers, in charwomen, individuality is often pushed to the edge of insanity. But as long as the Thackerayan platform of gentility stood firm all this was, comparatively speaking, concealed. For the English, of all nations, have the most uniform upper class and the most varied democracy. In France it is the peasants who are solid to uniformity; it is the marquises who are a little mad. But in England, while good form restrains and

levels the universities and the army, the poor people are the most motley and amusing creatures in the world, full of humorous affections and prejudices and twists of irony. Frenchmen tend to be alike, because they are all soldiers; Prussians because they are all something else, probably policemen; even Americans are all something, though it is not easy to say what it is; it goes with hawk-like eyes and an irrational eagerness. Perhaps it is savages. But two English cabmen will be as grotesquely different as Mr. Weller and Mr. Wegg. Nor is it true to say that I see this variety because it is in my own people. For I do not see the same degree of variety in my own class or in the class above it; there is more superficial resemblance between two Kensington doctors or two Highland dukes. No; the democracy is really composed of Dickens characters, for the simple reason that Dickens was himself one of the democracy.

There remains one thing to be added to this attempt to exhibit Dickens in the growing and changing lights of our time. God forbid that any one (especially any Dickensian) should dilute or discourage the great efforts towards social improvement. But I wish that social reformers would more often remember that they are imposing their rules not on dots and numbers, but on Bob Sawyer and Tim Linkinwater, on Mrs. Lirriper and Dr. Marigold. I wish Mr. Sidney Webb would shut his eyes until he *sees* Sam Weller.

A great many circumstances have led to the neglect in literature of these exuberant types which do actually exist in

the ruder classes of society. Perhaps the principal cause is that since Dickens's time the study of the poor has ceased to be an art and become a sort of sham science. Dickens took the poor individually: all modern writing tends to take them collectively. It is said that the modern realist produces a photograph rather than a picture. But this is an inadequate objection. The real trouble with the realist is not that he produces a photograph, but that he produces a composite photograph. It is like all composite photographs, blurred; like all composite photographs, hideous; and like all composite photographs, unlike anything or anybody. The new sociological novels, which attempt to describe the abstract type of the working-classes, sin in practice against the first canon of literature, true when all others are subject to exception. Literature must always be a pointing out of what is interesting in life; but these books are duller than the life they represent. Even supposing that Dickens did exaggerate the degree to which one man differs from another – that was at least an exaggeration upon the side of literature; it was better than a mere attempt to reduce what is actually vivid and unmistakable to what is in comparison colourless or unnoticeable. Even the creditable and necessary efforts of our time in certain matters of social reform have discouraged the old distinctive Dickens treatment. People are so anxious to do something for the poor man that they have a sort of subconscious desire to think that there is only one kind of man to do it for. Thus while the old accounts were sometimes too steep and crazy, the new became

too sweeping and flat. People write about the problem of drink, for instance, as if it were one problem. Dickens could have told them that there is the abyss between heaven and hell between the incongruous excesses of Mr. Pickwick and the fatalistic soaking of Mr. Wickfield. He could have shown that there was nothing in common between the brandy and water of Bob Sawyer and the rum and water of Mr. Stiggins. People talk of imprudent marriages among the poor, as if it were all one question. Dickens could have told them that it is one thing to marry without much money, like Stephen Blackpool, and quite another to marry without the smallest intention of ever trying to get any, like Harold Skimpole. People talk about husbands in the working-classes being kind or brutal to their wives, as if that was the one permanent problem and no other possibility need be considered. Dickens could have told them that there was the case (the by no means uncommon case) of the husband of Mrs. Gargery as well as of the wife of Mr. Quilp. In short, Dickens saw the problem of the poor not as a dead and definite business, but as a living and very complex one. In some ways he would be called much more conservative than the modern sociologists, in some ways much more revolutionary.

# LITTLE DORRIT

In the time of the decline and death of Dickens, and even more strongly after it, there arose a school of criticism which substantially maintained that a man wrote better when he was ill. It was some such sentiment as this that made Mr. George Gissing, that able writer, come near to contending that *Little Dorrit* is Dickens's best book. It was the principle of his philosophy to maintain (I know not why) that a man was more likely to perceive the truth when in low spirits than when in high spirits.

# REPRINTED PIECES

The three articles on Sunday of which I speak are almost the last expression of an articulate sort in English literature of the ancient and existing morality of the English people. It is always asserted that Puritanism came in with the seventeenth century and thoroughly soaked and absorbed the English. We are now, it is constantly said, an incurably Puritanic people. Personally, I have my doubts about this. I shall not refuse to admit to the Puritans that they conquered and crushed the English people; but I do not think that they ever transformed it. My doubt is chiefly derived from three historical facts. First, that England was never so richly and recognisably English as in the Shakespearian age before the Puritan had appeared. Second, that ever since he did appear there has been a long unbroken line of brilliant and typical Englishmen who belonged to the Shakespearian and not the Puritanic tradition; Dryden, Johnson, Wilkes, Fox, Nelson, were hardly Puritans. And third, that the real rise of a new, cold, and illiberal morality in these matters seems to me to have occurred in the time of Queen Victoria, and not of Queen Elizabeth. All things considered, it is likely that future historians will say that the Puritans first really triumphed in the twentieth century, and that Dickens was the last cry of Merry England.

And about these additional, miscellaneous, and even inferior works of Dickens there is, moreover, another use and fascination

which all Dickensians will understand; which, after a manner, is not for the profane. All who love Dickens have a strange sense that he is really inexhaustible. It is this fantastic infinity that divides him even from the strongest and healthiest romantic artists of a later day – from Stevenson, for example. I have read *Treasure Island* twenty times; nevertheless I know it. But I do not really feel as if I knew all *Pickwick*; I have not so much read it twenty times as read in it a million times; and it almost seemed as if I always read something new. We of the true faith look at each other and understand; yes, our master was a magician. I believe the books are alive; I believe that leaves still grow in them, as leaves grow on the trees. I believe that this fairy library flourishes and increases like a fairy forest: but the world is listening to us, and we will put our hand upon our mouth.

# OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

One thing at least seems certain. Dickens may or may not have been socialist in his tendencies; one might quote on the affirmative side his satire against Mr. Podsnap, who thought Centralisation "un-English"; one might quote in reply the fact that he satirised quite as unmercifully state and municipal officials of the most modern type. But there is one condition of affairs which Dickens would certainly have detested and denounced, and that is the condition in which we actually stand to-day. At this moment it is vain to discuss whether socialism will be a selling of men's liberty for bread. The men have already sold the liberty; only they have not yet got the bread. A most incessant and exacting interference with the poor is already in operation; they are already ruled like slaves, only they are not fed like slaves. The children are forcibly provided with a school; only they are not provided with a house. Officials give the most detailed domestic directions about the fireguard; only they do not give the fireguard. Officials bring round the most stringent directions about the milk; only they do not bring round the milk. The situation is perhaps the most humorous in the whole history of oppression. We force the nigger to dig; but as a concession to him we do not give him a spade. We compel Sambo to cook; but we consult his dignity so far as to refuse him a fire.

This state of things at least cannot conceivably endure. We

must either give the workers more property and liberty, or we must feed them properly as we work them properly. If we insist on sending the menu into them, they will naturally send the bill into us. This may possibly result (it is not my purpose here to prove that it will) in the drilling of the English people into hordes of humanely herded serfs; and this again may mean the fading from our consciousness of all those elves and giants, monsters and fantastics whom we are faintly beginning to feel and remember in the land. If this be so, the work of Dickens may be considered as a great vision – a vision, as Swinburne said, between a sleep and a sleep. It can be said that between the grey past of territorial depression and the grey future of economic routine the strange clouds lifted, and we beheld the land of the living.

Lastly, Dickens is even astonishingly right about Eugene Wrayburne. So far from reproaching him with not understanding a gentleman, the critic will be astonished at the accuracy with which he has really observed the worth and the weakness of the aristocrat. He is quite right when he suggests that such a man has intelligence enough to despise the invitations which he has not the energy to refuse. He is quite right when he makes Eugene (like Mr. Balfour) constantly right in argument even when he is obviously wrong in fact. Dickens is quite right when he describes Eugene as capable of cultivating a sort of secondary and false industry about anything that is not profitable; or pursuing with passion anything that is not his business. He is quite right in

making Eugene honestly appreciative of essential goodness – in other people. He is quite right in making him really good at the graceful combination of satire and sentiment, both perfectly sincere. He is also right in indicating that the only cure for this intellectual condition is a violent blow on the head.

# DAVID COPPERFIELD

The real achievement of the earlier part of *David Copperfield* lies in a certain impression of the little Copperfield living in a land of giants. It is at once Gargantuan in its fancy and grossly vivid in its facts; like Gulliver in the land of Brobdingnag when he describes mountainous hands and faces filling the sky, bristles as big as hedges, or moles as big as molehills. To him parents and guardians are not Olympians (as in Mr. Kenneth Grahame's clever book), mysterious and dignified, dwelling upon a cloudy hill. Rather they are all the more visible for being large. They come all the closer because they are colossal. Their queer features and weaknesses stand out large in a sort of gigantic domesticity, like the hairs and freckles of a Brobdingnagian. We feel the sombre Murdstone coming upon the house like a tall storm striding through the sky. We watch every pucker of Peggotty's peasant face in its moods of flinty prejudice or whimsical hesitation. We look up and feel that Aunt Betsey in her garden gloves was really terrible – especially her garden gloves. But one cannot avoid the impression that as the boy grows larger these figures grow smaller, and are not perhaps so completely satisfactory.

# CHRISTMAS BOOKS

And there is doubtless a certain poetic unity and irony in gathering together three or four of the crudest and most cocksure of the modern theorists, with their shrill voices and metallic virtues, under the fulness and the sonorous sanity of Christian bells. But the figures satirised in *The Chimes* cross each other's path and spoil each other in some degree. The main purpose of the book was a protest against that impudent and hard-hearted utilitarianism which arranges the people only in rows of men or even in rows of figures. It is a flaming denunciation of that strange mathematical morality which was twisted often unfairly out of Bentham and Mill: a morality by which each citizen must regard himself as a fraction, and a very vulgar fraction. Though the particular form of this insolent patronage has changed, this revolt and rebuke is still of value, and may be wholesome for those who are teaching the poor to be provident. Doubtless it is a good idea to be provident, in the sense that Providence is provident, but that should mean being kind, and certainly not merely being cold.

*The Cricket on the Hearth*, though popular, I think, with many sections of the great army of Dickensians, cannot be spoken of in any such abstract or serious terms. It is a brief domestic glimpse; it is an interior. It must be remembered that Dickens was fond of interiors as such; he was like a romantic tramp who should go

from window to window looking in at the parlours. He had that solid, indescribable delight in the mere solidity and neatness of funny little humanity in its funny little houses, like doll's houses. To him every house was a box, a Christmas box, in which a dancing human doll was tied up in bricks and slates instead of string and brown paper. He went from one gleaming window to another, looking in at the lamp-lit parlours. Thus he stood for a little while looking in at this cosy if commonplace interior of the carrier and his wife; but he did not stand there very long. He was on his way to quainter towns and villages. Already the plants were sprouting upon the balcony of Miss Tox; and the great wind was rising that flung Mr. Pecksniff against his own front door.

# TALE OF TWO CITIES

It was well for him, at any rate, that the people rose in France. It was well for him, at any rate, that the guillotine was set up in the Place de la Concorde. Unconsciously, but not accidentally, Dickens was here working out the whole true comparison between swift revolutionism in Paris and slow evolutionism in London. Sidney Carton is one of those sublime ascetics whose head offends them, and who cut it off. For him at least it was better that the blood should flow in Paris than that the wine should flow any longer in London. And if I say that even now the guillotine might be the best cure for many a London lawyer, I ask you to believe that I am not merely flippant. But you will not believe it.

# BARNABY RUDGE

It may be said that there is no comparison between that explosive opening of the intellect in Paris and an antiquated madman leading a knot of provincial Protestants. The Man of the Hill, says Victor Hugo somewhere, fights for an idea; the Man of the Forest for a prejudice. Nevertheless it remains true that the enemies of the red cap long attempted to represent it as a sham decoration in the style of Sim Tappertit. Long after the revolutionists had shown more than the qualities of men, it was common among lords and lacqueys to attribute to them the stagey and piratical pretentiousness of urchins. The kings called Napoleon's pistol a toy pistol even while it was holding up their coach and mastering their money or their lives; they called his sword a stage sword even while they ran away from it. Something of the same senile inconsistency can be found in an English and American habit common until recently: that of painting the South Americans at once as ruffians wading in carnage, and also as poltroons playing at war. They blame them first for the cruelty of having a fight; and then for the weakness of having a sham fight. Such, however, since the French Revolution and before it, has been the fatuous attitude of certain Anglo-Saxons towards the whole revolutionary tradition. Sim Tappertit was a sort of answer to everything; and the young men were mocked as 'prentices long after they were masters. The rising fortune

of the South American republics to-day is symbolical and even menacing of many things; and it may be that the romance of riot will not be so much extinguished as extended; and nearer home we may have boys being boys again, and in London the cry of "clubs."

# THE UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER

*The Uncommercial Traveller* is a collection of Dickens's memories rather than of his literary purposes; but it is due to him to say that memory is often more startling in him than prophecy in anybody else. They have the character which belongs to all his vivid incidental writing: that they attach themselves always to some text which is a fact rather than an idea. He was one of those sons of Eve who are fonder of the Tree of Life than of the Tree of Knowledge – even of the knowledge of good and of evil. He was in this profoundest sense a realist. Critics have talked of an artist with his eye on the object. Dickens as an essayist always had his eye on an object before he had the faintest notion of a subject. All these works of his can best be considered as letters; they are notes of personal travel, scribbles in a diary about this or that that really happened. But Dickens was one of the few men who have the two talents that are the whole of literature – and have them both together. First, he could make a thing happen over again; and second, he could make it happen better. He can be called exaggerative; but mere exaggeration conveys nothing of his typical talent. Mere whirlwinds of words, mere melodramas of earth and heaven do not affect us as Dickens affects us, because they are exaggerations of nothing. If asked for an exaggeration of something, their inventors would be entirely dumb. They would not know how to exaggerate a broom-stick;

for the life of them they could not exaggerate a tenpenny nail. Dickens always began with the nail or the broom-stick. He always began with a fact even when he was most fanciful; and even when he drew the long bow he was careful to hit the white.

This riotous realism of Dickens has its disadvantage – a disadvantage that comes out more clearly in these casual sketches than in his constructed romances. One grave defect in his greatness is that he was altogether too indifferent to theories. On large matters he went right by the very largeness of his mind; but in small matters he suffered from the lack of any logical test and ready reckoner. Hence his comment upon the details of civilisation or reform are sometimes apt to be jerky and jarring, and even grossly inconsistent. So long as a thing was heroic enough to admire, Dickens admired it; whenever it was absurd enough to laugh at he laughed at it: so far he was on sure ground. But about all the small human projects that lie between the extremes of the sublime and the ridiculous, his criticism was apt to have an accidental quality. As Matthew Arnold said of the remarks of the Young Man from the Country about the perambulator, they are felt not to be at the heart of the situation. On a great many occasions the Uncommercial Traveller seems, like other hasty travellers, to be criticising elements and institutions which he has quite inadequately understood; and once or twice the Uncommercial Traveller might almost as well be a Commercial Traveller for all he knows of the countryside.

An instance of what I mean may be found in the amusing

article about the nightmares of the nursery. Superficially read it might almost be taken to mean that Dickens disapproved of ghost stories – disapproved of that old and genial horror which nurses can hardly supply fast enough for the children who want it. Dickens, one would have thought, should have been the last man in the world to object to horrible stories, having himself written some of the most horrible that exist in the world. The author of the Madman's Manuscript, of the disease of Monk and the death of Krook, cannot be considered fastidious in the matter of revolting realism or of revolting mysticism. If artistic horror is to be kept from the young, it is at least as necessary to keep little boys from reading *Pickwick* or *Bleak House* as to refrain from telling them the story of Captain Murderer or the terrible tale of Chips. If there was something appalling in the rhyme of Chips and pips and ships, it was nothing compared to that infernal refrain of "Mudstains, bloodstains" which Dickens himself, in one of his highest moments of hellish art, put into *Oliver Twist*.

I take this one instance of the excellent article called "Nurse's Stories" because it is quite typical of all the rest. Dickens (accused of superficiality by those who cannot grasp that there is foam upon deep seas) was really deep about human beings; that is, he was original and creative about them. But about ideas he did tend to be a little superficial. He judged them by whether they hit him, and not by what they were trying to hit. Thus in this book the great wizard of the Christmas ghosts seems almost the enemy of

ghost stories; thus the almost melodramatic moralist who created Ralph Nickleby and Jonas Chuzzlewit cannot see the point in original sin; thus the great denouncer of official oppression in England may be found far too indulgent to the basest aspects of the modern police. His theories were less important than his creations, because he was a man of genius. But he himself thought his theories the more important, because he was a man.

# SKETCHES BY BOZ

The greatest mystery about almost any great writer is why he was ever allowed to write at all. The first efforts of eminent men are always imitations; and very often they are bad imitations. The only question is whether the publisher had (as his name would seem to imply) some subconscious connection or sympathy with the public, and thus felt instinctively the presence of something that might ultimately tell; or whether the choice was merely a matter of chance and one Dickens was chosen and another Dickens left. The fact is almost unquestionable: most authors made their reputation by bad books and afterwards supported it by good ones. This is in some degree true even in the case of Dickens. The public continued to call him "Boz" long after the public had forgotten the *Sketches by Boz*. Numberless writers of the time speak of "Boz" as having written *Martin Chuzzlewit* and "Boz" as having written *David Copperfield*. Yet if they had gone back to the original book signed "Boz" they might even have felt that it was vulgar and flippant. This is indeed the chief tragedy of publishers: that they may easily refuse at the same moment the wrong manuscript and the right man. It is easy to see of Dickens now that he was the right man; but a man might have been very well excused if he had not realised that the *Sketches* was the right book. Dickens, I say, is a case for this primary query: whether there was in the first work any clear

sign of his higher creative spirit. But Dickens is much less a case for this query than almost all the other great men of his period. The very earliest works of Thackeray are much more unimpressive than those of Dickens. Nay, they are much more vulgar than those of Dickens. And worst of all, they are much more numerous than those of Dickens. Thackeray came much nearer to being the ordinary literary failure than Dickens ever came. Read some of the earliest criticisms of Mr. Yellowplush or Michael Angelo Titmarsh and you will realise that at the very beginning there was more potential clumsiness and silliness in Thackeray than there ever was in Dickens. Nevertheless there was some potential clumsiness and silliness in Dickens; and what there is of it appears here and there in the admirable *Sketches by Boz*.

Perhaps we may put the matter this way: this is the only one of Dickens's works of which it is ordinarily necessary to know the date. To a close and delicate comprehension it is indeed very important that *Nicholas Nickleby* was written at the beginning of Dickens's life, and *Our Mutual Friend* towards the end of it. Nevertheless anybody could understand or enjoy these books, whenever they were written. If *Our Mutual Friend* was written in the Latin of the Dark Ages we should still want it translated. If we thought that *Nicholas Nickleby* would not be written until thirty years hence we should all wait for it eagerly. The general impression produced by Dickens's work is the same as that produced by miraculous visions; it is the destruction of time.

Thomas Aquinas said that there was no time in the sight of God; however this may be, there was no time in the sight of Dickens. As a general rule Dickens can be read in any order; not only in any order of books, but even in any order of chapters. In an average Dickens book every part is so amusing and alive that you can read the parts backwards; you can read the quarrel first and then the cause of the quarrel; you can fall in love with a woman in the tenth chapter and then turn back to the first chapter to find out who she is. This is not chaos; it is eternity. It means merely that Dickens instinctively felt all his figures to be immortal souls who existed whether he wrote of them or not, and whether the reader read of them or not. There is a peculiar quality as of celestial pre-existence about the Dickens characters. Not only did they exist before we heard of them, they existed also before Dickens heard of them. As a rule this unchangeable air in Dickens deprives any discussion about date of its point. But as I have said, this is the one Dickens work of which the date *is* essential. It is really an important part of the criticism of this book to say that it is his first book. Certain elements of clumsiness, of obviousness, of evident blunder, actually require the chronological explanation. It is biographically important that this is his first book, almost exactly in the same way that it is biographically important that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was his last book. Change or no change, *Edwin Drood* has this plain point of a last story about it: that it is not finished. But if the last book is unfinished, the first book is more unfinished still.

The *Sketches* divide themselves, of course, into two broad classes. One half consists of sketches that are truly and in the strict sense sketches. That is, they are things that have no story and in their outline none of the character of creation; they are merely facts from the street or the tavern or the town hall, noted down as they occurred by an intelligence of quite exceptional vivacity. The second class consists of purely creative things: farces, romances, stories in any case with a non-natural perfection, or a poetical justice, to round them off. One class is admirably represented, for instance, by the sketch describing the Charity Dinner, the other by such a story as that of *Horatio Sparkins*. These things were almost certainly written by Dickens at very various periods of his youth; and early as the harvest is, no doubt it is a harvest and had ripened during a reasonably long time. Nevertheless it is with these two types of narrative that the young Charles Dickens first enters English literature; he enters it with a number of journalistic notes of such things as he has seen happen in streets or offices, and with a number of short stories which err on the side of the extravagant and even the superficial. Journalism had not then, indeed, sunk to the low level which it has since reached. His sketches of dirty London would not have been dirty enough for the modern Imperialist press. Still these first efforts of his are journalism, and sometimes vulgar journalism. It was as a journalist that he attacked the world, as a journalist that he conquered it.

The biographical circumstances will not, of course, be

forgotten. The life of Dickens had been a curious one. Brought up in a family just poor enough to be painfully conscious of its prosperity and its respectability, he had been suddenly flung by a financial calamity into a social condition far below his own. For men on that exact edge of the educated class such a transition is really tragic. A duke may become a navvy for a joke, but a clerk cannot become a navvy for a joke. Dickens's parents went to a debtors' prison; Dickens himself went to a far more unpleasant place. The debtors' prison had about it at least that element of amiable compromise and kindly decay which belonged (and belongs still) to all the official institutions of England. But Dickens was doomed to see the very blackest aspect of nineteenth-century England, something far blacker than any mere bad government. He went not to a prison but to a factory. In the musty traditionalism of the Marshalsea old John Dickens could easily remain optimistic. In the ferocious efficiency of the modern factory young Charles Dickens narrowly escaped being a pessimist. He did escape this danger; finally he even escaped the factory itself. His next step in life was, if possible, even more eccentric. He was sent to school; he was sent off like an innocent little boy in Eton collars to learn the rudiments of Latin grammar, without any reference to the fact that he had already taken his part in the horrible competition and actuality of the age of manufactures. It was like giving a sacked bank manager a satchel and sending him to a dame's school. Nor was the third stage of this career unconnected with the oddity of the others.

On leaving the school he was made a clerk in a lawyer's office, as if henceforward this child of ridiculous changes was to settle down into a silent assistant for a quiet solicitor. It was exactly at this moment that his fundamental rebellion began to seethe; it seethed more against the quiet finality of his legal occupation than it had seethed against the squalor and slavery of his days of poverty. There must have been in his mind, I think, a dim feeling: "Did all my dark crises mean only this; was I crucified only that I might become a solicitor's clerk?" Whatever be the truth about this conjecture there can be no question about the facts themselves. It was about this time that he began to burst and bubble over, to insist upon his own intellect, to claim a career. It was about this time that he put together a loose pile of papers, satires on institutions, pictures of private persons, fairy tales of the vulgarity of his world, odds and ends such as come out of the facility and the fierce vanity of youth. It was about this time at any rate that he decided to publish them, and gave them the name of *Sketches by Boz*.

They must, I think, be read in the light of this youthful explosion. In some psychological sense he had really been wronged. But he had only become conscious of his wrongs as his wrongs had been gradually righted. Similarly, it has often been found that a man who can patiently endure penal servitude through a judicial blunder will nevertheless, when once his cause is well asserted, quarrel about the amount of compensation or complain of small slights in his professional existence. These are

the marks of the first literary action of Dickens. It has in it all the peculiar hardness of youth; a hardness which in those who have in any way been unfairly treated reaches even to impudence. It is a terrible thing for any man to find out that his elders are wrong. And this almost unkindly courage of youth must partly be held responsible for the smartness of Dickens, that almost offensive smartness which in these earlier books of his sometimes irritates us like the showy gibes in the tall talk of a school-boy. These first pages bear witness both to the energy of his genius and also to its unenlightenment; he seems more ignorant and more cocksure than so great a man should be. Dickens was never stupid, but he was sometimes silly; and he is occasionally silly here.

All this must be said to prepare the more fastidious modern for these papers, if he has never read them before. But when all this has been said there remains in them exactly what always remains in Dickens when you have taken away everything that can be taken away by the most fastidious modern who ever dissected his grandmother. There remains that *primum mobile* of which all the mystics have spoken: energy, the power to create. I will not call it "the will to live," for that is a priggish phrase of German professors. Even German professors, I suppose, have the will to live. But Dickens had exactly what German professors have not: he had the power to live. And indeed it is most valuable to have these early specimens of the Dickens work if only because they are specimens of his spirit apart from his matured intelligence. It is well to be able to realise that contact with the Dickens world

is almost like a physical contact; it is like stepping suddenly into the hot smells of a greenhouse, or into the bleak smell of the sea. We know that we are there. Let any one read, for instance, one of the foolish but amusing farces in Dickens's first volume. Let him read, for instance, such a story as that of *Horatio Sparkins* or that of *The Tuggses at Ramsgate*. He will not find very much of that verbal felicity or fantastic irony that Dickens afterwards developed; the incidents are upon the plain lines of the stock comedy of the day: sharpers who entrap simpletons, spinsters who angle for husbands, youths who try to look Byronic and only look foolish. Yet there is something in these stories which there is not in the ordinary stock comedies of that day: an indefinable flavour of emphasis and richness, a hint as of infinity of fun. Doubtless, for instance, a million comic writers of that epoch had made game of the dark, romantic young man who pretended to abysses of philosophy and despair. And it is not easy to say exactly why we feel that the few metaphysical remarks of Mr. Horatio Sparkins are in some way really much funnier than any of those old stock jokes. It is in a certain quality of deep enjoyment in the writer as well as the reader; as if the few words written had been dipped in dark nonsense and were, as it were, reeking with derision. "Because if Effect be the result of Cause and Cause be the Precursor of Effect," said Mr. Horatio Sparkins, "I apprehend that you are wrong." Nobody can get at the real secret of sentences like that; sentences which were afterwards strewed with reckless liberality over the conversation of Dick Swiveller

or Mr. Mantalini, Sim Tappertit or Mr. Pecksniff. Though the joke seems most superficial one has only to read it a certain number of times to see that it is most subtle. The joke does not lie in Mr. Sparkins merely using long words, any more than the joke lies merely in Mr. Swiveller drinking, or in Mr. Mantalini deceiving his wife. It is something in the arrangement of the words; something in a last inspired turn of absurdity given to a sentence. In spite of everything Horatio Sparkins is funny. We cannot tell why he is funny. When we know why he is funny we shall know why Dickens is great.

Standing as we do here upon the threshold, as it were, of the work of Dickens, it may be well perhaps to state this truth as being, after all, the most important one. This first work had, as I have said, the faults of first work and the special faults that arose from its author's accidental history; he was deprived of education, and therefore it was in some ways uneducated; he was confronted with the folly and failure of his natural superiors and guardians, and therefore it was in some ways pert and insolent. Nevertheless the main fact about the work is worth stating here for any reader who should follow the chronological order and read the *Sketches by Boz* before embarking on the stormy and splendid sea of *Pickwick*. For the sea of *Pickwick*, though splendid, does make some people seasick. The great point to be emphasised at such an initiation is this: that people, especially refined people, are not to judge of Dickens by what they would call the coarseness or commonplaceness of his subject. It is quite

true that his jokes are often on the same *subjects* as the jokes in a halfpenny comic paper. Only they happen to be good jokes. He does make jokes about drunkenness, jokes about mothers-in-law, jokes about henpecked husbands, jokes (which is much more really unpardonable) about spinsters, jokes about physical cowardice, jokes about fatness, jokes about sitting down on one's hat. He does make fun of all these things; and the reason is not very far to seek. He makes fun of all these things because all these things, or nearly all of them, are really very funny. But a large number of those who might otherwise read and enjoy Dickens are undoubtedly "put off" (as the phrase goes) by the fact that he seems to be echoing a poor kind of claptrap in his choice of incidents and images. Partly, of course, he suffers from the very fact of his success; his play with these topics was so good that every one else has played with them increasingly since; he may indeed have copied the old jokes, but he certainly renewed them. For instance, "Ally Sloper" was certainly copied from Wilkins Micawber. To this day you may see (in the front page of that fine periodical) the bald head and the high shirt collar that betray the high original from which "Ally Sloper" is derived. But exactly because "Sloper" was stolen from Micawber, for that very reason the new generation feels as if Micawber were stolen from "Sloper." Many modern readers feel as if Dickens were copying the comic papers, whereas in truth the comic papers are still copying Dickens.

Dickens showed himself to be an original man by always

accepting old and established topics. There is no clearer sign of the absence of originality among modern poets than their disposition to find new themes. Really original poets write poems about the spring. They are always fresh, just as the spring is always fresh. Men wholly without originality write poems about torture, or new religions, of some perversion of obscenity, hoping that the mere sting of the subject may speak for them. But we do not sufficiently realise that what is true of the classic ode is also true of the classic joke. A true poet writes about the spring being beautiful because (after a thousand springs) the spring really is beautiful. In the same way the true humourist writes about a man sitting down on his hat, because the act of sitting down on one's hat (however often and however admirably performed) really is extremely funny. We must not dismiss a new poet because his poem is called *To a Skylark*; nor must we dismiss a humourist because his new farce is called *My Mother-in-law*. He may really have splendid and inspiring things to say upon an eternal problem. The whole question is whether he has.

Now this is exactly where Dickens, and the possible mistake about Dickens, both come in. Numbers of sensitive ladies, numbers of simple æsthetes, have had a vague shrinking from that element in Dickens which begins vaguely in *The Tuggses at Ramsgate* and culminates in *Pickwick*. They have a vague shrinking from the mere subject matter; from the mere fact that so much of the fun is about drinking or fighting, or falling down, or eloping with old ladies. It is to these that the first appeal must

be made upon the threshold of Dickens criticism. Let them really read the thing and really see whether the humour is the gross and half-witted jeering which they imagine it to be. It is exactly here that the whole genius of Dickens is concerned. His subjects are indeed stock subjects; like the skylark of Shelley, or the autumn of Keats. But all the more because they are stock subjects the reader realises what a magician is at work. The notion of a clumsy fellow who falls off his horse is indeed a stock and stale subject. But Mr. Winkle is not a stock and stale subject. Nor is his horse a stock and stale subject; it is as immortal as the horses of Achilles. The notion of a fat old gentleman proud of his legs might easily be vulgar. But Mr. Pickwick proud of his legs is not vulgar; somehow we feel that they were legs to be proud of. And it is exactly this that we must look for in these *Sketches*. We must not leap to any cheap fancy that they are low farces. Rather we must see that they are not low farces; and see that nobody but Dickens could have prevented them from being so.

# PICKWICK PAPERS

There are those who deny with enthusiasm the existence of a God and are happy in a hobby which they call the Mistakes of Moses. I have not studied their labours in detail, but it seems that the chief mistake of Moses was that he neglected to write the Pentateuch. The lesser errors, apparently, were not made by Moses, but by another person equally unknown. These controversialists cover the very widest field, and their attacks upon Scripture are varied to the point of wildness. They range from the proposition that the unexpurgated Bible is almost as unfit for an American girls' school as is an unexpurgated Shakespeare; they descend to the proposition that kissing the Book is almost as hygienically dangerous as kissing the babies of the poor. A superficial critic might well imagine that there was not one single sentence left of the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures which this school had not marked with some ingenious and uneducated comment. But there is one passage at least upon which they have never pounced, at least to my knowledge; and in pointing it out to them I feel that I am, or ought to be, providing material for quite a multitude of Hyde Park orations. I mean that singular arrangement in the mystical account of the Creation by which light is created first and all the luminous bodies afterwards. One could not imagine a process more open to the elephantine logic of the Bible-smasher than this: that the sun

should be created after the sunlight. The conception that lies at the back of the phrase is indeed profoundly antagonistic to much of the modern point of view. To many modern people it would sound like saying that foliage existed before the first leaf; it would sound like saying that childhood existed before a baby was born. The idea is, as I have said, alien to most modern thought, and like many other ideas which are alien to most modern thought, it is a very subtle and a very sound idea. Whatever be the meaning of the passage in the actual primeval poem, there is a very real metaphysical meaning in the idea that light existed before the sun and stars. It is not barbaric; it is rather Platonic. The idea existed before any of the machinery which made manifest the idea. Justice existed when there was no need of judges, and mercy existed before any man was oppressed.

However this may be in the matter of religion and philosophy, it can be said with little exaggeration that this truth is the very key of literature. The whole difference between construction and creation is exactly this: that a thing constructed can only be loved after it is constructed; but a thing created is loved before it exists, as the mother can love the unborn child. In creative art the essence of a book exists before the book or before even the details or main features of the book; the author enjoys it and lives in it with a kind of prophetic rapture. He wishes to write a comic story before he has thought of a single comic incident. He desires to write a sad story before he has thought of anything sad. He knows the atmosphere before he knows anything. There is a low

priggish maxim sometimes uttered by men so frivolous as to take humour seriously – a maxim that a man should not laugh at his own jokes. But the great artist not only laughs at his own jokes; he laughs at his own jokes before he has made them. In the case of a man really humorous we can see humour in his eye before he has thought of any amusing words at all. So the creative writer laughs at his comedy before he creates it, and he has tears for his tragedy before he knows what it is. When the symbols and the fulfilling facts do come to him, they come generally in a manner very fragmentary and inverted, mostly in irrational glimpses of crisis or consummation. The last page comes before the first; before his romance has begun, he knows that it has ended well. He sees the wedding before the wooing; he sees the death before the duel. But most of all he sees the colour and character of the whole story prior to any possible events in it. This is the real argument for art and style, only that the artists and the stylists have not the sense to use it. In one very real sense style is far more important than either character or narrative. For a man knows what style of book he wants to write when he knows nothing else about it.

*Pickwick* is in Dickens's career the mere mass of light before the creation of sun or moon. It is the splendid, shapeless substance of which all his stars were ultimately made. You might split up *Pickwick* into innumerable novels as you could split up that primeval light into innumerable solar systems. The *Pickwick Papers* constitute first and foremost a kind of wild promise, a

pre-natal vision of all the children of Dickens. He had not yet settled down into the plain, professional habit of picking out a plot and characters, of attending to one thing at a time, of writing a separate, sensible novel and sending it off to his publishers. He is still in the youthful whirl of the kind of world that he would like to create. He has not yet really settled what story he will write, but only what sort of story he will write. He tries to tell ten stories at once; he pours into the pot all the chaotic fancies and crude experiences of his boyhood; he sticks in irrelevant short stories shamelessly, as into a scrap-book; he adopts designs and abandons them, begins episodes and leaves them unfinished; but from the first page to the last there is a nameless and elemental ecstasy – that of the man who is doing the kind of thing that he can do. Dickens, like every other honest and effective writer, came at last to some degree of care and self-restraint. He learned how to make his *dramatis personæ* assist his drama; he learned how to write stories which were full of rambling and perversity, but which were stories. But before he wrote a single real story, he had a kind of vision. It was a vision of the Dickens world – a maze of white roads, a map full of fantastic towns, thundering coaches, clamorous market-places, uproarious inns, strange and swaggering figures. That vision was *Pickwick*.

It must be remembered that this is true even in connection with the man's contemporaneous biography. Apart from anything else about it, *Pickwick* was his first great chance. It was a big commission given in some sense to an untried man, that he

might show what he could do. It was in a strict sense a sample. And just as a sample of leather can be only a piece of leather, or a sample of coal a lump of coal, so this book may most properly be regarded as simply a lump of Dickens. He was anxious to show all that was in him. He was more concerned to prove that he could write well than to prove that he could write this particular book well. And he did prove this, at any rate. No one ever sent such a sample as the sample of Dickens. His roll of leather blocked up the street; his lump of coal set the Thames on fire.

The book originated in the suggestion of a publisher; as many more good books have done than the arrogance of the man of letters is commonly inclined to admit. Very much is said in our time about Apollo and Admetus, and the impossibility of asking genius to work within prescribed limits or assist an alien design. But after all, as a matter of fact, some of the greatest geniuses have done it, from Shakespeare botching up bad comedies and dramatising bad novels down to Dickens writing a masterpiece as the mere framework for a Mr. Seymour's sketches. Nor is the true explanation irrelevant to the spirit and power of Dickens. Very delicate, slender, and *bizarre* talents are indeed incapable of being used for an outside purpose, whether of public good or of private gain. But about very great and rich talent there goes a certain disdainful generosity which can turn its hand to anything. Minor poets cannot write to order; but very great poets can write to order. The larger the man's mind, the wider his scope of vision, the more likely it will be that anything suggested to

him will seem significant and promising; the more he has a grasp of everything the more ready he will be to write anything. It is very hard (if that is the question) to throw a brick at a man and ask him to write an epic; but the more he is a great man the more able he will be to write about the brick. It is very unjust (if that is all) to point to a hoarding of Colman's mustard and demand a flood of philosophical eloquence; but the greater the man is the more likely he will be to give it to you. So it was proved, not for the first time, in this great experiment of the early employment of Dickens. Messrs. Chapman and Hall came to him with a scheme for a string of sporting stories to serve as the context, and one might almost say the excuse, for a string of sketches by Seymour, the sporting artist. Dickens made some modifications in the plan, but he adopted its main feature; and its main feature was Mr. Winkle. To think of what Mr. Winkle might have been in the hands of a dull *farceur*, and then to think of what he is, is to experience the feeling that Dickens made a man out of rags and refuse. Dickens was to work splendidly and successfully in many fields, and to send forth many brilliant books and brave figures. He was destined to have the applause of continents like a statesman, and to dictate to his publishers like a despot; but perhaps he never worked again so supremely well as here, where he worked in chains. It may well be questioned whether his one hack book is not his masterpiece.

Of course it is true that as he went on his independence increased, and he kicked quite free of the influences that had

suggested his story. So Shakespeare declared his independence of the original chronicle of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, eliminating altogether (with some wisdom) another uncle called Wiglerus. At the start the Nimrod Club of Chapman and Hall may have even had equal chances with the Pickwick Club of young Mr. Dickens; but the Pickwick Club became something much better than any publisher had dared to dream of. Some of the old links were indeed severed by accident or extraneous trouble; Seymour, for whose sake the whole had perhaps been planned, blew his brains out before he had drawn ten pictures. But such things were trifles compared to *Pickwick* itself. It mattered little now whether Seymour blew his brains out, so long as Charles Dickens blew his brains in. The work became systematically and progressively more powerful and masterly. Many critics have commented on the somewhat discordant and inartistic change between the earlier part of *Pickwick* and the later; they have pointed out, not without good sense, that the character of Mr. Pickwick changes from that of a silly buffoon to that of a solid merchant. But the case, if these critics had noticed it, is much stronger in the minor characters of the great company. Mr. Winkle, who has been an idiot (even, perhaps, as Mr. Pickwick says, "an impostor"), suddenly becomes a romantic and even reckless lover, scaling a forbidden wall and planning a bold elopement. Mr. Snodgrass, who has behaved in a ridiculous manner in all serious positions, suddenly finds himself in a ridiculous position – that of a gentleman surprised in a secret

love affair – and behaves in a manner perfectly manly, serious, and honourable. Mr. Tupman alone has no serious emotional development, and for this reason it is, presumably, that we hear less and less of Mr. Tupman towards the end of the book. Dickens has by this time got into a thoroughly serious mood – a mood expressed indeed by extravagant incidents, but none the less serious for that; and into this Winkle and Snodgrass, in the character of romantic lovers, could be made to fit. Mr. Tupman had to be left out of the love affairs; therefore Mr. Tupman is left out of the book.

Much of the change was due to the entrance of the greatest character in the story. It may seem strange at the first glance to say that Sam Weller helped to make the story serious. Nevertheless, this is strictly true. The introduction of Sam Weller had, to begin with, some merely accidental and superficial effects. When Samuel Weller had appeared, Samuel Pickwick was no longer the chief farcical character. Weller became the joker and Pickwick in some sense the butt of his jokes. Thus it was obvious that the more simple, solemn, and really respectable this butt could be made the better. Mr. Pickwick had been the figure capering before the footlights. But with the advent of Sam, Mr. Pickwick had become a sort of black background and had to behave as such. But this explanation, though true as far as it goes, is a mean and unsatisfactory one, leaving the great elements unexplained. For a much deeper and more righteous reason Sam Weller introduces the more serious tone of Pickwick.

He introduces it because he introduces something which it was the chief business of Dickens to preach throughout his life – something which he never preached so well as when he preached it unconsciously. Sam Weller introduces the English people.

Sam Weller is the great symbol in English literature of the populace peculiar to England. His incessant stream of sane nonsense is a wonderful achievement of Dickens: but it is no great falsification of the incessant stream of sane nonsense as it really exists among the English poor. The English poor live in an atmosphere of humour; they think in humour. Irony is the very air that they breathe. A joke comes suddenly from time to time into the head of a politician or a gentleman, and then as a rule he makes the most of it; but when a serious word comes into the mind of a coster it is almost as startling as a joke. The word "chaff" was, I suppose, originally applied to badinage to express its barren and unsustaining character; but to the English poor chaff is as sustaining as grain. The phrase that leaps to their lips is the ironical phrase. I remember once being driven in a hansom cab down a street that turned out to be a *cul de sac*, and brought us bang up against a wall. The driver and I simultaneously said something. But I said: "This'll never do!" and he said: "This is all right!" Even in the act of pulling back his horse's nose from a brick wall, that confirmed satirist thought in terms of his highly-trained and traditional satire; while I, belonging to a duller and simpler class, expressed my feelings in words as innocent and literal as those of a rustic or a child.

This eternal output of divine derision has never been so truly typified as by the character of Sam; he is a grotesque fountain which gushes the living waters for ever. Dickens is accused of exaggeration and he is often guilty of exaggeration; but here he does not exaggerate: he merely symbolises and sublimates like any other great artist. Sam Weller does not exaggerate the wit of the London street arab one atom more than Colonel Newcome, let us say, exaggerates the stateliness of an ordinary soldier and gentleman, or than Mr. Collins exaggerates the fatuity of a certain kind of country clergyman. And this breath from the boisterous brotherhood of the poor lent a special seriousness and smell of reality to the whole story. The unconscious follies of Winkle and Tupman are blown away like leaves before the solid and conscious folly of Sam Weller. Moreover, the relations between Pickwick and his servant Sam are in some ways new and valuable in literature. Many comic writers had described the clever rascal and his ridiculous dupe; but here, in a fresh and very human atmosphere, we have a clever servant who was not a rascal and a dupe who was not ridiculous. Sam Weller stands in some ways for a cheerful knowledge of the world; Mr. Pickwick stands for a still more cheerful ignorance of the world. And Dickens responded to a profound human sentiment (the sentiment that has made saints and the sanctity of children) when he made the gentler and less-travelled type – the type which moderates and controls. Knowledge and innocence are both excellent things, and they are both very funny. But it is right that knowledge should be

the servant and innocence the master.

The sincerity of this study of Sam Weller has produced one particular effect in the book which I wonder that critics of Dickens have never noticed or discussed. Because it has no Dickens "pathos," certain parts of it are truly pathetic. Dickens, realising rightly that the whole tone of the book was fun, felt that he ought to keep out of it any great experiments in sadness and keep within limits those that he put in. He used this restraint in order not to spoil the humour; but (if he had known himself better) he might well have used it in order not to spoil the pathos. This is the one book in which Dickens was, as it were, forced to trample down his tender feelings; and for that very reason it is the one book where all the tenderness there is is quite unquestionably true. An admirable example of what I mean may be found in the scene in which Sam Weller goes down to see his bereaved father after the death of his step-mother. The most loyal admirer of Dickens can hardly prevent himself from giving a slight shudder when he thinks of what Dickens might have made of that scene in some of his more expansive and maudlin moments. For all I know old Mrs. Weller might have asked what the wild waves were saying; and for all I know old Mr. Weller might have told her. As it is, Dickens, being forced to keep the tale taut and humorous, gives a picture of humble respect and decency which is manly, dignified, and really sad. There is no attempt made by these simple and honest men, the father and son, to pretend that the dead woman was anything greatly other than she was; their

respect is for death, and for the human weakness and mystery which it must finally cover. Old Tony Weller does not tell his shrewish wife that she is already a white-winged angel; he speaks to her with an admirable good nature and good sense:

> "'Susan,' I says, 'you've been a wery good vife to me altogether: keep a good heart, my dear, and you'll live to see me punch that 'ere Stiggins's 'ead yet.' She smiled at this, Samivel … but she died arter all."

That is perhaps the first and the last time that Dickens ever touched the extreme dignity of pathos. He is restraining his compassion, and afterwards he let it go. Now laughter is a thing that can be let go; laughter has in it a quality of liberty. But sorrow has in it by its very nature a quality of confinement; pathos by its very nature fights with itself. Humour is expansive; it bursts outwards; the fact is attested by the common expression, "holding one's sides." But sorrow is not expansive; and it was afterwards the mistake of Dickens that he tried to make it expansive. It is the one great weakness of Dickens as a great writer, that he did try to make that sudden sadness, that abrupt pity, which we call pathos, a thing quite obvious, infectious, public, as if it were journalism or the measles. It is pleasant to think that in this supreme masterpiece, done in the dawn of his career, there is not even this faint fleck upon the sun of his just splendour. Pickwick will always be remembered as the great example of everything that made Dickens great; of the solemn conviviality of great friendships, of the erratic adventures of old English roads,

of the hospitality of old English inns, of the great fundamental kindliness and honour of old English manners. First of all, however, it will always be remembered for its laughter, or, if you will, for its folly. A good joke is the one ultimate and sacred thing which cannot be criticised. Our relations with a good joke are direct and even divine relations. We speak of "seeing" a joke just as we speak of "seeing" a ghost or a vision. If we have seen it, it is futile to argue with us; and we have seen the vision of *Pickwick*. *Pickwick* may be the top of Dickens's humour; I think upon the whole it is. But the broad humour of *Pickwick* he broadened over many wonderful kingdoms; the narrow pathos of *Pickwick* he never found again.

# NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

Romance is perhaps the highest point of human expression, except indeed religion, to which it is closely allied. Romance resembles religion especially in this, that it is not only a simplification but a shortening of existence. Both romance and religion see everything as it were foreshortened; they see everything in an abrupt and fantastic perspective, coming to an apex. It is the whole essence of perspective that it comes to a point. Similarly, religion comes to a point – to the point. Thus religion is always insisting on the shortness of human life. But it does not insist on the shortness of human life as the pessimists insist on it. Pessimism insists on the shortness of human life in order to show that life is valueless. Religion insists on the shortness of human life in order to show that life is frightfully valuable – is almost horribly valuable. Pessimism says that life is so short that it gives nobody a chance; religion says that life is so short that it gives everybody his final chance. In the first case the word brevity means futility; in the second case, opportunity. But the case is even stronger than this. Religion shortens everything. Religion shortens even eternity. Where science, submitting to the false standard of time, sees evolution, which is slow, religion sees creation, which is sudden. Philosophically speaking, the process is neither slow nor quick since we have nothing to compare it with. Religion prefers to think of it as quick. For religion

the flowers shoot up suddenly like rockets. For religion the mountains are lifted up suddenly like waves. Those who quote that fine passage which says that in God's sight a thousand years are as yesterday that is passed as a watch in the night, do not realise the full force of the meaning. To God a thousand years are not only a watch but an exciting watch. For God time goes at a gallop, as it does to a man reading a good tale.

All this is, in a humble manner, true for romance. Romance is a shortening and sharpening of the human difficulty. Where you and I have to vote against a man, or write (rather feebly) against a man, or sign illegible petitions against a man, romance does for him what we should really like to see done. It knocks him down; it shortens the slow process of historical justice. All romances consist of three characters. Other characters may be introduced; but those other characters are certainly mere scenery as far as the romance is concerned. They are bushes that wave rather excitedly; they are posts that stand up with a certain pride; they are correctly painted rocks that frown very correctly; but they are all landscape – they are all a background. In every pure romance there are three living and moving characters. For the sake of argument they may be called St. George and the Dragon and the Princess. In every romance there must be the twin elements of loving and fighting. In every romance there must be the three characters: there must be the Princess, who is a thing to be loved; there must be the Dragon, who is a thing to be fought; and there must be St. George, who is a thing that both loves and fights.

There have been many symptoms of cynicism and decay in our modern civilisation. But of all the signs of modern feebleness, of lack of grasp on morals as they actually must be, there has been none quite so silly or so dangerous as this: that the philosophers of to-day have started to divide loving from fighting and to put them into opposite camps. There could be no worse sign than that a man, even Nietzsche, can be found to say that we should go in for fighting instead of loving. There can be no worse sign than that a man, even Tolstoi, can be found to tell us that we should go in for loving instead of fighting. The two things imply each other; they implied each other in the old romance and in the old religion, which were the two permanent things of humanity. You cannot love a thing without wanting to fight for it. You cannot fight without something to fight for. To love a thing without wishing to fight for it is not love at all; it is lust. It may be an airy, philosophical, and disinterested lust; it may be, so to speak, a virgin lust; but it is lust, because it is wholly self-indulgent and invites no attack. On the other hand, fighting for a thing without loving it is not even fighting; it can only be called a kind of horse-play that is occasionally fatal. Wherever human nature is human and unspoilt by any special sophistry, there exists this natural kinship between war and wooing, and that natural kinship is called romance. It comes upon a man especially in the great hour of youth; and every man who has ever been young at all has felt, if only for a moment, this ultimate and poetic paradox. He knows that loving the world is the same thing as fighting

the world. It was at the very moment when he offered to like everybody he also offered to hit everybody. To almost every man that can be called a man this especial moment of the romantic culmination has come. In the first resort the man wished to live a romance. In the second resort, in the last and worst resort, he was content to write one.

Now there is a certain moment when this element enters independently into the life of Dickens. There is a particular time when we can see him suddenly realise that he wants to write a romance and nothing else. In reading his letters, in appreciating his character, this point emerges clearly enough. He was full of the afterglow of his marriage; he was still young and psychologically ignorant; above all, he was now, really for the first time, sure that he was going to be at least some kind of success. There is, I repeat, a certain point at which one feels that Dickens will either begin to write romances or go off on something different altogether. This crucial point in his life is marked by *Nicholas Nickleby*.

It must be remembered that before this issue of *Nicholas Nickleby* his work, successful as it was, had not been such as to dedicate him seriously or irrevocably to the writing of novels. He had already written three books; and at least two of them are classed among the novels under his name. But if we look at the actual origin and formation of these books we see that they came from another source and were really designed upon another plan. The three books were, of course, the *Sketches by Boz*, *the*

*Pickwick Papers*, and *Oliver Twist*. It is, I suppose, sufficiently well understood that the *Sketches by Boz* are, as their name implies, only sketches. But surely it is quite equally clear that the *Pickwick Papers* are, as their name implies, merely papers. Nor is the case at all different in spirit and essence when we come to *Oliver Twist*. There is indeed a sort of romance in *Oliver Twist*, but it is such an uncommonly bad one that it can hardly be regarded as greatly interrupting the previous process; and if the reader chooses to pay very little attention to it, he cannot pay less attention to it than the author did. But in fact the case lies far deeper. *Oliver Twist* is so much apart from the ordinary track of Dickens, it is so gloomy, it is so much all in one atmosphere, that it can best be considered as an exception or a solitary excursus in his work. Perhaps it can best be considered as the extension of one of his old sketches, of some sketch that happened to be about a visit to a workhouse or a gaol. In the *Sketches by Boz* he might well have visited a workhouse where he saw Bumble; in the *Sketches by Boz* he might well have visited a prison where he saw Fagin. We are still in the realm of sketches and sketchiness. *The Pickwick Papers* may be called an extension of one of his bright sketches. *Oliver Twist* may be called an extension of one of his gloomy ones.

Had he continued along this line all his books might very well have been note-books. It would be very easy to split up all his subsequent books into scraps and episodes, such as those which make up the *Sketches by Boz*. It would be easy enough

for Dickens, instead of publishing *Nicholas Nickleby*, to have published a book of sketches, one of which was called "A Yorkshire School," another called "A Provincial Theatre," and another called "Sir Mulberry Hawk or High Life Revealed," another called "Mrs. Nickleby or a Lady's Monologue." It would have been very easy to have thrown over the rather chaotic plan of the *Old Curiosity Shop*. He might have merely written short stories called "The Glorious Apollos," "Mrs. Quilp's Tea-Party," "Mrs. Jarley's Waxwork," "The Little Servant," and "The Death of a Dwarf." *Martin Chuzzlewit* might have been twenty stories instead of one story. *Dombey and Son* might have been twenty stories instead of one story. We might have lost all Dickens's novels; we might have lost altogether Dickens the novelist. We might have lost that steady love of a seminal and growing romance which grew on him steadily as the years advanced, and which gave us towards the end some of his greatest triumphs. All his books might have been *Sketches by Boz*. But he did turn away from this, and the turning-point is *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Everything has a supreme moment and is crucial; that is where our friends the evolutionists go wrong. I suppose that there is an instant of midsummer as there is an instant of midnight. If in the same way there is a supreme point of spring, *Nicholas Nickleby* is the supreme point of Dickens's spring. I do not mean that it is the best book that he wrote in his youth. *Pickwick* is a better book. I do not mean that it contains more striking characters than any of the other books in his youth. The *Old Curiosity Shop* contains

at least two more striking characters. But I mean that this book coincided with his resolution to be a great novelist and his final belief that he could be one. Henceforward his books are novels, very commonly bad novels. Previously they have not really been novels at all. There are many indications of the change I mean. Here is one, for instance, which is more or less final. *Nicholas Nickleby* is Dickens's first romantic novel because it is his first novel with a proper and dignified romantic hero; which means, of course, a somewhat chivalrous young donkey. The hero of *Pickwick* is an old man. The hero of *Oliver Twist* is a child. Even after *Nicholas Nickleby* this non-romantic custom continued. The *Old Curiosity Shop* has no hero in particular. The hero of *Barnaby Rudge* is a lunatic. But Nicholas Nickleby is a proper, formal, and ceremonial hero. He has no psychology; he has not even any particular character; but he is made deliberately a hero – young, poor, brave, unimpeachable, and ultimately triumphant. He is, in short, the hero. Mr. Vincent Crummles had a colossal intellect; and I always have a fancy that under all his pomposity he saw things more keenly than he allowed others to see. The moment he saw Nicholas Nickleby, almost in rags and limping along the high road, he engaged him (you will remember) as first walking gentleman. He was right. Nobody could possibly be more of a first walking gentleman than Nicholas Nickleby was. He was the first walking gentleman before he went on to the boards of Mr. Vincent Crummles's theatre, and he remained the first walking gentleman after he had come off.

Now this romantic method involves a certain element of climax which to us appears crudity. Nicholas Nickleby, for instance, wanders through the world; he takes a situation as assistant to a Yorkshire schoolmaster; he sees an act of tyranny of which he strongly disapproves; he cries out "Stop!" in a voice that makes the rafters ring; he thrashes the schoolmaster within an inch of his life; he throws the schoolmaster away like an old cigar, and he goes away. The modern intellect is positively prostrated and flattened by this rapid and romantic way of righting wrongs. If a modern philanthropist came to Dotheboys Hall I fear he would not employ the simple, sacred, and truly Christian solution of beating Mr. Squeers with a stick. I fancy he would petition the Government to appoint a Royal Commission to inquire into Mr. Squeers. I think he would every now and then write letters to newspapers reminding people that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, there was a Royal Commission to inquire into Mr. Squeers. I agree that he might even go the length of calling a crowded meeting in St. James's Hall on the subject of the best policy with regard to Mr. Squeers. At this meeting some very heated and daring speakers might even go the length of alluding sternly to Mr. Squeers. Occasionally even hoarse voices from the back of the hall might ask (in vain) what was going to be done with Mr. Squeers. The Royal Commission would report about three years afterwards and would say that many things had happened which were certainly most regrettable; that Mr. Squeers was the victim of a bad system; that Mrs. Squeers was

also the victim of a bad system; but that the man who sold Squeers his cane had really acted with great indiscretion and ought to be spoken to kindly. Something like this would be what, after four years, the Royal Commission would have said; but it would not matter in the least what the Royal Commission had said, for by that time the philanthropists would be off on a new tack and the world would have forgotten all about Dotheboys Hall and everything connected with it. By that time the philanthropists would be petitioning Parliament for another Royal Commission; perhaps a Royal Commission to inquire into whether Mr. Mantalini was extravagant with his wife's money; perhaps a commission to inquire into whether Mr. Vincent Crummles kept the Infant Phenomenon short by means of gin.

If we wish to understand the spirit and the period of *Nicholas Nickleby* we must endeavour to comprehend and to appreciate the old more decisive remedies, or, if we prefer to put it so, the old more desperate remedies. Our fathers had a plain sort of pity; if you will, a gross and coarse pity. They had their own sort of sentimentalism. They were quite willing to weep over Smike. But it certainly never occurred to them to weep over Squeers. Even those who opposed the French war opposed it exactly in the same way as their enemies opposed the French soldiers. They fought with fighting. Charles Fox was full of horror at the bitterness and the useless bloodshed; but if any one had insulted him over the matter, he would have gone out and shot him in a duel as coolly as any of his contemporaries. All their interference was heroic

interference. All their legislation was heroic legislation. All their remedies were heroic remedies. No doubt they were often narrow and often visionary. No doubt they often looked at a political formula when they should have looked at an elemental fact. No doubt they were pedantic in some of their principles and clumsy in some of their solutions. No doubt, in short, they were all very wrong; and no doubt we are the people, and wisdom shall die with us. But when they saw something which in their eyes, such as they were, really violated their morality, such as it was, then they did not cry "Investigate!" They did not cry "Educate!" They did not cry "Improve!" They did not cry "Evolve!" Like Nicholas Nickleby they cried "Stop!" And it did stop.

This is the first mark of the purely romantic method: the swiftness and simplicity with which St. George kills the dragon. The second mark of it is exhibited here as one of the weaknesses of *Nicholas Nickleby*. I mean the tendency in the purely romantic story to regard the heroine merely as something to be won; to regard the princess solely as something to be saved from the dragon. The father of Madeline Bray is really a very respectable dragon. His selfishness is suggested with much more psychological tact and truth than that of any other of the villains that Dickens described about this time. But his daughter is merely the young woman with whom Nicholas is in love. We do not care a rap about Madeline Bray. Personally I should have preferred Cecilia Bobster. Here is one real point where the Victorian romance falls below the Elizabethan romantic drama.

Shakespeare always made his heroines heroic as well as his heroes.

In Dickens's actual literary career it is this romantic quality in *Nicholas Nickleby* that is most important. It is his first definite attempt to write a young and chivalrous novel. In this sense the comic characters and the comic scenes are secondary; and indeed the comic characters and the comic scenes, admirable as they are, could never be considered as in themselves superior to such characters and such scenes in many of the other books. But in themselves how unforgettable they are. Mr. Crummles and the whole of his theatrical business is an admirable case of that first and most splendid quality in Dickens – I mean the art of making something which in life we call pompous and dull, becoming in literature pompous and delightful. I have remarked before that nearly every one of the amusing characters of Dickens is in reality a great fool. But I might go further. Almost every one of his amusing characters is in reality a great bore. The very people that we fly to in Dickens are the very people that we fly from in life. And there is more in Crummles than the mere entertainment of his solemnity and his tedium. The enormous seriousness with which he takes his art is always an exact touch in regard to the unsuccessful artist. If an artist is successful, everything then depends upon a dilemma of his moral character. If he is a mean artist success will make him a society man. If he is a magnanimous artist, success will make him an ordinary man. But only as long as he is unsuccessful will he be

an unfathomable and serious artist, like Mr. Crummles. Dickens was always particularly good at expressing thus the treasures that belong to those who do not succeed in this world. There are vast prospects and splendid songs in the point of view of the typically unsuccessful man; if all the used-up actors and spoilt journalists and broken clerks could give a chorus, it would be a wonderful chorus in praise of the world. But these unsuccessful men commonly cannot even speak. Dickens is the voice of them, and a very ringing voice; because he was perhaps the only one of these unsuccessful men that was ever successful.

# OLIVER TWIST

In considering Dickens, as we almost always must consider him, as a man of rich originality, we may possibly miss the forces from which he drew even his original energy. It is not well for man to be alone. We, in the modern world, are ready enough to admit that when it is applied to some problem of monasticism or of an ecstatic life. But we will not admit that our modern artistic claim to absolute originality is really a claim to absolute unsociability; a claim to absolute loneliness. The anarchist is at least as solitary as the ascetic. And the men of very vivid vigour in literature, the men such as Dickens, have generally displayed a large sociability towards the society of letters, always expressed in the happy pursuit of pre-existent themes, sometimes expressed, as in the case of Molière or Sterne, in downright plagiarism. For even theft is a confession of our dependence on society. In Dickens, however, this element of the original foundations on which he worked is quite especially difficult to determine. This is partly due to the fact that for the present reading public he is practically the only one of his long line that is read at all. He sums up Smollett and Goldsmith, but he also destroys them. This one giant, being closest to us, cuts off from our view even the giants that begat him. But much more is this difficulty due to the fact that Dickens mixed up with the old material, materials so subtly modern, so made of the French

Revolution, that the whole is transformed. If we want the best example of this, the best example is *Oliver Twist*.

Relatively to the other works of Dickens *Oliver Twist* is not of great value, but it is of great importance. Some parts of it are so crude and of so clumsy a melodrama, that one is almost tempted to say that Dickens would have been greater without it. But even if he had been greater without it he would still have been incomplete without it. With the exception of some gorgeous passages, both of humour and horror, the interest of the book lies not so much in its revelation of Dickens's literary genius as in its revelation of those moral, personal, and political instincts which were the make-up of his character and the permanent support of that literary genius. It is by far the most depressing of all his books; it is in some ways the most irritating; yet its ugliness gives the last touch of honesty to all that spontaneous and splendid output. Without this one discordant note all his merriment might have seemed like levity.

Dickens had just appeared upon the stage and set the whole world laughing with his first great story *Pickwick*. *Oliver Twist* was his encore. It was the second opportunity given to him by those who had rolled about with laughter over Tupman and Jingle, Weller and Dowler. Under such circumstances a stagey reciter will sometimes take care to give a pathetic piece after his humorous one; and with all his many moral merits, there was much that was stagey about Dickens. But this explanation alone is altogether inadequate and unworthy. There was in Dickens

this other kind of energy, horrible, uncanny, barbaric, capable in another age of coarseness, greedy for the emblems of established ugliness, the coffin, the gibbet, the bones, the bloody knife. Dickens liked these things and he was all the more of a man for liking them; especially he was all the more of a boy. We can all recall with pleasure the fact that Miss Petowker (afterwards Mrs. Lillyvick) was in the habit of reciting a poem called "The Blood Drinker's Burial." I cannot express my regret that the words of this poem are not given; for Dickens would have been quite as capable of writing "The Blood Drinker's Burial" as Miss Petowker was of reciting it. This strain existed in Dickens alongside of his happy laughter; both were allied to the same robust romance. Here as elsewhere Dickens is close to all the permanent human things. He is close to religion, which has never allowed the thousand devils on its churches to stop the dancing of its bells. He is allied to the people, to the real poor, who love nothing so much as to take a cheerful glass and to talk about funerals. The extremes of his gloom and gaiety are the mark of religion and democracy; they mark him off from the moderate happiness of philosophers, and from that stoicism which is the virtue and the creed of aristocrats. There is nothing odd in the fact that the same man who conceived the humane hospitalities of Pickwick should also have imagined the inhuman laughter of Fagin's den. They are both genuine and they are both exaggerated. And the whole human tradition has tied up together in a strange knot these strands of festivity and fear. It is over the

cups of Christmas Eve that men have always competed in telling ghost stories.

This first element was present in Dickens, and it is very powerfully present in *Oliver Twist*. It had not been present with sufficient consistency or continuity in *Pickwick* to make it remain on the reader's memory at all, for the tale of "Gabriel Grubb" is grotesque rather than horrible, and the two gloomy stories of the "Madman" and the "Queer Client" are so utterly irrelevant to the tale, that even if the reader remember them he probably does not remember that they occur in *Pickwick*. Critics have complained of Shakespeare and others for putting comic episodes into a tragedy. It required a man with the courage and coarseness of Dickens actually to put tragic episodes into a farce. But they are not caught up into the story at all. In *Oliver Twist*, however, the thing broke out with an almost brutal inspiration, and those who had fallen in love with Dickens for his generous buffoonery may very likely have been startled at receiving such very different fare at the next helping. When you have bought a man's book because you like his writing about Mr. Wardle's punch-bowl and Mr. Winkle's skates, it may very well be surprising to open it and read about the sickening thuds that beat out the life of Nancy, or that mysterious villain whose face was blasted with disease.

As a nightmare, the work is really admirable. Characters which are not very clearly conceived as regards their own psychology are yet, at certain moments, managed so as to shake to its foundations our own psychology. Bill Sikes is not exactly

a real man, but for all that he is a real murderer. Nancy is not really impressive as a living woman; but (as the phrase goes) she makes a lovely corpse. Something quite childish and eternal in us, something which is shocked with the mere simplicity of death, quivers when we read of those repeated blows or see Sikes cursing the tell-tale cur who will follow his bloody foot-prints. And this strange, sublime, vulgar melodrama, which is melodrama and yet is painfully real, reaches its hideous height in that fine scene of the death of Sikes, the besieged house, the boy screaming within, the crowd screaming without, the murderer turned almost a maniac and dragging his victim uselessly up and down the room, the escape over the roof, the rope swiftly running taut, and death sudden, startling and symbolic; a man hanged. There is in this and similar scenes something of the quality of Hogarth and many other English moralists of the early eighteenth century. It is not easy to define this Hogarthian quality in words, beyond saying that it is a sort of alphabetical realism, like the cruel candour of children. But it has about it these two special principles which separate it from all that we call realism in our time. First, that with us a moral story means a story about moral people; with them a moral story meant more often a story about immoral people. Second, that with us realism is always associated with some subtle view of morals; with them realism was always associated with some simple view of morals. The end of Bill Sikes exactly in the way that the law would have killed him – this is a Hogarthian incident; it carries on that tradition of startling

and shocking platitude.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.