CHARLES DICKENS – PART 2

BY: G. K. CHESTERTON

CATEGORY: BIOGRAPHY AND MEMOIRS -- BIOGRAPHY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER VII

DICKENS AND CHRISTMAS

In the July of 1844 Dickens went on an Italian tour, which he afterwards summarised in the book called "Pictures from Italy." They are, of course, very vivacious, but there is no great need to insist on them considered as Italian sketches; there is no need whatever to worry about them as a phase of the mind of Dickens when he travelled out of England. He never travelled out of England. There is no trace in all these amusing pages that he really felt the great foreign things which lie in wait for us in the south of Europe, the Latin civilisation, the Catholic Church, the art of the centre, the endless end of Rome. His travels are not travels in Italy, but travels in Dickensland. He sees amusing things; he describes them amusingly. But he would have seen things just as good in a street in Pimlico, and described them just as well. Few things were racier, even in his raciest novel, than his description of the marionette play of the death of Napoleon. Nothing could be more perfect than the figure of the doctor, which had something wrong with its wires, and hence "hovered about the couch and delivered medical opinions in the air." Nothing could be better as a catching of the spirit of all popular drama than the colossal

depravity of the wooden image of "Sir Uudson Low." But there is nothing Italian about it. Dickens would have made just as good fun, indeed just the same fun, of a Punch and Judy show performing in Long Acre or Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Dickens uttered just and sincere satire on Plornish and Podsnap; but Dickens was as English as any Podsnap or any Plornish. He had a hearty humanitarianism, and a hearty sense of justice to all nations so far as he understood it. But that very kind of humanitarianism, that very kind of justice, were English. He was the Englishman of the type that made Free Trade, the most English of all things, since it was at once calculating and optimistic. He respected catacombs and gondolas, but that very respect was English. He wondered at brigands and volcanoes, but that very wonder was English. The very conception that Italy consists of these things was an English conception. The root things he never understood, the Roman legend, the ancient life of the Mediterranean, the world-old civilisation of the vine and olive, the mystery of the immutable Church. He never understood these things, and I am glad he never understood them: he could only have understood them by ceasing to be the inspired cockney that he was, the rousing English Radical of the great Radical age in England. That spirit of his was one of the things that we have had which were truly national. All other forces we have borrowed, especially those which flatter us most. Imperialism is foreign, socialism is foreign, militarism is foreign, education is foreign, strictly even Liberalism is foreign. But Radicalism was our own; as English as the hedgerows.

Dickens abroad, then, was for all serious purposes simply the Englishman abroad; the Englishman man abroad is for all serious purposes simply the Englishman at home. Of this generalisation one modification must be made. Dickens did feel a direct pleasure in the bright and busy exterior of the French life, the clean caps, the coloured uniforms, the skies like blue enamel, the little green trees, the little white houses, the scene picked out in primary colours, like a child's picture -- book. This he felt, and this he put (by a stroke of genius) into the mouth of Mrs. Lirriper, a London landlady on a holiday: for Dickens always knew that it is the simple and not the subtle who feel differences; and he saw all his colours through the clear eyes of the poor. And in thus taking to his heart the streets, as it were, rather than the spires of the Continent, he showed beyond question that combination of which we have spoken -- of common sense with common sensibility. For it is for the sake of the streets and shops and the coats and hats, that we should go abroad; they are far better worth going to see than the castles and cathedrals and Roman camps. For the wonders of the world are the same all over the world, at least all over the European world. Castles that throw valleys in shadow, minsters that strike the sky, roads so old that they seem to have been made by the gods, these are in all Christian countries. The marvels of man are at all our doors. A labourer hoeing turnips in Sussex has no need to be ignorant that the bones of Europe are the Roman roads. A clerk living in Lambeth has no need not to know that there was a Christian art exuberant in the thirteenth century; for only across the river he can see the live stones of the Middle Ages surging together towards the stars. But exactly the things that do strike the traveller as extraordinary are the ordinary things, the food, the clothes, the vehicles; the strange things are cosmopolitan, the common things are national and peculiar. Cologne spire is lifted on the same arches as Canterbury; but the thing you cannot see out of Germany is a German

beer-garden. There is no need for a Frenchman to go to look at Westminster Abbey as a piece of English architecture; it is not in the special sense a piece of English architecture. But a hansom cab is a piece of English architecture; a thing produced by the peculiar poetry of our cities, a symbol of a certain reckless comfort which is really English; a thing to draw a pilgrimage of the nations. The imaginative Englishman will be found all day in a *café*; the imaginative Frenchman in a hansom cab.

This sort of pleasure Dickens took in the Latin life; but no deeper kind. And the strongest of all possible indications of his fundamental detachment from it can be found in one fact. A great part of the time that he was in Italy he was engaged in writing "The Chimes," and such Christmas tales, tales of Christmas in the English towns, tales full of fog and snow and hail and happiness.

Dickens could find in any street divergences between man and man deeper than the divisions of nations. His fault was to exaggerate differences. He could find types almost as distinct as separate tribes of animals in his own brain and his own city, those two homes of a magnificent chaos. The only two southerners introduced prominently into his novels, the two in "Little Dorrit," are popular English foreigners, I had almost said stage foreigners. Villainy is, in English eyes, a southern trait, therefore one of the foreigners is villainous. Vivacity is, in English eyes, another southern trait, therefore the other foreigner is vivacious. But we can see from the outlines of both that Dickens did not have to go to Italy to get them. While poor panting millionaires, poor tired earls and poor God-forsaken American men of culture are plodding about Italy for literary inspiration, Charles Dickens made up the whole of that Italian romance (as I strongly suspect) from the faces of two London organ-grinders.

In the sunlight of the southern world, he was still dreaming of the firelight of the north. Among the palaces and the white campanili, he shut his eyes to see Marylebone and dreamed a lovely dream of chimney-pots. He was not happy, he said, without streets. The very foulness and smoke of London were lovable in his eyes and fill his Christmas tales with a vivid vapour. In the clear skies of the south he saw afar off the fog of London like a sunset cloud and longed to be in the core of it.

This Christmas tone of Dickens, in connection with his travels, is a matter that can only be expressed by a parallel with one of his other works. Much the same that has here been said of his "Pictures from Italy," may be said about his" Child's History of England;" with the difference that while the "Pictures from Italy" do in a sense add to his fame, the "History of England" in almost every sense detracts from it. But the nature of the limitation is the same. What Dickens was travelling in distant lands, that he was travelling in distant ages; a sturdy, sentimental English Radical with a large heart and a narrow mind. He could not help falling into that besetting sin or weakness of the modern progressive, the habit of regarding the contemporary questions as the eternal questions and the latest word as the last. He could not get out of his head the instinctive conception that the real problem before St. Dunstan was whether he should support Lord John Russell or Sir Robert Peel. He could not help seeing the remotest peaks lit up by the raging bonfire of his own passionate political crisis. He lived for the instant and its

urgency; that is, he did what St. Dunstan did. He lived in an eternal present like all simple men. It is indeed "A Child's History of England;" but the child is the writer and not the reader.

But Dickens in his cheapest cockney utilitarianism was not only English, but unconsciously historic. Upon him descended the real tradition of "Merry England," and not upon the pallid mediævalists who thought they were reviving it. The Pre-Raphaelites, the Gothicists, the admirers of the Middle Ages, had in their subtlety and sadness the spirit of the present day. Dickens had in his buffoonery and bravery the spirit of the Middle Ages. He was much more mediæval in his attacks on mediævalism than they were in their defences of it. It was he who had the things of Chaucer, the love of large jokes and long stories and brown ale and all the white roads of England. Like Chaucer he loved story within story, every man telling a tale. Like Chaucer he saw something openly comic in men's motley trades. Sam Weller would have been a great gain to the Canterbury Pilgrimage and told an admirable story. Rosetti's Damozel would have been a great bore, regarded as too fast by the Prioress and too priggish by the Wife of Bath. It is said that in the somewhat sickly Victorian revival of feudalism which was called "Young England," a nobleman hired a hermit to live in his grounds. It is also said that the hermit struck for more beer. Whether this anecdote be true or not, it is always told as showing a collapse from the ideal of the Middle Ages to the level of the present day. But in the mere act of striking for beer the holy man was very much more "medieval" than the fool who employed him.

It would be hard to find a better example of this than Dickens's great defence of Christmas. In fighting for Christmas he was fighting for the old European festival. Pagan and Christian, for that trinity of eating, drinking and praying which to moderns appears irreverent, for the holy day which is really a holiday. He had himself the most babyish ideas about the past. He supposed the Middle Ages to have consisted of tournaments and torture-chambers, he supposed himself to be a brisk man of the manufacturing age, almost a Utilitarian. But for all that he defended the mediæval feast which was going out against the Utilitarianism which was coming in. He could only see all that was bad in mediævalism. But he fought for all that was good in it. And he was all the more really in sympathy with the old strength and simplicity because he only knew that it was good and did not know that it was old. He cared as little for mediævalism as the mediævals did. He cared as much as they did for lustiness and virile laughter and sad tales of good lovers and pleasant tales of good livers. He would have been very much bored by Ruskin and Walter Pater if they had explained to him the strange sunset tints of Lippi and Botticelli. He had no pleasure in looking on the dying Middle Ages. But he looked on the living Middle Ages, on a piece of the old uproarious superstition still unbroken; and he hailed it like a new religion. The Dickens character ate pudding to an extent at which the modern mediævalists turned pale. They would do every kind of honour to an old observance, except observing it. They would pay to a Church feast every sort of compliment except feasting.

And (as I have said) as were his unconscious relations to our European past, so were his unconscious relations to England. He imagined himself to be, if anything, a sort of

cosmopolitan; at any rate to be a champion of the charms and merits of continental lands against the arrogance of our island. But he was in truth very much more a champion of the old and genuine England against that comparatively cosmopolitan England which we have all lived to see. And here again the supreme example is Christmas. Christmas is, as I have said, one of numberless old European feasts of which the essence is the combination of religion with merry-making. But among those feasts it is also especially and distinctively English in the style of its merry-making and even in the style of its religion. For the character of Christmas (as distinct, for instance, from the continental Easter) lies chiefly in two things; first on the terrestrial side the note of comfort rather than the note of brightness; and on the spiritual side, Christian charity rather than Christian ecstasy. And comfort is, like charity, a very English instinct. Nay, comfort is, like charity, an English merit; though our comfort may and does degenerate into materialism, just as our charity may and does degenerate into laxity and make-believe.

This ideal of comfort belongs peculiarly to England; it belongs peculiarly to Christmas; above all, it belongs pre-eminently to Dickens. And it is astonishingly misunderstood. It is misunderstood by the continent of Europe; it is, if possible, still more misunderstood by the English of to-day. On the Continent the restaurateurs provide us with raw beef, as if we were savages; yet old English cooking takes as much care as French. And in England has arisen a parvenu patriotism which represents the English as everything but English; as a blend of Chinese stoicism, Latin militarism, Prussian rigidity, and American bad taste. And so England, whose fault is gentility and whose virtue is geniality, England with her tradition of the great gay gentlemen of Elizabeth, is represented to the four quarters of the world (as in Mr. Kipling's religious poems) in the enormous image of a solemn cad. And because it is very difficult to be comfortable in the suburbs, the suburbs have voted that comfort is a gross and material thing. Comfort, especially this vision of Christmas comfort, is the reverse of a gross or material thing. It is far more poetical, properly speaking, than the Garden of Epicurus. It is far more artistic than the Palace of Art. It is more artistic because it is based upon a contrast, a contrast between the fire and wine within the house and the winter and the roaring rains without. It is far more poetical, because there is in it a note of defence, almost of war; a note of being besieged by the snow and hail; of making merry in the belly of a fort. The man who said that an Englishman's house is his castle said much more than he meant. The Englishman thinks of his house as something fortified and provisioned, and his very surliness is at root romantic. And this sense would naturally be strongest in wild winter nights, when the lowered portcullis and the lifted drawbridge do not merely bar people out, but bar people in. The Englishman's house is most sacred, not merely when the King cannot enter it, but when the Englishman cannot get out of it.

This comfort, then, is an abstract thing, a principle. The English poor shut all their doors and windows till their rooms reek like the Black Hole. They are suffering for an idea. Mere animal hedonism would not dream, as we English do, of winter feasts and little rooms, but of eating fruit in large and idle gardens. Mere sensuality would desire to please all its senses. But to our good dreams this dark and dangerous background is essential; the highest pleasure we can imagine is a defiant pleasure, a happiness that stands at bay. The word "comfort" is not indeed the right word, it conveys too much of

the slander of mere sense; the true word is "cosiness," a word not translatable. One, at least, of the essentials of it is smallness, smallness in preference to largeness, smallness for smallness' sake. The merry-maker wants a pleasant parlour, he would not give twopence for a pleasant continent. In our difficult time, of course, a fight for mere space has become necessary. Instead of being greedy for ale and Christmas pudding we are greedy for mere air, an equally sensual appetite. In abnormal conditions this is wise; and the illimitable veldt is an excellent thing for nervous people. But our fathers were large and healthy enough to make a thing humane, and not worry about whether it was hygienic. They were big enough to get into small rooms.

Of this quite deliberate and artistic quality in the close Christmas chamber, the standing evidence is Dickens in Italy. He created these dim firelit tales like little dim red jewels, as an artistic necessity, in the centre of an endless summer. Amid the white cities of Tuscany he hungered for something romantic, and wrote about a rainy Christmas. Amid the pictures of the Uffizi he starved for something beautiful, and fed his memory on London fog. His feeling for the fog was especially poignant and typical. In the first of his Christmas tales, the popular "Christmas Carol," he suggested the very soul of it in one simile, when he spoke of the dense air, suggesting that "Nature was brewing on a large scale." This sense of the thick atmosphere as something to eat or drink, something not only solid but satisfactory, may seem almost insane, but it is no exaggeration of Dickens's emotion. We speak of a fog "that you could cut with a knife." Dickens would have liked the phrase as suggesting that the fog was a colossal cake. He liked even more his own phrase of the Titanic brewery, and no dream would have given him a wilder pleasure than to grope his way to some such tremendous vats and drink the ale of the giants.

There is a current prejudice against fogs, and Dickens, perhaps, is their only poet. Considered hygienically, no doubt this may be more or less excusable. But, considered poetically, fog is not undeserving, it has a real significance. We have in our great cities abolished the clean and sane darkness of the country. We have outlawed night and sent her wandering in wild meadows; we have lit eternal watch-fires against her return. We have made a new cosmos, and as a consequence our own sun and stars. And as a consequence also, and most justly, we have made our own darkness. Just as every lamp is a warm human moon, so every fog is a rich human nightfall. If it were not for this mystic accident we should never see darkness, and he who has never seen darkness has never seen the sun. Fog for us is the chief form of that outward pressure which compresses mere luxury into real comfort. It makes the world small, in the same spirit as in that common and happy cry that the world is small, meaning that it is full of friends. The first man that emerges out of the mist with a light, is for us Prometheus, a saviour bringing fire to men. He is that greatest and best of all men, greater than the heroes, better than the saints, Man Friday. Every rumble of a cart, every cry in the distance, marks the heart of humanity beating undaunted in the darkness. It is wholly human; man toiling in his own cloud. If real darkness is like the embrace of God, this is the dark embrace of man.

In such a sacred cloud the tale called "The Christmas Carol" begins, the first and most typical of all his Christmas tales. It is not irrelevant to dilate upon the geniality of this darkness, because it is characteristic of Dickens that his atmospheres are more important

than his stories. The Christmas atmosphere is more important than Scrooge, or the ghosts either; in a sense, the background is more important than the figures. The same thing may be noticed in his dealings with that other atmosphere (besides that of good humour) which he excelled in creating, an atmosphere of mystery and wrong, such as that which gathers round Mrs. Clennam, rigid in her chair, or old Miss Havisham, ironically robed as a bride. Here again the atmosphere altogether eclipses the story, which often seems disappointing in comparison. The secrecy is sensational; the secret is tame. The surface of the thing seems more awful than the core of it. It seems almost as if these grisly figures, Mrs. Chadband and Mrs. Clennam, Miss Havisham, and Miss Flite, Nemo and Sally Brass, were keeping something back from the author as well as from the reader. When the book closes we do not know their real secret. They soothed the optimistic Dickens with something less terrible than the truth. The dark house of Arthur Clennam's childhood really depresses us; it is a true glimpse into that quiet street in hell, where live the children of that unique dispensation which theologians call Calvinism and Christians devil-worship. But some stranger crime had really been done there, some more monstrous blasphemy or human sacrifice than the suppression of some silly document advantageous to the silly Dorrits. Something worse than a common tale of jilting lay behind the masquerade and madness of the awful Miss Havisham. Something worse was whispered by the misshapen Quilp to the sinister Sally in that wild, wet summer-house by the river, something worse than the clumsy plot against the clumsy Kit. These dark pictures seem almost as if they were literally visions; things, that is, that Dickens saw but did not understand.

And as with his backgrounds of gloom, so with his backgrounds of good-will, in such tales as "The Christmas Carol." The tone of the tale is kept throughout in a happy monotony, though the tale is everywhere irregular and in some places weak. It has the same kind of artistic unity that belongs to a dream. A dream may begin with the end of the world and end with a tea-party; but either the end of the world will em as trivial as a tea-party or that tea-party will be as terrible as the day of doom. The incidents change wildly; the story scarcely changes at all. "The Christmas Carol" is a kind of philanthropic dream, an enjoyable nightmare, in which the scenes shift bewilderingly and seem as miscellaneous as the pictures in a scrap-book, but in which there is one constant state of the soul, a state of rowdy benediction and a hunger for human faces. The beginning is bout a winter day and a miser; yet the beginning is in no way bleak. The author starts with a kind of happy howl; he bangs on our door like a drunken carol singer; his style is festive and popular; he compares the snow and hail to philanthropists who "come down handsomely;" he compares the fog to unlimited beer. Scrooge is not really inhuman at the beginning any more than he is at the end. There is a heartiness in his inhospitable sentiments that is akin to humour and therefore to humanity; he is only a crusty old bachelor, and had (I strongly suspect) given away turkeys secretly all his life. The beauty and the real blessing of the story do not lie in the mechanical plot of it, the repentance of Scrooge, probable or improbable; they lie in the great furnace of real happiness that glows through Scrooge and everything around him; that great furnace, the heart of Dickens. Whether the Christmas visions would or would not convert Scrooge, they convert us. Whether or no the visions were evoked by real Spirits of the Past, Present, and Future, they were evoked by that truly exalted order of angels who are correctly

called High Spirits. They are impelled and sustained by a quality which our contemporary artists ignore or almost deny, but which in a life decently lived is as normal and attainable as sleep, positive, passionate, conscious joy. The story sings from end to end like a happy man going home; and, like a happy and good man, when it cannot sing it yells. It is lyric and exclamatory, from the first exclamatory words of it. It is strictly a Christmas carol.

Dickens, as has been said, went to Italy with this kindly cloud still about him, still meditating on Yule mysteries. Among the olives and the orange-trees he wrote his second great Christmas tale, "The Chimes," at Genoa in 1844, a Christmas tale only differing from "The Christmas Carol" in being fuller of the grey rains of winter and the north. "The Chimes" is, like the "Carol," an appeal for charity and mirth, but it is a stern and fighting appeal: if the other is a Christmas carol, this is a Christmas war-song. In it Dickens hurled himself with even more than his usual militant joy and scorn into an attack upon a cant, which he said made his blood boil. This cant was nothing more nor less than the whole tone taken by three-quarters of the political and economic world towards the poor. It was a vague and vulgar Benthamism with a rollicking Tory touch in it. It explained to the poor their duties with a cold and coarse philanthropy unendurable by any free man. It had also at its command a kind of brutal banter, a loud good humour which Dickens sketches savagely in Alderman Cute. He fell furiously on all their ideas: the cheap advice to live cheaply, the base advice to live basely, above all, the preposterous primary assumption that the rich are to advise the poor and not the poor the rich. There were and are hundreds of these benevolent bullies. Some say that the poor should give up having children, which means that they should give up their great virtue of sexual sanity. Some say that they should give up "treating" each other, which means that they should give up all that remains to them of the virtue of hospitality. Against all of this Dickens thundered very thoroughly in "The Chimes." It may be remarked in passing that this affords another instance of a confusion already referred to, the confusion whereby Dickens supposed himself to be exalting the present over the past, whereas he was really dealing deadly blows at things strictly peculiar to the present. Embedded in this very book is a somewhat useless interview between Trotty Veck and the church bells, in which the latter lecture the former for having supposed (why, I don't know) that they were expressing regret for the disappearance of the Middle Ages. There is no reason why Trotty Veck or anyone else should idealise the Middle Ages, but certainly he was the last man in the world to be asked to idealise the nineteenth century, seeing that the smug and stingy philosophy, which poisons his life through the book, was an exclusive creation of that century. But, as I have said before, the fieriest mediævalist may forgive Dickens for disliking the good things the Middle Ages took away, considering how he loved whatever good things the Middle Ages left behind. It matters very little that he hated old feudal castles when they were already old. It matters very much that he hated the New Poor Law while it was still new.

The moral of this matter in "The Chimes" is essential. Dickens had sympathy with the poor in the Greek and literal sense; he suffered with them mentally; for the things that irritated them were the things that irritated him. He did not pity the people, or even champion the people, or even merely love the people; in this matter he was the people. He alone in our literature is the voice not merely of the social substratum, but even of the

subconsciousness of the substratum. He utters the secret anger of the humble. He says what the uneducated only think, or even only feel, about the educated. And in nothing is he so genuinely such a voice as in this fact of his fiercest mood being reserved for methods that are counted scientific and progressive. Pure and exalted atheists talk themselves into believing that the working-classes are turning with indignant scorn from the churches. The working-classes are not indignant against the churches in the least. The things the working-classes really are indignant against are the hospitals. The people has no definite disbelief in the temples of theology. The people has a very fiery and practical disbelief in the temples of physical science. The things the poor hate are the modern things, the rationalistic things -- doctors, inspectors, poor law guardians, professional philanthropy. They never showed any reluctance to be helped by the old and corrupt monasteries. They will often die rather than be helped by the modern and efficient workhouse. Of all this anger, good or bad, Dickens is the voice of an accusing energy. When, in "The Christmas Carol," Scrooge refers to the surplus population, the Spirit tells him, very justly, not to speak till he knows what the surplus is and where it is. The implication is severe but sound. When a group of superciliously benevolent economists look down into the abyss for the surplus population, assuredly there is only one answer that should be given to them; and that is to say, "If there is a surplus, you are a surplus." And if anyone were ever cut off, they would be. If the barricades went up in our streets and the poor became masters, I think the priests would escape, I fear the gentlemen would; but I believe the gutters would be simply running with the blood of philanthropists.

Lastly, he was at one with the poor in this chief matter of Christmas, in the matter, that is, of special festivity. There is nothing on which the poor are more criticised than on the point of spending large sums on small feasts; and though there are material difficulties, there is nothing in which they are more right. It is said that a Boston paradox-monger said, "Give us the luxuries of life and we will dispense with the necessities." But it is the whole human race that says it, from the first savage wearing feathers instead of clothes to the last costermonger having a treat instead of three meals.

The third of his Christmas stories, "The Cricket on the Hearth," calls for no extensive comment, though it is very characteristic. It has all the qualities which we have called dominant qualities in his Christmas sentiment. It has cosiness, that is the comfort that depends upon a discomfort surrounding it. It has a sympathy with the poor, and especially with the extravagance of the poor; with what may be called the temporary wealth of the poor. It has the sentiment of the hearth, that is, the sentiment of the open fire being the red heart of the room. That open fire is the veritable flame of England, still kept burning in the midst of a mean civilisation of stoves. But everything that is valuable in "The Cricket on the Hearth" is perhaps as well expressed in the title as it is in the story. The tale itself, in spite of some of those inimitable things that Dickens never failed to say, is a little too comfortable to be quite convincing. "The Christmas Carol" is the conversion of an anti-Christmas character. "The Chimes" is a slaughter of anti-Christmas characters. "The Cricket," perhaps, fails for lack of this crusading note. For everything has its weak side, and when full justice has been done to this neglected note of poetic comfort, we must remember that it has its very real weak side. The defect of it in the work of Dickens

was that he tended sometimes to pile up the cushions until none of the characters could move. He is so much interested in effecting his state of static happiness that he forgets to make a story at all. His princes at the start of the story begin to live happily ever afterwards. We feel this strongly in "Master Humphrey's Clock" and we feel it sometimes in these Christmas stories. He makes his characters so comfortable that his characters begin to dream and drivel. And he makes his reader so comfortable that his reader goes to sleep.

The actual tale of the carrier and his wife sounds somewhat sleepily in our ears; we cannot keep our attention fixed on it, though we are conscious of a kind of warmth from it as from a great wood fire. We know so well that everything will soon be all right that we do not suspect when the carrier suspects, and are not frightened when the gruff Tackleton growls. The sound of the festivities at the end come fainter on our ears than did the shout of the Cratchits or the bells of Trotty Veck. All the good figures that followed Scrooge when he came growling out of the fog fade into the fog again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TIME OF TRANSITION

Dickens was back in London by the June of 1845. About this time he became the first editor of *The Daily News*, a paper which he had largely planned and suggested, and which, I trust, remembers its semi-divine origin. That his thoughts had been running, as suggested in the last chapter, somewhat monotonously on his Christmas domesticities, is again suggested by the rather singular fact that he originally wished *The Daily News* to be called *The Cricket*. Probably he was haunted again with his old vision of a homely, tale-telling periodical such as had broken off in "Master Humphrey's Clock." About this time, however, he was peculiarly unsettled. Almost as soon as he had taken the editorship he threw it up; and having only recently come back to England, he soon made up his mind to go back to the Continent. In the May of 1846 he ran over to Switzerland and tried to write "Dombey and Son" at Lausanne. Tried to, I say, because his letters are full of an angry impotence. He could not get on. He attributed this especially to his love of London and his loss of it, "the absence of streets and numbers of figures. . . . *My* figures seem disposed to stagnate without crowds about them." But he also, with shrewdness, attributed it more generally to the laxer and more wandering life he had led for the last two years, the American tour, the Italian tour, diversified, generally speaking, only with slight literary productions. His ways were never punctual or healthy, but they were also never unconscientious as far as work was concerned. If he walked all night he could write all day. But in this strange exile or interregnum he did not seem able to fall into any habits, even bad habits. A restlessness beyond all his experience had fallen for a season upon the most restless of the children of men.

It may be a mere coincidence: but this break in his life very nearly coincided with the important break in his art. "Dombey and Son," planned in all probability some time

before, was destined to be the last of a quite definite series, the early novels of Dickens. The difference between the books from the beginning up to "Dombey," and the books from "David Copperfield" to the end may be hard to state dogmatically, but is evident to every one with any literary sense. Very coarsely, the case may be put by saying that he diminished, in the story as a whole, the practice of pure caricature. Still more coarsely it may be put in the phrase that he began to practise realism. If we take Mr. Stiggins, say, as a clergyman depicted at the beginning of his literary career, and Mr. Crisparkle, say, as a clergyman depicted at the end of it, it is evident that the difference does not merely consist in the fact that the first is a less desirable clergyman than the second. It consists in the nature of our desire for either of them. The glory of Mr. Crisparkle partly consists in the fact that he might really exist anywhere, in any country town into which we may happen to stray. The glory of Mr. Stiggins wholly consists in the fact that he could not possibly exist anywhere except in the head of Dickens. Dickens has the secret recipe of that divine dish. In some sense, therefore, when we say that he became less of a caricaturist we mean that he became less of a creator. That original violent vision of all things which he had seen from his boyhood began to be mixed with other men's milder visions and with the light of common day. He began to understand and practise other than his own mad merits; began to have some movement towards the merits of other writers, towards the mixed emotion of Thackeray, or the solidity of George Eliot. And this must be said for the process; that the fierce wine of Dickens could endure some dilution. On the whole, perhaps, his primal personalism was all the better when surging against some saner restraints. Perhaps a flavour of strong Stiggins goes a long way. Perhaps the colossal Crummles might be cut down into six or seven quite creditable characters. For my own part, for reasons which I shall afterwards mention, I am in real doubt about the advantage of this realistic education of Dickens. I am not sure that it made his books better; but I am sure it made them less bad. He made fewer mistakes undoubtedly; he succeeded in eliminating much of the mere rant or cant of his first books; he threw away much of the old padding, all the more annoying, perhaps, in a literary sense, because he did not mean it for padding, but for essential eloquence. But he did not produce anything actually better than Mr. Chuckster. But then there is nothing better than Mr. Chuckster. Certain works of art, such as the Venus of Milo, exhaust our aspiration. Upon the whole this may, perhaps, be safely said of the transition. Those who have any doubt about Dickens can have no doubt of the superiority of the later books. Beyond question they have less of what annoys us in Dickens. But do not, if you are in the company of any ardent adorers of Dickens (as I hope for your sake you are), do not insist too urgently and exclusively on the splendour of Dickens's last works, or they will discover that you do not like him.

"Dombey and Son" is the last novel in the first manner: "David Copperfield" is the first novel in the last. The increase in care and realism in the second of the two is almost startling. Yet even in "Dombey and Son" we can see the coming of a change, however faint, if we compare it with his first fantasies such as "Nicholas Nickleby" or "The Old Curiosity Shop." The central story is still melodrama, bat it is much more tactful and effective melodrama. Melodrama is a form of art, legitimate like any other, as noble as farce, almost as noble as pantomime. The essence of melodrama is that it appeals to the moral sense in a highly simplified state, just as farce appeals to the sense of humour in a

highly simplified state. Farce creates people who are so intellectually simple as to hide in packing-cases or pretend to be their own aunts. Melodrama creates people so morally simple as to kill their enemies in Oxford Street, and repent on seeing their mother's photograph. The object of the simplification in farce and melodrama is the same, and quite artistically legitimate, the object of gaining a resounding rapidity of action which subtleties would obstruct. And this can be done well or ill. The simplified villain can be a spirited charcoal sketch or a mere black smudge. Carker is a spirited charcoal sketch: Ralph Nickleby is a mere black smudge. The tragedy of Edith Dombey teems with unlikelihood, but it teems with life. That Dombey should give his own wife censure through his own business manager is impossible, I will not say in a gentleman, but in a person of ordinary sane self-conceit. But once having got the inconceivable trio before the footlights, Dickens gives us good ringing dialogue very different from the mere rants in which Ralph Nickleby figures in the unimaginable character of a rhetorical money-lender. And there is another point of technical improvement in this book over such books as "Nicholas Nickleby." It has not only a basic idea, but a good basic idea. There is a real artistic opportunity in the conception of a solemn and selfish man of affairs, feeling for his male heir, his first and last emotion, mingled of a thin flame of tenderness and a strong flame of pride. But with all these possibilities, the serious episode of the Dombeys serves ultimately only to show how unfitted Dickens was for such things, how fitted he was for something opposite.

The incurable poetic character, the hopelessly non-realistic character of Dickens's essential genius could not have a better example than the story of the Dombeys. For the story itself is probable; it is the treatment that makes it unreal. In attempting to paint the dark pagan devotion of the father (as distant from the ecstatic and Christian devotion of the mother) Dickens was painting something that was really there. This is no wild theme, like the wanderings of Nell's grandfather, or the marriage of Gride. A man of Dombey's type would love his son as he loves Paul. He would neglect his daughter as he neglects Florence. And yet we feel the utter unreality of it all, while we feel the utter reality of monsters like Stiggins or Mantalini. Dickens could only work in his own way, and that way was the wild way. We may almost say this: that he could only make his characters probable if he was allowed to make them impossible. Give him licence to say and do anything, and he could create beings as vivid as our own aunts and uncles. Keep him to likelihood and he could not tell the plainest tale so as to make it seem likely. The story of "Pickwick" is credible, although it is not possible. The story of Florence Dombey is incredible although it is true.

An excellent example can be found in the same story. Major Bagstock is a grotesque, and yet he contains touch after touch of Dickens's quiet and sane observation of things as they are. He was always most accurate when he was most fantastic. Dombey and Florence are perfectly reasonable, but we simply know that they do not exist. The Major is mountainously exaggerated, but we all feel that we have met him at Brighton. Nor is the rationale of the paradox difficult to see; Dickens exaggerated when he had found a real truth to exaggerate. It is a deadly error (an error at the back of much of the false placidity of our politics) to suppose that lies are told with excess and luxuriance, and truths told with modesty and restraint. Some of the most frantic lies on the face of life are told with

modesty and restraint; for the simple reason that only modesty and restraint will save them. Many official declarations are just as dignified as Mr. Dombey, because they are just as fictitious. On the other hand, the man who has found a truth dances about like a boy who has found a shilling; he breaks into extravagances, as the Christian churches broke into gargoyles. In one sense truth alone can be exaggerated; nothing else can stand the strain. The outrageous Bagstock is a glowing and glaring exaggeration of a thing we have all seen in life -- the worst and most dangerous of all its hypocrisies. For the worst and most dangerous hypocrite is not he who affects unpopular virtue, but he who affects popular vice. The jolly fellow of the saloon bar and the racecourse is the real deceiver of mankind; he has misled more than any false prophet, and his victims cry to him out of hell. The excellence of the Bagstock conception can best be seen if we compare it with the much weaker and more improbable knavery of Pecksniff. It would not be worth a man's while, with any worldly object, to pretend to be a holy and high-minded architect. The world does not admire holy and high-minded architects. The world does admire rough and tough old army men who swear at waiters and wink at women. Major Bagstock is simply the perfect prophecy of that decadent jingoism which corrupted England of late years. England has been duped, not by the cant of goodness, but by the cant of badness. It has been fascinated by a quite fictitious cynicism, and reached that last and strangest of all impostures in which the mask is as repulsive as the face.

"Dombey and Son" provides us with yet another instance of this general fact in Dickens. He could only get to the most solemn emotions adequately if he got to them through the grotesque. He could only, so to speak, really get into the inner chamber by coming down the chimney, like his own most lovable lunatic in "Nicholas Nickleby." A good example is such a character as Toots. Toots is what none of Dickens's dignified characters are, in the most serious sense, a true lover. He is the twin of Romeo. He has passion, humility, self-knowledge, a mind lifted into all magnanimous thoughts, everything that goes with the best kind of romantic love. His excellence in the art of love can only be expressed by the somewhat violent expression that he is as good a lover as Walter Gay is a bad one. Florence surely deserved her father's scorn if she could prefer Gay to Toots. It is neither a joke nor any kind of exaggeration to say that in the vacillations of Toots, Dickens not only came nearer to the psychology of true love than he ever came elsewhere, but nearer than anyone else ever came. To ask for the loved one, and then not to dare to cross the threshold, to be invited by her, to long to accept, and then to lie in order to decline, these are the funny things that Mr. Toots did, and that every honest man who yells with laughter at him has done also. For the moment, however, I only mention this matter as a pendant case to the case of Major Bagstock, an example of the way in which Dickens had to be ridiculous in order to begin to be true. His characters that begin solemn end futile; his characters that begin frivolous end solemn in the best sense. His foolish figures are not only more entertaining than his serious figures, they are also much more serious. The Marchioness is not only much more laughable than Little Nell; she is also much more of all that Little Nell was meant to be; much more really devoted, pathetic, and brave. Dick Swiveller is not only a much funnier fellow than Kit, he is also a much more genuine fellow, being free from that slight stain of "meekness," or the snobbishness of the respectable poor, which the wise and perfect Chuckster wisely and perfectly perceived in Kit. Susan Nipper is not only more of a comic character than Florence; she is more of a

heroine than Florence any day of the week. In "Our Mutual Friend" we do not, for some reason or other, feel really very much excited about the fall or rescue of Lizzie Hexam. She seems too romantic to be really pathetic. But we do feel excited about the rescue of Miss Podsnap, because she is, like Toots, a holy fool; because her pink nose and pink elbows, and candid outcry and open indecent affections do convey to us a sense of innocence helpless among human dragons, of Andromeda tied naked to a rock. Dickens had to make a character humorous before he could make it human; it was the only way he knew, and he ought to have always adhered to it. Whether he knew it or not, the only two really touching figures in "Martin Chuzzlewit" are the Misses Pecksniff. Of the things he tried to treat unsmilingly and grandly we can all make game to our heart's content. But when once he has laughed at a thing it is sacred for ever.

"Dombey," however, means first and foremost the finale of the early Dickens. It is difficult to say exactly in what it is that we perceive that the old crudity ends here, and does not reappear in "David Copperfield" or in any of the novels after it. But so certainly it is. In detached scenes and characters, indeed, Dickens kept up his farcical note almost or quite to the end. But this is the last farce; this is the last work in which a farcical licence is tacitly claimed, a farcical note struck to start with. And in a sense his next novel may be called his first novel. But the growth of this great novel, "David Copperfield," is a thing very interesting, but at the same time very dark, for it is a growth in the soul. We have seen that Dickens's mind was in a stir of change; that he was dreaming of art and even of realism. Hugely delighted as he invariably was with his own books, he was humble enough to be ambitious. He was even humble enough to be envious. In the matter of art, for instance, in the narrower sense, of arrangement and proportion in fictitious things, he began to be conscious of his deficiency, and even, in a stormy sort of way, ashamed of it; he tried to gain completeness even while raging at anyone who called him incomplete. And in this manner of artistic construction, his ambition (and his success too) grew steadily up to the instant of his death. The end finds him attempting things that are at the opposite pole to the frank formlessness of "Pickwick." His last book, "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," depends entirely upon construction, even upon a centralised strategy. He staked everything upon a plot; he who had been the weakest of plotters, weaker than Sim Tappertit. He essayed a detective story, he who could never keep a secret; and he has kept it to this day. A new Dickens was really being born when Dickens died.

And as with art, so with reality. He wished to show that he could construct as well as anybody. He also wished to show that he could be as accurate as anybody. And in this connection (as in many others) we must recur constantly to the facts mentioned in connection with America and with his money-matters. We must recur, I mean, to the central fact that his desires were extravagant in quantity, but not in quality; that his wishes were excessive, but not eccentric. It must never be forgotten that sanity was his ideal, even when he seemed almost insane. It was thus with his literary aspirations. He was brilliant; but he wished sincerely to be solid. Nobody out of an asylum could deny that he was a genius and an unique writer; but he did not wish to be an unique writer, but an universal writer. Much of the manufactured pathos or rhetoric against which his enemies quite rightly rail, is really due to his desire to give all sides of life at once, to

make his book a cosmos instead of a tale. He was sometimes really vulgar in his wish to be a literary Whiteley, an universal provider. Thus it was that he felt about realism and truth to live. Nothing is easier than to defend Dickens as Dickens, but Dickens wished to be everybody else. Nothing is easier than to defend Dickens's world as a fairyland, of which he alone has the key; to defend him as one defends Maeterlinck, or any other original writer. But Dickens was not content with being original, he had a wild wish to be true. He loved truth so much in the abstract that he sacrificed to the shadow of it his own glory. He denied his own divine originality, and pretended that he had plagiarised from life. He disowned his own soul's children, and said he had picked them up in the street.

And in this mixed and heated mood of anger and ambition, vanity and doubt, a new and great design was born. He loved to be romantic, yet he desired to be real. How if he wrote of a thing that was real and showed that it was romantic? He loved real life; but he also loved his own way. How if he wrote his own real life, but wrote it in his own way? How if he showed the carping critics who doubted the existence of his strange characters, his own yet stranger existence? How if he forced these pedants and unbelievers to admit that Weller and Pecksniff, Crummles and Swiveller, whom they thought so improbably wild and wonderful, were less wild and wonderful than Charles Dickens? What if he ended the quarrels about whether his romances could occur, by confessing that his romance had occurred?

For some time past, probably during the greater part of his life, he had made notes for an autobiography. I have already quoted an admirable passage from these notes, a passage reproduced in "David Copperfield," with little more alteration than a change of proper names -- the passage which describes Captain Porter and the debtor's petition in the Marshalsea. But he probably perceived at last what a less keen intelligence must ultimately have perceived, that if an autobiography is really to be honest it must be turned into a work of fiction. If it is really to tell the truth, it must at all costs profess not to. No man dare say of himself, over his own name, how badly he has behaved. No man dare say of himself over his own name, how well he has behaved. Moreover, of course, a touch of fiction is almost always essential to the real conveying of fact, because fact, as experienced, has a fragmentariness which is bewildering at first hand and quite blinding at second hand. Facts have at least to be sorted into compartments and the proper head and tail given back to each. The perfection and pointedness of art are a sort of substitute for the pungency of actuality. Without this selection and completion our life seems a tangle of unfinished tales, a heap of novels, all volume one. Dickens determined to make one complete novel of it.

For though there are many other aspects of "David Copperfield," this autobiographical aspect is, after all, the greatest. The point of the book is that, unlike all the other books of Dickens, it is concerned with quite common actualities, but it is concerned with them warmly and with the warlike sympathies. It is not only both realistic and romantic; it is realistic because it is romantic. It is human nature described with the human exaggeration. We all know the actual types in the book; they are not like the turgid and preternatural types elsewhere in Dickens. They are not purely poetic creations like Mr. Kenwigs or Mr. Bunsby. We all know that they exist. We all know the stiff-necked and

humorous old-fashioned nurse, so conventional and yet so original, so dependent and yet so independent. We all know the intrusive stepfather, the abstract strange male, coarse, handsome, sulky, successful, a breaker-up of homes. We all know the erect and sardonic spinster, the spinster who is so mad in small things and so sane in great ones. We all know the cock of the school; we all know Steerforth, the creature whom the gods love and even the servants respect. We know his poor and aristocratic mother, so proud, so gratified, so desolate. We know the Rosa Dartle type, the lonely woman in whom affection itself has stagnated into a sort of poison.

But while these are real characters they are real characters lit up with the colours of youth and passion. They are real people romantically felt; that is to say, they are real people felt as real people feel them. They are exaggerated, like all Dickens's figures: but they are not exaggerated as personalities are exaggerated by an artist; they are exaggerated as personalities are exaggerated by their own friends and enemies. The strong souls are seen through the glorious haze of the emotions that strong souls really create. We have Murdstone as he would be to a boy who hated him; and rightly, for a boy would hate him. We have Steerforth as he would be to a boy who adored him; and rightly, for a boy would adore him. It may be that if these persons had a mere terrestrial existence, they appeared to other eyes more insignificant. It may be that Murdstone in common life was only a heavy business man with a human side that David was too sulky to find. It may be that Steerforth was only an inch or two taller than David, and only a shade or two above him in the lower middle classes; but this does not make the book less true. In cataloguing the facts of life the author must not omit that massive fact, illusion.

When we say the book is true to life we must stipulate that it is especially true to youth: even to boyhood. All the characters seem a little larger than they really were, for David is looking up at them. And the early pages of the book are in particular astonishingly vivid. Parts of it seem like fragments of our forgotten infancy. The dark house of childhood, the loneliness, the things half understood, the nurse with her inscrutable sulks and her more inscrutable tenderness, the sudden deportations to distant places, the seaside and its childish friendships, all this stirs in us when we read it, like something out of a previous existence. Above all, Dickens has excellently depicted the child enthroned in that humble circle which only in after years he perceives to have been humble. Modern and cultured persons, I believe, object to their children seeing kitchen company or being taught by a woman like Peggotty. But surely it is more important to be educated in a sense of human dignity and equality than in anything else in the world. And a child who has once had to respect a kind and capable woman of the lower classes will respect the lower classes for ever. The true way to overcome the evil in class distinction is not to denounce them as revolutionists denounce them, but to ignore them as children ignore them.

The early youth of David Copperfield is psychologically almost as good as his childhood. In one touch especially Dickens pierced the very core of the sensibility of boyhood; it was when he made David more afraid of a manservant than of anybody or anything else. The lowering Murdstone, the awful Mrs. Steerforth are not so alarming to him as Mr. Littimer, the unimpeachable gentleman's gentleman. This is exquisitely true to the masculine emotions, especially in their undeveloped state. A youth of common courage

does not fear anything violent, but he is in mortal fear of anything correct. This may or may not be the reason that so few female writers understand their male characters, but this fact remains that the more sincere and passionate and even headlong a lad is the more certain he is to be conventional. The bolder and freer he seems the more the traditions of the college or the rules of the club will hold him with their gyves of gossamer; and the less afraid he is of his enemies the more cravenly he will be afraid of his friends. Herein lies indeed the darkest period of our ethical doubt and chaos. The fear is that as morals become less urgent, manners will become more so; and men who have forgotten the fear of God will retain the fear of Littimer. We shall merely sink into a much meaner bondage. For when you break the great laws, you do not get liberty; you do not even get anarchy. You get the small laws.

The sting and strength of this piece of fiction, then, do (by a rare accident) lie in the circumstance that it was so largely founded on fact. "David Copperfield" is the great answer of a great romancer to the realists. David says in effect: "What! you say that the Dickens tales are too purple really to have happened! Why, this is what happened to me, and it seemed the most purple of all. You say that the Dickens heroes are too handsome and triumphant! Why, no prince or paladin in Ariosto was ever so handsome and triumphant as the Head Boy seemed to me walking before me in the sun. You say the Dickens villains are too black I Why, there was no ink in the devil's inkstand black enough for my own step-father when I had to live in the same house with him. The facts are quite the other way to what you suppose. This life of grey studies and half-tones, the absence of which you regret in Dickens, is only life as it is looked at. This life of heroes and villains is life as it is lived. The life a man knows best is exactly the life he finds most full of fierce certainties and battles between good and ill -- his own. Oh yes, the life we do not care about may easily be a psychological comedy. Other people's lives may easily be human documents. But a man's own life is always a melodrama."

There are other effective things in "David Copperfield;" they are not all autobiographical, but they nearly all have this new note of quietude and reality. Micawber is gigantic; an immense assertion of the truth that the way to live is to exaggerate everything. But of him I shall have to speak more fully in another connection. Mrs. Micawber, artistically speaking, is even better. She is very nearly the best thing in Dickens. Nothing could be more absurd, and at the same time more true, than her clear argumentative manner of speech as she sits smiling and expounding in the midst of ruin. What could be more lucid and logical and unanswerable than her statement of the prolegomena of the Medway problem, of which the first step must be to "see the Medway," or of the coal-trade, which required talent and capital. "Talent Mr. Micawber has. Capital Mr. Micawber has not." It seems as if something should have come at last out of so clear and scientific an arrangement of the ideas. Indeed if (as has been suggested) we regard "David Copperfield" as an unconscious defence of the poetic view of life, we might regard Mrs. Micawber as an unconscious satire on the logical view of life. She sits as a monument of the hopelessness and helplessness of reason in the face of this romantic and unreasonable world.

As I have taken "Dombey and Son" as the book before the transition, and "David Copperfield" as typical of the transition itself, I may perhaps take "Bleak House" as the book after the transition, and so complete the description. Bleak House has every characteristic of his new realistic culture. Dickens never now, as in his ear]y books, revels in the parts he likes and scamps the parts he does not, after the manner of Scott. He does not, as in previous tales, leave his heroes and heroines mere walking gentlemen and ladies with nothing at all to do but walk: he expends upon them at least ingenuity. By the expedients (successful or not) of the self-revelation of Esther or the humorous inconsistencies of Rick, he makes his younger figures if not lovable at least readable. Everywhere we see this tighter and more careful grip. He does not, for instance, when he wishes to denounce a dark institution, sandwich it in as a mere episode in a rambling story of adventure, as the debtor's prison is embedded in the body of "Pickwick" or the low Yorkshire school in the body of "Nicholas Nickleby." He puts the Court of Chancery in the centre of the stage, a sombre and sinister temple, and groups round it in artistic relation decaying and frantic figures, its offspring and its satirists, An old dipsomaniac keeps a rag and bone shop, type of futility and antiquity, and calls himself the Lord Chancellor. A little mad old maid hangs about the courts on a forgotten or imaginary lawsuit, and says with perfect and pungent irony, "I am expecting a judgment shortly. On the Day of Judgment." Rick and Ada and Esther are not mere strollers who have strayed into the court of law, they are its children, its symbols, and its victims. The righteous indignation of the book is not at the red heat of anarchy, but at the white heat of art. Its anger is patient and plodding, like some historic revenge. Moreover, it slowly and carefully creates the real psychology of oppression. The endless formality, the endless unemotional urbanity, the endless hope deferred, these things make one feel the fact of injustice more than the madness of Nero. For it is not the activeness of tyranny that maddens, but its passiveness. We hate the deafness of the god more than his strength. Silence is the unbearable repartee.

Again we can see in this book strong traces of an increase in social experience. Dickens, as his fame carried him into more fashionable circles, began really to understand something of what is strong and what is weak in the English upper class. Sir Leicester Dedlock is a far more effective condemnation of oligarchy than the ugly swagger of Sir Mulberry Hawk, because pride stands out more plainly in all its impotence and insolence as the one weakness of a good man, than as one of the million weaknesses of a bad one. Dickens, like all young Radicals, had imagined in his youth that aristocracy rested upon the hardness of somebody; he found, as we all do, that it rests upon the softness of everybody. It is very hard not to like Sir Leicester Dedlock, not to applaud his silly old speeches, so foolish, so manly, so genuinely English, so disastrous to England. It is true that the English people love a lord, but it is not true that they fear him; rather, if anything, they pity him; there creeps into their love something of the feeling they have towards a baby or a black man. In their hearts they think it admirable that Sir Leicester Dedlock should be able to speak at all. And so a system, which no iron laws and no bloody battles could possibly force upon a people, is preserved from generation to generation by pure, weak good-nature.

In "Bleak House" occurs the character of Harold Skimpole, the character whose alleged likeness to Leigh Hunt has laid Dickens open to so much disapproval. Unjust disapproval, I think, as far as fundamental morals are concerned. In method he was a little clamorous and clumsy, as, indeed, he was apt to be. But when he said that it was possible to combine a certain tone of conversation taken from a particular man with other characteristics which were not meant to be his, he surely said what all men who write stories know. A work of fiction often consists in combining a pair of whiskers seen in one street with a crime seen in another. He may quite possibly have really meant only to make Leigh Hunt's light philosophy the mask for a new kind of scamp, as a variant on the pious mask of Pecksniff or the candid mask of Bagstock. He may never once have had the unfriendly thought, "Suppose Hunt behaved like a rascal!" he may have only had the fanciful thought, "Suppose a rascal behaved like Hunt!"

But there is a good reason for mentioning Skimpole especially. In the character of Skimpole, Dickens displayed again a quality that was very admirable in him -- I mean a disposition to see things sanely and to satirise even his own faults. He was commonly occupied in satirising the Gradgrinds, the economists, the men of Smiles and Self-Help. For him there was nothing poorer than their wealth, nothing more selfish than their self-denial. And against them he was in the habit of pitting the people of a more expansive habit -- the happy Swivellers and Micawbers, who, if they were poor, were at least as rich as their last penny could make them. He loved that great Christian carelessness that seeks its meat from God. It was merely a kind of uncontrollable honesty that forced him into urging the other side. He could not disguise from himself or from the world that man who began by seeking his meat from his neighbour without apprising his neighbour of the fact. He had shown how good irresponsibility could be; he could not stoop to hide how bad it could be. He created Skimpole; and Skimpole is the dark underside of Micawber.

In attempting Skimpole he attempted something with a great and urgent meaning. He attempted it, I say; I do not assert that he carried it through. As has been remarked, he was never successful in describing psychological change; his characters are the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. And critics have complained very justly of the crude villainy of Skimpole's action in the matter of Joe and Mr. Bucket. Certainly Skimpole had no need to commit a clumsy treachery to win a clumsy bribe; he had only to call on Mr. Jarndyce. He had lost his honour too long to need to sell it.

The effect is bad; but I repeat that the aim was great. Dickens wished, under the symbol of Skimpole, to point out a truth which is perhaps the most terrible in moral psychology. I mean the fact that it is by no means easy to draw the line between light and heavy offence. He desired to show that there are no faults, however kindly, that we can afford to flatter or to let alone; he meant that perhaps Skimpole had once been as good a man as Swiveller. If flattered or let alone, our kindliest fault can destroy our kindliest virtue. A thing may begin as a very human weakness and end as a very inhuman weakness. Skimpole means that the extremes of evil are much nearer than we think. A man may begin by being too generous to pay his debts, and end by being too mean to pay his debts. For the vices are very strangely in league, and encourage each other. A sober man may become a drunkard through being a coward. A brave man may become a coward through

being a drunkard. That is the thing Dickens was darkly trying to convey in Skimpole -- that a man might become a mountain of selfishness if he attended only to the Dickens virtues. There is nothing that can be neglected; there is no such thing (he meant) as a peccadillo.

I have dwelt on this consciousness of his because, alas, it had a very sharp edge for himself. Even while he was permitting a fault originally small to make a comedy of Skimpole, a fault originally small was making a tragedy of Charles Dickens. For Dickens also had a bad quality, not intrinsically very terrible, which he allowed to wreck his life. He also had a small weakness that could sometimes become stronger than all his strengths. His selfishness was not, it need hardly be said, the selfishness of Gradgrind; he was particularly compassionate and liberal. Nor was it in the least the selfishness of Skimpole. He was entirely self-dependent, industrious, and dignified. His selfishness was wholly a selfishness of the nerves. Whatever his whim or the temperature of the instant told him to do must be done. He was the type of man who would break a window if it would not open and give him air. And this weakness of his had, by the time of which we speak, led to a breach between himself and his wife which he was too exasperated and excited to heal in time. Everything must be put right, and put right at once, with him. If London bored him, he must go to the Continent at once; if the Continent bored him, he must come back to London at once. If the day was too noisy, the whole household must be quiet; if night was too quiet, the whole household must wake up. Above all, he had the supreme character of the domestic despot -- that his good temper was, if possible, more despotic than his bad temper. When he was miserable (as he often was, poor fellow), they only had to listen to his railings. When he was happy they had to listen to his novels. All this, which was mainly mere excitability, did not seem to amount to much; it did not in the least mean that he had ceased to be a clean-living and kind-hearted and quiet honest man. But there was this evil about it -- that he did not resist his little weakness at all; he pampered it as Skimpole pampered his. And it separated him and his wife. A mere silly trick of temperament did everything that the blackest misconduct could have done. A random sensibility, started about the shuffling of papers or the shutting of a window, ended by tearing two clean, Christian people from each other, like a blast of bigamy or adultery.

CHAPTER IX

LATER LIFE AND WORKS

I have deliberately in this book mentioned only such facts in the life of Dickens as were, I will not say significant (for all facts must be significant, including the million facts that can never be mentioned by anybody), but such facts as illustrated my own immediate meaning. I have observed this method consistently and without shame because I think that we can hardly make too evident a chasm between books which profess to be statements of all the ascertainable facts, and books which (like this one) profess only to contain a particular opinion or a summary deducible from the facts. Books like Forster's

exhaustive work and others exist, and are as accessible as St. Paul's Cathedral; we have them in common as we have the facts of the physical universe; and it seems highly desirable that the function of making an exhaustive catalogue and that of making an individual generalisation should not be confused. No catalogue, of course, can contain all the facts even of five minutes; every catalogue, however long and learned, must be not only a bold, but, one may say, an audacious selection. Bat if a great many facts are given, the reader gains a blurred belief that all the facts are being given. In a professedly personal judgment it is therefore clearer and more honest to give only a few illustrative facts, leaving the other obtainable facts to balance them. For thus it is made quite clear that the thing is a sketch, an affair of a few lines.

It is as well, however, to make at this point a pause sufficient to indicate the main course of the later life of the novelist. And it is best to begin with the man himself, as he appeared in those last days of popularity and public distinction. Many are still alive who remember him in his after-dinner speeches, his lectures, and his many public activities; as I am not one of these, I cannot correct my notions with that flash of the living features without which a description may be subtly and entirely wrong. Once a man is dead, if it be only yesterday, the new-comer must piece him together from descriptions really as much at random as if he were describing Cæsar or Henry II. Allowing, however, for this inevitable falsity, a figure vivid and a little fantastic, does walk across the stage of Forster's " Life."

Dickens was of a middle size and his vivacity and relative physical insignificance probably gave rather the impression of small size; certainly of the absence of bulk. In early life he wore, even for that epoch, extravagant clusters of brown hair, and in later years a brown moustache and a fringe of brown beard (cut like a sort of broad and bushy imperial) sufficiently individual in shape to give him a faint air as of a foreigner. His face had a peculiar tint or quality which is hard to describe even after one has contrived to imagine it. It was the quality which Mrs. Carlyle felt to be, as it were metallic, and compared to clear steel. It was, I think, a sort of pale glitter and animation, very much alive and yet with something deathly about it, like a corpse galvanised by a god. His face (if this was so) was curiously a counterpart of his character. For the essence of all Dickens's character was that it was at once tremulous and yet hard and sharp, just as the bright blade of a sword is tremulous and yet hard and sharp. He vibrated at every touch and yet he was indestructible; you could bend him, but you could not break him. Brown of hair and beard, somewhat pale of visage (especially in his later days of excitement and ill-health), he had quite exceptionally bright and active eyes that were always darting about like brilliant birds to pick up all the tiny things of which he made more, perhaps, than any novelist has done; for he was a sort of poetical Sherlock Holmes. The mouth behind the brown beard was large and mobile, like the mouth of an actor; indeed he was an actor, in many things too much of an actor. In his lectures, in later years, he could turn his strange face into any of the innumerable mad masks that were the faces of his grotesque characters. He could make his face fall suddenly into the blank inanity of Mrs. Raddle's servant, or swell, as if to twice its size, into the apoplectic energy of Mr. Serjeant Buzfuz. But the outline of his face itself, from his youth upwards, was cut quite

delicate and decisive and in repose, and in its own keen way, may even have looked effeminate.

The dress of the comfortable classes during the later years of Dickens was, compared with ours, somewhat slipshod and somewhat gaudy. It was the time of loose pegtop trousers of an almost Turkish oddity, of large ties, of loose short jackets and of loose long whiskers. Yet even this expansive period, it must be confessed, considered Dickens a little too flashy or, as some put it, too Frenchified in his dress. Such a man would wear velvet coats and wild waistcoats that were like incredible sunsets; he would wear those old white hats of an unnecessary and startling whiteness. He did not mind being seen in sensational dressing-gowns; it is said he had his portrait painted in one of them. All this is not meritorious; neither is it particularly discreditable; it is a characteristic only, but an important one. He was an absolutely independent and entirely self-respecting man. But he had none of that old lusty, half-dignified English feeling upon which Thackeray was so sensitive; I mean the desire to be regarded as a private gentleman, which means at bottom the desire to be left alone. This again is not a merit; it is only one of the milder aspects of aristocracy. But meritorious or not, Dickens did not possess it. He had no objection to being stared at, if he were also admired. He did not exactly pose in the oriental manner of Disraeli; his instincts were too clean for that; but he did pose somewhat in the French manner, of some leaders like Mirabeau and Gambetta. Nor had he the dull desire to "get on" which makes men die contented as inarticulate Under-Secretaries of State. He did not desire success so much as fame, the old human glory, the applause and wonder of the people. Such he was as he walked down the street in his Frenchified clothes, probably with a slight swagger.

His private life consisted of one tragedy and ten thousand comedies. By one tragedy I mean one real and rending moral tragedy -- the failure of his marriage. He loved his children dearly, and more than one of them died; but in sorrows like these there is no violence and above all no shame. The end of life is not tragic like the end of love. And by the ten thousand comedies I mean the whole texture of his life, his letters, his conversation, which were one incessant carnival of insane and inspired improvisation So far as he could prevent it, he never permitted a day of his life to be ordinary. There was always some prank, some impetuous proposal, some practical joke, some sudden hospitality, some sudden disappearance. It is related of him (I give one anecdote out of a hundred) that in his last visit to America, when he was already reeling as it were under the blow that was to be mortal, he remarked quite casually to his companions that a row of painted cottages looked exactly like the painted shops in a pantomime. No sooner had the suggestion passed his lips than he leapt at the nearest doorway and in exact imitation of the clown in the harlequinade, beat conscientiously with his fist, not on the door (for that would have burst the canvas scenery of course), but on the side of the doorpost. Having done this he lay down ceremoniously across the doorstep for the owner to fall over him if he should come rushing out. He then got up gravely and went on his way. His whole life was full of such unexpected energies, precisely like those of the pantomime clown. Dickens had indeed a great and fundamental affinity with the landscape, or rather house-scape, of the harlequinade. He liked high houses, and sloping roofs, and deep areas. But he would have been really happy if some good fairy of the eternal pantomime

had given him the power of flying off the roofs and pitching harmlessly down the height of the houses and bounding out of the areas like an indiarubber ball. The divine lunatic in "Nicholas Nickleby" comes nearest to his dream. I really think Dickens would rather have been that one of his characters than any of the others. With what excitement he would have struggled down the chimney. With what ecstatic energy he would have hurled the cucumbers over the garden wall.

His letters exhibit even more the same incessant creative force. His letters are as creative as any of his literary creation. His shortest postcard is often as good as his ablest novel; each one of them is spontaneous; each one of them is different. He varies even the form and shape of the letter as far as possible; now it is in absurd French; now it is from one of his characters; now it is an advertisement for himself as a stray dog. All of them are very funny; they are not only very funny, but they are quite as funny as his finished and published work. This is the ultimately amazing thing about Dickens; the amount there is of him. He wrote, at the very least, sixteen thick important books packed full of original creation. And if you had burnt them all he could have written sixteen more, as a man writes idle letters to his friend.

In connection with this exuberant part of his nature there is another thing to be noted, if we are to make a personal picture of him. Many modern people, chiefly women, have been heard to object to the Bacchic element in the books of Dickens, that celebration of social drinking as a supreme symbol of social living, which those books share with almost all the great literature of mankind, including the New Testament. Undoubtedly there is an abnormal amount of drinking in a page of Dickens, as there is an abnormal amount of fighting, say, in a page of Dumas. If you reckon up the beers and brandies of Mr. Bob Sawyer, with the care of an arithmetician and the deductions of a pathologist, they rise alarmingly like a rising tide at sea. Dickens did defend drink clamorously, praised it with passion, and described whole orgies of it with enormous gusto. Yet it is wonderfully typical of his prompt and impatient nature that he himself drank comparatively little. He was the type of man who could be so eager in praising the cup that he left the cup untasted. It was a part of his active and feverish temperament that he did not drink wine very much. But it was a part of his humane philosophy, of his religion, that he did drink wine. To healthy European philosophy wine is a symbol; to European religion it is a sacrament. Dickens approved it because it was a great human institution, one of the rites of civilisation, and this it certainly is. The teetotaller who stands outside it may have perfectly clear ethical reasons of his own, as a man may have who stands outside education or nationality, who refuses to go to a University or to serve in an Army. But he is neglecting one of the great social things that man has added to nature. The teetotaller has chosen a most unfortunate phrase for the drunkard when he says that the drunkard is making a beast of himself. The man who drinks ordinarily makes nothing but an ordinary man of himself. The man who drinks excessively makes a devil of himself. But nothing connected with a human and artistic thing like wine can bring one nearer to the brute life of nature. The only man who is, in the exact and literal sense of the words, making a beast of himself is the teetotaller.

The tone of Dickens towards religion, though like that of most of his contemporaries, philosophically disturbed and rather historically ignorant, had an element that was very characteristic of himself. He had all the prejudices of his time. He had, for instance, that dislike of defined dogmas, which really means a preference for unexamined dogmas. He had the usual vague notion that the whole of our human past was packed with nothing but insane Tories. He had, in a word, al the old Radical ignorances which went along with the old Radical acuteness and courage and public spirit. But this spirit tended, in almost all the others who held it, to a specific dislike of the Church of England; and a disposition to set the other sects against it, as truer types of inquiry, or of individualism. Dickens had a definite tenderness for the Church of England. He might have even called it a weakness for the Church of England, but he had it. Something in those placid services, something in that reticent and humane liturgy pleased him against all the tendencies of his time; pleased him in the best part of himself, his virile love of charity and peace. Once, in a puff of anger at the Church's political stupidity (which is indeed profound), he left it for a week or two and went to an Unitarian Chapel; in a week or two he came back. This curious and sentimental hold of the English Church upon him increased with years. In the book he was at work on when he died he describes the Minor Canon, humble, chivalrous, tender-hearted, answering with indignant simplicity the froth and platform righteousness of the sectarian philanthropist. He upholds Canon Crisparkle and satirises Mr. Honeythunder. Almost every one of the other Radicals, his friends, would have upheld Mr. Honeythunder and satirised Canon Crisparkle.

I have mentioned this matter for a special reason. It brings us back to that apparent contradiction or dualism in Dickens to which, in one connection or another, I have often adverted, and which, in one shape or another, constitutes the whole crux of his character. I mean the union of a general wildness approaching lunacy, with a sort of secret moderation almost amounting to mediocrity. Dickens was, more or less, the man I have described -- sensitive, theatrical, amazing, a bit of a dandy, a bit of a buffoon. Nor are such characteristics, whether weak or wild, entirely accidents or externals. He had some false theatrical tendencies integral in his nature. For instance, he had one most unfortunate habit, a habit that often put him in the wrong, even when he happened to be in the right. He had an incurable habit of explaining himself. This reduced his admirers to the mental condition of the authentic but hitherto uncelebrated little girl who said to her mother, "I think I should understand if only you wouldn't explain." Dickens always would explain. It was a part of that instinctive publicity of his which made him at once a splendid democrat and a little too much of an actor. He carried it to the craziest lengths. He actually printed, in *Household Words*, an apology for his own action in the matter of his marriage. That incident alone is enough to suggest that his external offers and proposals were sometimes like screams heard from Bedlam. Yet it remains true that he had in him a central part that was pleased only by the most decent and the most reposeful rites, by things of which the Anglican Prayer-book is very typical. It is certainly true that he was often extravagant. It is most certainly equally true that he detested and despised extravagance.

The best explanation can be found in his literary genius. His literary genius consisted in a contradictory capacity at once to entertain and to deride -- very ridiculous ideas. If he is a

buffoon, he is laughing at buffoonery. His books were in some ways the wildest on the face of the world. Rabelais did not introduce into Paphlagonia or the Kingdom of the Coqcigrues satiric figures more frantic and misshapen than Dickens made to walk about the Strand and Lincoln's Inn. But for all that, you come, in the core of him, on a sudden quietude and good sense. Such, I think, was the core of Rabelais, such were all the far-stretching and violent satirists. This is a point essential to Dickens, though very little comprehended in our current tone of thought. Dickens was an immoderate jester, but a moderate thinker. He was an immoderate jester because he was a moderate thinker. What we moderns call the wildness of his imagination was actually created by what we moderns call the tameness of his thought. I mean that he felt the full insanity of all extreme tendencies, because he was himself so sane; he felt eccentricities, because he was in the centre. We are always, in these days, asking our violent prophets to write violent satires; but violent prophets can never possibly write violent satires. In order to write satire like that of Rabelais -- satire that juggles with the stars and kicks the world about like a football -- it is necessary to be one's self temperate, and even mild. A modern man like Nietzsche, a modern man like Gorky, a modern man like d'Annunzio, could not possibly write real and riotous satire. They are themselves too much on the borderlands. They could not be a success as caricaturists, for they are already a great success as caricatures.

I have mentioned his religious preference merely as an instance of this interior moderation. To say, as some have done, that he attacked Nonconformity is quite a false way of putting it. It is clean across the whole trend of the man and his time to suppose that he could have felt bitterness against any theological body as a theological body; but anything like religious extravagance, whether Protestant or Catholic, moved him to an extravagance of satire. And he flung himself into the drunken energy of Stiggins, he piled up to the stars the "verbose flights of stairs" of Mr. Chadband, exactly because his own conception of religion was the quiet and impersonal Morning Prayer. It is typical of him that he had a peculiar hatred for speeches at the grave-side.

An even clearer case of what I mean can be found in his political attitude. He seemed to some an almost anarchic satirist. He made equal fun of the system which reformers made war on, and of the instruments on which reformers relied. He made no secret of his feeling that the average English premier was an accidental ass. In two superb sentences he summed up and swept away the whole British constitution: "England, for the last week, has been in an awful state. Lord Coodle would go out, Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn't come in, and there being no people in England to speak of except Coodle and Doodle, the country has been without a government." He lumped all cabinets and all government offices together, and made the same game of them all. He created his most staggering humbugs, his most adorable and incredible idiots, and set them in the highest thrones of our national system. To many moderate and progressive people, such a satirist seemed to be insulting heaven and earth, ready to wreck society for some mad alternative, prepared to pull down St. Paul's, and on its ruins erect a gory guillotine. Yet as a matter of fact, this apparent wildness of his came from his being, if anything, a very moderate politician. It came, not at all from fanaticism, but from a rather rational detachment. He had the sense to see that the British Constitution was not democracy, but the British

Constitution. It was an artificial system -- like any other, good in some ways, bad in others. His satire of it sounded wild to those that worshipped it; but his satire of it arose not from his having any wild enthusiasm against it, but simply from his not having, like every one else, a wild enthusiasm for it. Alone, as far as I know, among all the great Englishmen of that age, he realised the thing that Frenchmen and Irishmen understand. I mean the fact that popular government is one thing, and representative government another. He realised that representative government has many minor disadvantages, one of them being that it is never representative. He speaks of his "hope to have made every man in England feel something of the contempt for the House of Commons that I have." He says also these two things, both of which are wonderfully penetrating as coming from a good Radical in 1855, for they contain a perfect statement of the peril in which we now stand, and which may, if it please God, sting us into avoiding the long vista at the end of which one sees so closely the dignity and the decay of Venice --

"I am hourly strengthened," he says, "in my old belief, that our political aristocracy and our tuft-hunting are the death of England. In all this business I don't see a gleam of hope. As to the popular spirit, it has come to be so entirely separated from the Parliament and the Government, and so perfectly apathetic about them both, that I seriously think it a most portentous sign." And he says also this: "I really am serious in thinking -- and I have given as painful consideration to the subject as a man with children to live and suffer after him can possibly give it -- that representative government is become altogether a failure with us, that the English gentilities and subserviences render the people more unfit for it, and the whole thing has broken down since the great seventeenth-century time, and has no hope in it."

These are the words of a wise and perhaps melancholy man, but certainly not of an unduly excited one. It is worth noting, for instance, how much more directly Dickens goes to the point than Carlyle did, who noted many of the same evils. But Carlyle fancied that our modern English government was wordy and long-winded because it was democratic government. Dickens saw, what is certainly the fact, that it is wordy and long-winded because it is aristocratic government, the two most pleasant aristocratic qualities being a love of literature and an unconsciousness of time. But all this amounts to the same conclusion of the matter. Frantic figures like Stiggins and Chadband were created out of the quietude of his religious preference. Wild creations like the Barnacles and the Bounderbys were produced in a kind of ecstasy of the ordinary, of the obvious in political justice. His monsters were made out of his level and his moderation, as the old monsters were made out of the level sea.

Such was the man of genius we must try to imagine; violently emotional, yet with a good judgment; pugnacious, but only when he thought himself oppressed; prone to think himself oppressed, yet not cynical about human motives. He was a man remarkably hard to understand or to reanimate. He almost always had reasons for his action; his error was that he always expounded them. Sometimes his nerve snapped; and then he was mad. Unless it did so he was quite unusually sane.

Such a rough sketch at least must suffice us in order to summarise his later years. Those years were occupied, of course, in two main additions to his previous activities. The first was the series of public readings and lectures which he now began to give systematically. The second was his successive editorship of *Household Words* and of *All the Year Round*. He was of a type that enjoys every new function and opportunity. He had been so many things in his life, a reporter, an actor, a conjuror, a poet. As he had enjoyed them all, so he enjoyed being a lecturer, and enjoyed being an editor. It is certain that his audiences (who sometimes stacked themselves so thick that they lay flat on the platform all round him) enjoyed his being a lecturer. It is not so certain that the sub-editors enjoyed his being an editor. But in both connections the main matter of importance is the effect on the permanent work of Dickens himself. The readings were important for this reason, that they fixed, as if by some public and pontifical pronouncement, what was Dickens's interpretation of Dickens's work. Such a knowledge is mere tradition, but it is very forcible. My own family has handed on to me, and I shall probably hand on to the next generation, a definite memory of how Dickens made his face suddenly like the face of an idiot in impersonating Mrs. Raddle's servant, Betsy. This does serve one of the permanent purposes of tradition; it does make it a little more difficult for any ingenious person to prove that Betsy was meant to be a brilliant satire on the over-cultivation of the intellect.

As for his relation to his two magazines, it is chiefly important, first for the admirable things that he wrote m the magazines himself (one cannot forbear to mention the inimitable monologue of the waiter in "Somebody's Luggage"), and secondly for the fact that in his capacity of editor he made one valuable discovery. He discovered Wilkie Collins. Wilkie Collins was the one man of unmistakable genius who has a certain affinity with Dickens; an affinity in this respect, that they both combine in a curious way a modern and cockney and even commonplace opinion about things with a huge elemental sympathy with strange oracles and spirits and old night. There were no two men in Mid-Victorian England, with their top-hats and umbrellas, more typical of its rationality and dull reform; and there were no two men who could touch them at a ghost-story. No two men would have more contempt for superstitions; and no two men could so create the superstitious thrill. Indeed, our modern mystics make a mistake when they wear long hair or loose ties to attract the spirits. The elves and the old gods when they revisit the earth really go straight for a dull top-hat. For it means simplicity, which the gods love.

Meanwhile his books, appearing from time to time, while as brilliant as ever, bore witness to that increasing tendency to a more careful and responsible treatment which we have remarked in the transition which culminated in "Bleak House." His next important book, "Hard Times," strikes an almost unexpected note of severity. The characters are indeed exaggerated but they are bitterly and deliberately exaggerated; they are not exaggerated with the old unconscious high spirits of Nicholas Nickleby or Martin Chuzzlewit. Dickens exaggerates Bounderby because he really hates him. He exaggerated Pecksniff because he really loved him. "Hard Times" is not one of the greatest books of Dickens; but it is perhaps in a sense one of his greatest monuments. It stamps and records the reality of Dickens's emotion on a great many things that were then considered unphilosophical grumblings, but which since have swelled into the immense phenomena

of the socialist philosophy. To call Dickens a Socialist is a wild exaggeration; but the truth and peculiarity of his position might be expressed thus: that even when everybody thought that Liberalism meant individualism he was emphatically a Liberal and emphatically not an individualist. Or the truth might be better still stated in this manner: that he saw that there was a secret thing, called humanity, to which both extreme socialism and extreme individualism were profoundly and inexpressibly indifferent, and that this permanent and presiding humanity was the thing he happened to understand; he knew that individualism is nothing and non-individualism is nothing but the keeping of the commandment of man. He felt, as a novelist should, that the question is too much discussed as to whether a man is in favour of this or that scientific philosophy; that there is another question, whether the scientific philosophy is in favour of the man. That is why such books as "Hard Times" will remain always a part of the power and tradition of Dickens. He saw that economic systems are not things like the stars, but things like the lamp-posts, manifestations of the human mind, and things to be judged by the human heart.

Thenceforward until the end his books grow consistently graver, and as it were, more responsible; he improves as an artist if not always as a creator. "Little Dorrit" (published in 1857) is at once in some ways so much more subtle and in every way so much more sad than the rest of his work that it bores Dickensians and especially pleases George Gissing. It is the only one of the Dickens tales which could please Gissing, not only by its genius, but also by its atmosphere. There is something a little modern and a little sad, something also out of tune with the main trend of Dickens's moral feeling, about the description of the character of Dorrit as actually and finally weakened by his wasting experiences, as not lifting any cry above the conquered years. It is but a faint fleck of shadow. But the illimitable white light of human hopefulness, of which I spoke at the beginning, is ebbing away, the work of the revolution is growing weaker everywhere; and the night of necessitarianism cometh when no man can work. For the first time in a book by Dickens perhaps we really do feel that the hero is forty-five. Clennam is certainly very much older than Mr. Pickwick.

This was indeed only a fugitive grey cloud; he went on to breezier operations. But whatever they were, they still had the note of the later days. They' have a more cautious craftsmanship; they have a more mellow and a more mixed human sentiment. Shadows fell upon his page from the other and sadder figures out of the Victorian decline. A good instance of this is his next book, "The Tale of Two Cities" (1859). In dignity and eloquence it almost stands alone among the books by Dickens. But it also stands alone among his books in this respect, that it is not entirely by Dickens. It owes its inspiration avowedly to the passionate and cloudy pages of Carlyle's "French Revolution." And there is something quite essentially inconsistent between Carlyle's disturbed and half-sceptical transcendentalism and the original school and spirit to which Dickens belonged, the lucid and laughing decisiveness of the old convinced and contented Radicalism. Hence the genius of Dickens cannot save him, just as the great genius of Carlyle could not save him from making a picture of the French Revolution, which was delicately and yet deeply erroneous. Both tend too much to represent it as a mere elemental outbreak of hunger or vengeance; they do not see enough that it was a war for intellectual principles, even for

intellectual platitudes. We, the modern English, cannot easily understand the French Revolution, because we cannot easily understand the idea of bloody battle for pure common sense; we cannot understand common sense in arms and conquering. In modern England common sense appears to mean putting up with existing conditions. For us a practical politician really means a man who can be thoroughly trusted to do nothing at all; that is where his practicality comes in. The French feeling -- the feeling at the back of the Revolution -- was that the more sensible a man was, the more you must look out for slaughter.

In all the imitators of Carlyle, including Dickens, there is an obscure sentiment that the thing for which the Frenchmen died must have been something new and queer, a paradox, a strange idolatry. But when such blood ran in the streets, it was for the sake of a truism; when those cities were shaken to their foundations, they were shaken to their foundations by a truism.

I have mentioned this historical matter because it illustrates these later and more mingled influences which at once improve and as it were perplex the later work of Dickens. For Dickens had in his original mental composition capacities for understanding this cheery and sensible element in the French Revolution far better than Carlyle. The French Revolution was, among other things, French, and, so far as that goes, could never have a precise counterpart in so jolly and autochthonous an Englishman as Charles Dickens. But there was a great deal of the actual and unbroken tradition of the Revolution itself in his early radical indictments; in his denunciation of the Fleet Prison there was a great deal of the capture of the Bastille. There was, above all, a certain reasonable impatience which was the essence of the old Republican, and which is quite unknown to the Revolutionist in modern Europe. The old Radical did not feel exactly that he was "in revolt"; he felt if anything that a number of idiotic institutions had revolted against reason and against him. Dickens, I say, had the revolutionary idea, though an English form of it, by clear and conscious inheritance; Carlyle had to rediscover the Revolution by a violence of genius and vision. If Dickens, then, took from Carlyle (as he said he did) his image of the Revolution, it does certainly mean that he had forgotten something of his own youth and come under the more complex influences of the end of the nineteenth century. His old hilarious and sentimental view of human nature seems for a moment dimmed in "Little Dorrit." His old political simplicity has been slightly disturbed by Carlyle.

I repeat that this graver note is varied, but it remains a graver note. We see it struck, I think, with particular and remarkable success in "Great Expectations" (1860-61). This fine story is told with a consistency and quietude of individuality which is rare in Dickens. But so far had he travelled along the road of a heavier reality, that he even intended to give the tale an unhappy ending, making Pip lose Estella for ever; and he was only dissuaded from it by the robust romanticism of Bulwer Lytton. But the best part of the tale -- the account of the vacillations of the hero between the humble life to which he owes everything, and the gorgeous life from which he expects something, touches a very true and somewhat tragic part of morals; for the great paradox of morality (the paradox to which only the religions have given an adequate expression) is that the very vilest kind of fault is exactly the most easy kind. We read in books and ballads about the wild fellow

who might kill a man or smoke opium, but who would never stoop to lying or cowardice or to "anything mean." But for actual human beings opium and slaughter have only occasional charm; the permanent human temptation is the temptation to be mean. The one standing probability is the probability of becoming a cowardly hypocrite. The circle of the traitors is the lowest of the abyss, and it is also the easiest to fall into. That is one of the ringing realities of the Bible, that it does not make its great men commit grand sins; it makes its great men (such as David and St. Peter) commit small sins and behave like sneaks.

Dickens has dealt with this easy descent of desertion, this silent treason, with remarkable accuracy in the account of the indecisions of Pip. It contains a good suggestion of that weak romance which is the root of all snobbishness: that the mystery which belongs to patrician life excites us more than the open, even the indecent virtues of the humble. Pip is keener about Miss Havisham, who may mean well by him, than about Joe Gargery, who evidently does. All this is very strong and wholesome; but it is still a little stern. "Our Mutual Friend," 1864, brings us back a little into his merrier and more normal manner; some of the satire, such as that upon Veneering's election, is in the best of his old style, so airy and fanciful, yet hitting so suddenly and so hard. But even here we find the fuller and more serious treatment of psychology; notably in the two facts that he creates a really human villain, Bradley Headstone, and also one whom we might call a really human hero, Eugene, if it were not that he is much too human to be called a hero at all. It has been said (invariably by cads) that Dickens never described a gentleman; it is like saying that he never described a zebra. A gentleman is a very rare animal among human creatures, and to people like Dickens, interested in all humanity, not a supremely important one. But in Eugene Wrayburne he does, whether consciously or not, turn that accusation with a vengeance. For he not only describes a gentleman but describes the inner weakness and peril that belong to a gentleman, the devil that is always rending the entrails of an idle and agreeable man. In Eugene's purposeless pursuit of Lizzie Hexam, in his yet more purposeless torturing of Bradley Headstone, the author has marvellously realised that singular empty obstinacy that drives the whims and pleasures of a leisured class. He sees that there is nothing that such a man more stubbornly adheres to, than the thing that he does not particularly want to do. We are still in serious psychology.

His last book represents yet another new departure, dividing him from the chaotic Dickens of days long before. His last book is not merely an attempt to improve his power of construction in a story: it is an attempt to rely entirely on that power of construction. It not only has a plot, it is a plot. "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," 1870, was in such a sense, perhaps the most ambitious book that Dickens ever attempted. It is, as every one knows, a detective story, and certainly a very successful one, as is attested by the tumult of discussion as to its proper solution. In this, quite apart from its unfinished state, it stands, I think, alone among the author's works. Elsewhere, if he introduced a mystery, he seldom took the trouble to make it very mysterious. "Bleak House" is finished, but if it were only half finished I think anyone would guess that Lady Dedlock and Nemo had sinned in the past. "Edwin Drood" is not finished; for in the very middle of it Dickens died.

He had altogether overstrained himself in a last lecturing tour in America. He was a man in whom any serious malady would naturally make very rapid strides; for he had the temper of an irrational invalid. I have said before that there was in his curious character something that was feminine. Certainly there was nothing more entirely feminine than this, that he worked because he was tired. Fatigue bred in him a false and feverish industry, and his case increased, like the case of a man who drinks to cure the effects of drink. He died in 1870 and the whole nation mourned him as no public man has ever been mourned; for prime ministers and princes were private persons compared with Dickens. He had been a great popular king, like a king of some more primal age whom his people could come and see, giving judgment under an oak tree. He had in essence held great audiences of millions, and made proclamations to more than one of the nations of the earth. His obvious omnipresence in every part of public life was like the omnipresence of the sovereign. His secret omnipresence in every house and hut of private life was more like the omnipresence of a deity. Compared with that popular leadership all the fusses of the last forty years are diversions in idleness. Compared with such a case as his it may be said that we play with our politicians, and manage to endure our authors. We shall never have again such a popularity until we have again a people.

He left behind him this almost sombre fragment, "The Mystery of Edwin Drood." As one turns it over the tragic element of its truncation mingles somewhat with an element of tragedy in the thing itself; the passionate and predestined Landless, or the half maniacal Jasper carving devils out of his own heart. The workmanship of it is very fine; the right hand has not only not lost, but is still gaining its cunning. But as we turn the now enigmatic pages the thought creeps into us again which I have suggested earlier, and which is never far off the mind of a true lover of Dickens. Had he lost or gained by the growth of technique and probability in his later work? His later characters were more like men; but were not his earlier characters more like immortals? He has become able to perform a social scene so that it is possible at any rate; but where is that Dickens who once performed the impossible? Where is that young poet who created such majors and architects as Nature will never dare to create? Dickens learnt to describe daily life as Thackeray and Jane Austen could describe it; but Thackeray could not have thought such a thought as Crummles; and it is painful to think of Miss Austen attempting to imagine Mantalini. After all, we feel there are many able novelists; but there is only one Dickens, and whither has he fled?

He was alive to the end. And in this last dark and secretive story of Edwin Drood he makes one splendid and staggering appearance, like a magician saying farewell to mankind. In the centre of this otherwise reasonable and rather melancholy book, this grey story of a good clergyman and the quiet Cloisterham Towers, Dickens has calmly inserted one entirely delightful and entirely insane passage. I mean the frantic and inconceivable epitaph of Mrs. Sapsea, that which describes her as "the reverential wife" of Thomas Sapsea, speaks of her consistency in "looking up to him," and ends with the words, spaced out so admirably on the tombstone, "Stranger pause. And ask thyself this question, Canst thou do likewise? If not, with a blush retire." Not the wildest tale in Pickwick contains such an impossibility as that; Dickens dare scarcely have introduced it, even as one of Jingle's lies. In no human churchyard will you find that invaluable

tombstone; indeed, you could scarcely find it in any world where there are churchyards. You could scarcely have such immortal folly as that in a world where there is also death. Mr. Sapsea is one of the golden things stored up for us in a better world.

Yes, there were many other Dickenses: a clever Dickens, an industrious Dickens, a public-spirited Dickens; but this was the great one. This last outbreak of insane humour reminds us wherein lay his power and his supremacy. The praise of such beatific buffoonery should be the final praise, the ultimate word in his honour. The wild epitaph of Mrs. Sapsea should be the serious epitaph of Dickens.

CHAPTER X

THE GREAT DICKENS CHARACTERS

All criticism tends too much to become criticism of criticism; and the reason is very evident. It is that criticism of creation is so very staggering a thing. We see this in the difficulty of criticising any artistic creation. We see it again in the difficulty of criticising that creation which is spelt with a capital C. The pessimists who attack the Universe are always under this disadvantage. They have an exhilarating consciousness that they could make the sun and moon better; but they also have the depressing consciousness that they could not make the sun and moon at all. A man looking at a hippopotamus may sometimes be tempted to regard a hippopotamus as an enormous mistake; but he is also bound to confess that a fortunate inferiority prevents him personally from making such mistakes. It is neither a blasphemy nor an exaggeration to say that we feel something of the same difficulty in judging of the very creative element in human literature. And this is the first and last dignity of Dickens; that he was a creator. He did not point out things, he made them. We may disapprove of Mr. Guppy, but we recognise him as a creation flung down like a miracle out of an upper sphere; we can pull him to pieces, but we could not have put him together. We can destroy Mrs. Gamp in our wrath, but we could not have made her in our joy. Under this disadvantage any book about Dickens must definitely labour. Real primary creation (such as the sun or the birth of a child) calls forth not criticism, not appreciation, but a kind of incoherent gratitude. This is why most hymns about God are bad; and this is why most eulogies on Dickens are bad. The eulogists of the divine and of the human creator are alike inclined to appear sentimentalists because they are talking about something as very real. In the same way love-letters always sound florid and artificial because they are about something real.

Any chapter such as this chapter must therefore in a sense be inadequate. There is no way of dealing properly with the ultimate greatness of Dickens, except by offering sacrifice to him as a god; and this is opposed to the etiquette of our time. But something can perhaps be done in the way of suggesting what was the quality of this creation. But even in considering its quality we ought to remember that quality is not the whole question. One of the godlike things about Dickens is his quantity, his quantity as such, the enormous output, the incredible fecundity of his invention, I have said a moment ago that not one of

us could have invented Mr. Guppy. But even if we could have stolen Mr. Guppy from Dickens we have still to confront the fact that Dickens would have been able to invent another quite inconceivable character to take his place. Perhaps we could have created Mr. Guppy; but the effort would certainly have exhausted us; we should be ever afterwards wheeled about in a bath-chair at Bournemouth.

Nevertheless there is something that is worth saying about the quality of Dickens. At the very beginning of this review I remarked that the reader must be in a mood, at least, of democracy. To some it may have sounded irrelevant; but the Revolution was as much behind all the books of the nineteenth century as the Catholic religion (let us say) was behind all the colours and carving of the Middle Ages. Another great name of the nineteenth century will afford an evidence of this; and will also bring us most sharply to the problem of the literary quality of Dickens.

Of all these nineteenth-century writers there is none, in the noblest sense, more democratic than Walter Scott. As this may be disputed, and as it is relevant, I will expand the remark. There are two rooted spiritual realities out of which grow all kinds of democratic conception or sentiment of human equality. There are two things in which all men are manifestly and unmistakably equal. They are not equally clever or equally muscular or equally fat, as the sages of the modern reaction (with piercing insight) perceive. But this is a spiritual certainty, that all men are tragic. And this, again, is an equally sublime spiritual certainty, that all men are comic. No special and private sorrow can be so dreadful as the fact of having to die. And no freak or deformity can be so funny as the mere fact of having two legs. Every man is important if he loses his life; and every man is funny if he loses his hat, and has to run after it. And the universal test everywhere of whether a thing is popular, of the people, is whether it employs vigorously these extremes of the tragic and the comic. Shelley, for instance, was an aristocrat, if ever there was one in this world. He was a Republican, but he was not a democrat: in his poetry there is every perfect quality except this pungent and popular stab. For the tragic and the comic you must go, say, to Burns, a poor man. And all over the world, the folk literature, the popular literature, is the same. It consists of very dignified sorrow and very undignified fun. Its sad tales are of broken hearts; its happy tales are of broken heads.

These, I say, are two roots of democratic reality. But they have in more civilised literature, a more civilised embodiment of form. In literature such as that of the nineteenth century the two elements appear somewhat thus. Tragedy becomes a profound sense of human dignity. The other and jollier element becomes a delighted sense of human variety. The first supports equality by saying that all men are equally sublime. The second supports equality by observing that all men are equally interesting.

In this democratic aspect of the interest and variety of all men, there is, of course, no democrat so great as Dickens. But in the other matter, in the idea of the dignity of all men, I repeat that there is no democrat so great as Scott. This fact, which is the moral and enduring magnificence of Scott, has been astonishingly overlooked. His rich and dramatic effects are gained in almost every case by some grotesque or beggarly figure rising into a human pride and rhetoric. The common man, in the sense of the paltry man,

becomes the common man in the sense of the universal man. He declares his humanity. For the meanest of all the modernities has been the notion that the heroic is an oddity or variation, and that the things that unite us are merely flat or foul. The common things are terrible and startling, death, for instance, and first love: the things that are common are the things that are not commonplace. Into such high and central passions the comic Scott character will suddenly rise. Remember the firm and almost stately answer of the preposterous Nicol Jarvie when Helen Macgregor seeks to browbeat him into condoning lawlessness and breaking his bourgeois decency. That speech is a great monument of the middle class. Molière made M. Jourdain talk prose; but Scott made him talk poetry. Think of the rising and rousing voice of the dull and gluttonous Athelstane when he answers and overwhelms De Bracy. Think of the proud appeal of the old beggar in the "Antiquary" when he rebukes the duellists. Scott was fond of describing kings in disguise. But all his characters are kings in disguise. He was, with all his errors, profoundly possessed with the old religious conception, the only possible democratic basis, the idea that man himself is a king in disguise.

In all this Scott, though a Royalist and a Tory, had in the strangest way, the heart of the Revolution. For instance, he regarded rhetoric, the art of the orator, as the immediate weapon of the oppressed. All his poor men make grand speeches, as they did in the Jacobin Club, which Scott would have so much detested. And it is odd to reflect that he was, as an author, giving free speech to fictitious rebels while he was, as a stupid politician, denying it to real ones. But the point for us here is this that all this popular sympathy of his rests on the graver basis, on the dark dignity of man. "Can you find no way?" asks Sir Arthur Wardour of the beggar when they are cut off by the tide. "I'll give you a farm . . . I'll make you rich." . . . "Our riches will soon be equal," says the beggar, and looks out across the advancing sea.

Now, I have dwelt on this strong point of Scott because it is the best illustration of the one weak point of Dickens. Dickens had little or none of this sense of the concealed sublimity of every separate man. Dickens's sense of democracy was entirely of the other kind; it rested on the other of the two supports of which I have spoken. It rested on the sense that all men were wildly interesting and wildly varied. When a Dickens character becomes excited he becomes more and more himself. He does not, like the Scott beggar, turn more and more into man. As he rises he grows more and more into a gargoyle or grotesque. He does not, like the fine speaker in Scott, grow more classical as he grows more passionate, more universal as he grows more intense. The thing can only be illustrated by a special case. Dickens did more than once, of course, make one of his quaint or humble characters assert himself in a serious crisis or defy the powerful. There is, for instance, the quite admirable scene in which Susan Nipper (one of the greatest of Dickens's achievements) faces and rebukes Mr. Dombey. But it is still true (and quite appropriate in its own place and manner) that Susan Nipper remains a purely comic character throughout her speech, and even grows more comic as she goes on. She is more serious than usual in her meaning, but not more serious in her style. Dickens keeps the natural diction of Nipper, but makes her grow more Nipperish as she grows more warm. But Scott keeps the natural diction of Baillie Jarvie, but insensibly sobers and uplifts the style until it reaches a plain and appropriate eloquence. This plain and appropriate

eloquence was (except in a few places at the end of "Pickwick") almost unknown to Dickens. Whenever he made comic characters talk sentiment comically, as in the instance of Susan, it was a success, but an avowedly extravagant success. Whenever he made comic characters talk sentiment seriously it was an extravagant failure. Humour was his medium; his only way of approaching emotion. Wherever you do not get humour, you get unconscious humour.

As I have said elsewhere in this book Dickens was deeply and radically English; the most English of our great writers. And there is something very English in this contentment with a grotesque democracy; and in this absence of the eloquence and elevation of Scott. The English democracy is the most humorous democracy in the world. The Scotch democracy is the most dignified, while the whole abandon and satiric genius of the English populace come from its being quite undignified in every way. A comparison of the two types might be found, for instance, by putting a Scotch Labour Leader like Mr. Keir Hardie alongside an English Labour Leader like Mr. Will Crooks. Both are good men, honest, and responsible and compassionate; but we can feel that the Scotchman carries himself seriously and universally, the Englishman personally and with an obstinate humour. Mr. Keir Hardie wishes to hold up his head as Man, Mr. Crooks wishes to follow his nose as Crooks. Mr. Keir Hardie is very like a poor man in Walter Scott. Mr. Crooks is very like a poor man in Dickens.

Dickens then had this English feeling of a grotesque democracy. By that is more properly meant a vastly varying democracy. The intoxicating variety of men -- that was his vision and conception of human brotherhood. And certainly it is a great part of human brotherhood. In one sense things can only be equal if they are entirely different. Thus, for instance, people talk with a quite astonishing gravity about the inequality or equality of the sexes; as if there could possibly be any inequality between a lock and a key. Wherever there is no element of variety, wherever all the items literally have an identical aim, there is at once and of necessity inequality. A woman is only inferior to man in the matter of being not so manly; she is inferior in nothing else. Man is inferior to woman in so far as he is not a woman; there is no other reason. And the same applies in some degree to all genuine differences. It is a great mistake to suppose that love unites and unifies men. Love diversifies them, because love is directed towards individuality. The thing that really unites men and makes them like to each other is hatred. Thus, for instance, the more we love Germany the more pleased we shall be that Germany should be something different from ourselves, should keep her own ritual and conviviality and we ours. But the more we hate Germany the more we shall copy German guns and German fortifications in order to be armed against Germany. The more modern nations detest each other the more meekly they follow each other; for all competition is in its nature only a furious plagiarism. As competition means always similarity, it is equally true that similarity always means inequality. If everything is trying to be green, some things will be greener than others; but there is an immortal and indestructible equality between green and red. Something of the same kind of irrefutable equality exists between the violent and varying creations of such a writer as Dickens. They are all equally ecstatic fulfilments of a separate line of development. It would be hard to say that there could be any comparison or inequality, let us say between Mr. Sapsea and Mr. Elijah Pogram.

They are both in the same difficulty; they can neither of them contrive to exist in this world; they are both too big for the gate of birth.

Of the high virtue of this variation I shall speak more adequately in a moment; but certainly this love of mere variation (which I have contrasted with the classicism of Scott) is the only intelligent statement of the common case against the exaggeration of Dickens. This is the meaning, the only sane or endurable meaning, which people have in their minds when they say that Dickens is a mere caricaturist. They do not mean merely that Uncle Pumblechook does not exist. A fictitious character ought not to be a person who exists; he ought to be an entirely new combination, an addition to the creatures already existing on the earth. They do not mean that Uncle Pumblechook could not exist; for on that obviously they can have no knowledge whatever. They do not mean that Uncle Pumblechook's utterances are selected and arranged so as to bring out his essential Pumblechookery; to say that is simply to say that he occurs in a work of art. But what they do really mean is this, and there is an element of truth in it. They mean that Dickens nowhere makes the reader feel that Pumblechook has any kind of fundamental human dignity at all. It is nowhere suggested that Pumblechook will some day die. He is felt rather as one of the idle and evil fairies, who are innocuous and yet malignant, and who live for ever because they never really live at all. This dehumanised vitality, this fantasy, this irresponsibility of creation, does in some sense truly belong to Dickens. It is the lower side of his hilarious human variety. But now we come to the higher side of his human variety, and it is far more difficult to state.

Mr. George Gissing, from the point of view of the passing intellectualism of our day, has made (among his many wise tributes to Dickens) a characteristic complaint about him. He has said that Dickens, with all his undoubted sympathy for the lower classes, never made a working man, a poor man, specifically and highly intellectual. An exception does exist, which he must at least have realised -- a wit, a diplomatist, a great philosopher. I mean, of course, Mr. Weller. Broadly, however, the accusation has a truth, though it is a truth that Mr. Gissing did not grasp in its entirety. It is not only true that Dickens seldom made a poor character what we call intellectual; it is also true that he seldom made any character what we call intellectual. Intellectualism was not at all present to his imagination. What was present to his imagination was character -- a thing which is not only more important than intellect, but is also much more entertaining. When some English moralists write about the importance of having character, they appear to mean only the importance of having a dull character. But character is brighter than wit, and much more complex than sophistry. The whole superiority of the democracy of Dickens over the democracy of such a man as Gissing lies exactly in the fact that Gissing would have liked to prove that poor men could instruct themselves and could instruct others. It was of final importance to Dickens that poor men could amuse themselves and could amuse him. He troubled little about the mere education of that life; he declared two essential things about it -- that it was laughable, and that it was livable. The humble characters of Dickens do not amuse each other with epigrams; they amuse each other with themselves. The present that each man brings in hand is his own incredible personality. In the most sacred sense, and in the most literal sense of the phrase, he "gives himself away. Now, the man who gives himself away does the last act of generosity; he is

like a martyr, a lover, or a monk. But he is also almost certainly what we commonly call a fool.

The key of the great characters of Dickens is that they are all great fools. There is the same difference between a great fool and a small fool as there is between a great poet and a small poet. The great fool is a being who is above wisdom rather than below it. That element of greatness of which I spoke at the beginning of this book is nowhere more clearly indicated than in such characters. A man can be entirely great while he is entirely foolish. We see this in the epic heroes, such as Achilles. Nay, a man can be entirely great because he is entirely foolish. We see this in all the great comic characters of all the great comic writers of whom Dickens was the last. Bottom the Weaver is great because he is foolish; Mr. Toots is great because he is foolish. The thing I mean can be observed, for instance, in innumerable actual characters. Which of us has not known, for instance, a great rustic? -- a character so incurably characteristic that he seemed to break through all canons about cleverness or stupidity; we do not know whether he is an enormous idiot or an enormous philosopher; we know only that he is enormous, like a hill. These great, grotesque characters are almost entirely to be found where Dickens found them -- among the poorer classes. The gentry only attain this greatness by going slightly mad. But who has not known an unfathomably personal old nurse? Who has not known an abysmal butler? The truth is that our public life consists almost exclusively of small men. Our public men are small because they have to prove that they are in the commonplace interpretation clever, because they have to pass examinations, to learn codes of manners, to imitate a fixed type. It is in private life that we find the great characters. They are too great to get into the public world. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a great man to enter into the kingdoms of the earth. The truly great and gorgeous personality, he who talks as no one else could talk and feels with an elementary fire, you will never find this man on any cabinet bench, in any literary circle, at any society dinner. Least of all will you find him in artistic society; he is utterly unknown in Bohemia. He is more than clever, he is amusing. He is more than successful, he is alive. You will find him stranded here and there in all sorts of unknown positions, almost always in unsuccessful positions. You will find him adrift as an impecunious commercial traveller like Micawber. You will find him but one of a batch of silly clerks, like Swiveller. You will find him as an unsuccessful actor, like Crummles. You will find him as an unsuccessful doctor, like Sawyer. But you will always find this rich and reeking personality where Dickens found it -- among the poor. For the glory of this world is a very small and priggish affair, and these men are too large to get in line with it. They are too strong to conquer.

It is impossible to do justice to these figures because the essential of them is their multiplicity. The whole point of Dickens is that he not only made them, but made them by myriads; that he stamped his foot, and armies came out of the earth. But let us, for the sake of showing the true Dickens method, take one of them, a very sublime one, Toots. If affords a good example of the real work of Dickens, which was the revealing of a certain grotesque greatness inside an obscure and even unattractive type. It reveals the great paradox of all spiritual things; that the inside is always larger than the outside.

Toots is a type that we all know as well as we know chimney-pots. And of all conceivable human figures he is apparently the most futile and the most dull. He is the blockhead who hangs on at a private school, overgrown and under-developed. He is always backward in his lessons, but forward in certain cheap ways of the world; he can smoke before he can spell. Toots is a perfect and pungent picture of the wretched youth. Toots has, as this youth always has, a little money of his own; enough to waste in a semi-dissipation he does not enjoy, and in a gaping regard for sports in which he could not possibly excel. Toots has, as this youth always has, bits of surreptitious finery, in. his case the incomparable ring. In Toots, above all, is exactly rendered the central and most startling contradiction; the contrast between a jauntiness and a certain impudence of the attire, with the profound shame and sheepishness of the visage and the character. In him, too, is expressed the larger contrast between the external gaiety of such a lad's occupations, and the infinite, disconsolate sadness of his empty eyes. This is Toots;. we know him, we pity him, and we avoid him. Schoolmasters deal with him in despair or in a heart-breaking patience. His family is vague about him. His low-class hangers-on (like the Game Chicken) lead him by the nose. The very parasites that live on him despise him. But Dickens does not despise him. Without denying one of the dreary details which make us avoid the man, Dickens makes him a man whom we long to meet. He does not gloss over one of his dismal deficiencies, but he makes them seem suddenly like violent virtues that we would go to the world's end to see. Without altering one fact, he manages to alter the whole atmosphere, the whole universe of Toots. He makes us not only like, but love, not only love, but reverence this little dunce and cad. The power to do this is a power truly and literally to be called divine.

For this is the very wholesome point. Dickens does not alter Toots in any vital point. The thing he does alter is us. He makes us lively where we were bored, kind where we were cruel, and above all, free for an universal human laughter where we were cramped in a small competition about that sad and solemn tiling, the intellect. His enthusiasm fills us, as does the love of God, with a glorious shame; after all, he has only found in Toots what we might have found for ourselves. He has only made us as much interested in Toots as Toots is in himself. He does not alter the proportions of Toots; he alters only the scale; we seem as if we were staring at a rat risen to the stature of an elephant. Hitherto we have passed him by; now we feel that nothing could induce us to pass him by; that is the nearest way of putting the truth. He has not been whitewashed in the least; he has not been depicted as any cleverer than he is. He has been turned from a small fool into a great fool. We know Toots is not clever; but we are not inclined to quarrel with Toots because he is not clever. We are more likely to quarrel with cleverness because it is not Toots. All the examinations he could not pass, all the schools he could not enter, all the temporary tests of brain and culture which surrounded him shall pass, and Toots shall remain like a mountain.

It may be noticed that the great artists always choose great fools rather than great intellectuals to embody humanity. Hamlet does express the æsthetic dreams and the bewilderments of the intellect; but Bottom the Weaver expresses them much better. In the same manner Toots expresses certain permanent dignities in human nature more than any of Dickens's more dignified characters can do it. For instance, Toots expresses admirably

the enduring fear, which is the very essence of falling in love. When Toots is invited by Florence to come in, when he longs to come in, but still stays out, he is embodying a sort of insane and perverse humility which is elementary in the lover.

There is an apostolic injunction to suffer fools gladly. We always lay the stress on the word "suffer," and interpret the passage as one urging resignation. It might be better, perhaps, to lay the stress upon the word "gladly," and make our familiarity with fools a delight, and almost a dissipation. Nor is it necessary that our pleasure in fools (or at least in great and godlike fools) should be merely satiric or cruel. The great fool is he in whom we cannot tell which is the conscious and which the unconscious humour; we laugh with him and laugh at him at the same time. An obvious instance is that of ordinary and happy marriage. A man and a woman cannot live together without having against each other a kind of everlasting joke. Each has discovered that the other is a fool, but a great fool. This largeness, this grossness and gorgeousness of folly is the thing which we all find about those with whom we are in intimate contact; and it is the one enduring basis of affection, and even of respect. When we know an individual named Tomkins, we know that he has succeeded where all others have failed; he has succeeded in being Tomkins. Just so Mr. Toots succeeded; he was defeated in all scholastic examinations, but he was the victor in that visionary battle in which unknown competitors vainly tried to be Toots.

If we are to look for lessons, here at least is the last and deepest lesson of Dickens. It is in our own daily life that we are to look for the portents and the prodigies. This is the truth, not merely of the fixed figures of our life; the wife, the husband, the fool that fills the sky. It is true of the whole stream and substance of our daily experience; every instant we reject a great fool merely because he is foolish. Every day we neglect Tootses and Swivellers, Guppys and Joblings, Simmerys and Flashers. Every day we lose the last sight of Jobling and Chuckster, the Analytical Chemist, or the Marchioness. Every day we are missing a monster whom we might easily love, and an imbecile whom we should certainly admire.

This is the real gospel of Dickens; the inexhaustible opportunities offered by the liberty and the variety of man. Compared with this life, all public life, all fame, all wisdom, is by its nature cramped and cold and small. For on that defined and lighted public stage men are of necessity forced to profess one set of accomplishments, to rise to one rigid standard. It is the utterly unknown people who can grow in all directions like an exuberant tree. It is in our interior lives that we find that people are too much themselves. It is in our private life that we find them swelling into the enormous contours, and taking on the colours of caricature. Many of us live publicly with featureless public puppets, images of the small public abstractions. It is when we pass our own private gate, and open our own secret door, that we step into the land of the giants.

CHAPTER XI

ON THE ALLEGED OPTIMISM OF DICKENS

In one of the plays of the decadent period, an intellectual expressed the atmosphere of his epoch by referring to Dickens as "a vulgar optimist." I have in a previous chapter suggested something of the real strangeness of such a term. After all, the main matter of astonishment (or rather of admiration) is that optimism should be vulgar. In a world in which physical distress is almost the common lot, we actually complain that happiness is too common. In a world in which the majority is physically miserable we actually complain of the sameness of praise; we are bored with the abundance of approval. When we consider what the conditions of the vulgar really are, it is difficult to imagine a stranger or more splendid tribute to humanity than such a phrase as vulgar optimism. It is as if one spoke of "vulgar martyrdom" or "common crucifixion."

First, however, let it be said frankly that there is a foundation for the charge against Dickens which is implied in the phrase about vulgar optimism. It does not concern itself with Dickens's confidence in the value of existence and the intrinsic victory of virtue; that is not optimism but religion. It is not concerned with his habit of making bright occasions bright, and happy stories happy; that is not optimism, but literature. Nor is it concerned even with his peculiar genius for the description of an almost bloated joviality; that is not optimism, it is simply Dickens. With all these higher variations of optimism I deal elsewhere. But over and above all these there is a real sense in which Dickens laid himself open to the accusation of a vulgar optimism, and I desire to put the admission of this first, before the discussion that follows. Dickens did have a disposition to make his characters at all costs happy, or, to speak more strictly, he had a disposition to make them comfortable rather than happy. He had a sort of literary hospitality; he too often treated his characters as if they were his guests. From a host is always expected, and always ought to be expected as long as human civilisation is healthy, a strictly physical benevolence, if you will, a kind of coarse benevolence. Food and fire and such things should always be the symbols of the man entertaining men; because they are things which all men beyond question have in common. But something more than this is needed from a man who is imagining and making men, the artist, the man who is not receiving men, but rather sending them forth.

As I shall remark in a moment in the matter of the Dickens villains, it is not true that he made every one thus at home. But he did do it to a certain wide class of incongruous characters, he did it to all who had been in any way unfortunate. It had needed its origin (a very beautiful origin) in his realisation of how much a little pleasure was to such people. He knew well that the greatest happiness that has been known since Eden is the happiness of the unhappy. So far he is admirable. And as long as he was describing the ecstasy of the poor, the borderland between pain and pleasure, he was at his highest. Nothing that has ever been written about human delights, no Earthly Paradise, no Utopia has ever come so near the quick nerve of happiness as his descriptions of the rare extravagances of the poor; such an admirable description, for instance, as that of Kit Nubbles taking his family to the theatre. For he seizes on the real source of the whole pleasure; a holy fear. Kit tells the waiter to bring the beer. And the waiter, instead of saying, "Did you address that language to me," said, "Pot of beer, sir; yes, sir." That internal and quivering humility of Kit is the only way to enjoy life or banquets; and the

fear of the waiter is the beginning of dining. People in this mood "take their pleasures sadly"; which is the only way of taking them at all.

So far Dickens is supremely right. As long as he was dealing with such penury and such festivity his touch was almost invariably sure. But when he came to more difficult cases, to people who for one reason or another could not be cured with one good dinner, he did develop this other evil, this genuinely vulgar optimism of which I speak. And the mark of it is this: that he gave the characters a comfort that had no especial connection with themselves; he threw comfort at them like alms. There are cases at the end of his stories in which his kindness to his characters is a careless and insolent kindness. He loses his real charity and adopts the charity of the Charity Organisation Society; the charity that is not kind, the charity that is puffed up, and that does behave itself unseemly. At the end of some of his stories he deals out his characters a kind of out-door relief.

I will give two instances. The whole meaning of the character of Mr. Micawber is that a man can be always almost rich by constantly expecting riches. The lesson is a really important one in our sweeping modern sociology. We talk of the man whose life is a failure; but Micawber's life never is a failure, because it is always a crisis. We think constantly of the man who if he looked back would see that his existence was unsuccessful; but Micawber never does look back; he always looks forward, because the bailiff is coming to-morrow. You cannot say he is defeated, for his absurd battle never ends; he cannot despair of life, for he is so much occupied in living. All this is of immense importance in the understanding of the poor; it is worth all the slum novelists that ever insulted democracy. But how did it happen that the man who created this Micawber could pension him off at the end of the story and make him a successful colonial mayor? Micawber never did succeed, never ought to succeed; his kingdom is not of this world. But this is an excellent instance of Dickens's disposition to make his characters grossly and incongruously comfortable. There is another instance in the same book. Dora, the first wife of David Copperfield, is a very genuine and amusing figure; she has certainly far more force of character than Agnes. She represents the infinite and divine irrationality of the human heart. What possessed Dickens to make her such a dehumanised prig as to recommend her husband to marry another woman? One could easily respect a husband who after time and development made such a marriage, but surely not a wife who desired it. If Dora had died hating Agnes we should know that everything was right, and that God would reconcile the irreconcilable. When Dora dies recommending Agnes we know that everything is wrong, at least if hypocrisy and artificiality and moral vulgarity are wrong. There, again, Dickens yields to a mere desire to give comfort. He wishes to pile up pillows round Dora; and he smothers her with them, like Othello.

This is the real vulgar optimism of Dickens: it does exist; and I have deliberately put it first. Let us admit that Dickens's mind was far too much filled with pictures of satisfaction and cosiness and repose. Let us admit that he thought principally of the pleasures of the oppressed classes; let us admit that it hardly cost him any artistic pang to make out human beings as much happier than they are. Let us admit all this, and a curious fact remains.

For it was this too easily contented Dickens, this man with cushions at his back and (it sometimes seems) cotton wool in his ears; it was this happy dreamer, this vulgar optimist who alone of modern writers did really destroy some of the wrongs he hated and bring about some of the reforms he desired. Dickens did help to pull down the debtors' prisons; and if he was too much of an optimist he was quite enough of a destroyer. Dickens did drive Squeers out of his Yorkshire den; and if Dickens was too contented, it was more than Squeers was. Dickens did leave his mark on parochialism, on nursing, on funerals, on public executions, on workhouses, on the Court of Chancery. These things were altered; they are different. It may be that such reforms are not adequate remedies; that is another question altogether. The next sociologists may think these old Radical reforms quite narrow or accidental. But such as they were, the old Radicals got them done; and the new sociologists cannot get anything done at all. And in the practical doing of them Dickens played a solid and quite demonstrable part; that is the plain matter that concerns us here. If Dickens was an optimist he was an uncommonly active and useful kind of optimist. If Dickens was a sentimentalist he was a very practical sentimentalist.

And the reason of this is one that goes deep into Dickens's social reform, and like every other real and desirable thing, involves a kind of mystical contradiction. If we are to save the oppressed, we must have two apparently antagonistic emotions in us at the same time. We must think the oppressed man intensely miserable, and at the same time intensely attractive and important. We must insist with violence upon his degradation; we must insist with the same violence upon his dignity. For if we relax by one inch the one assertion, men will say he does not need saving. And if we relax by one inch the other assertion, men will say he is not worth saving. The optimists will say that reform is needless. The pessimists will say that reform is hopeless. We must apply both simultaneously to the same oppressed man; we must say that he is a worm and a god; and we must thus lay ourselves open to the accusation (or the compliment) of transcendentalism. This is, indeed, the strongest argument for the religious conception of life. If the dignity of man is an earthly dignity we shall be tempted to deny his earthly degradation. If it is a heavenly dignity we can admit the earthly degradation with all the candour of Zola. If we are idealists about the other world we can be realists about this world. But that is not here the point. What is quite evident is that if a logical praise of the poor man is pushed too far, and if a logical distress about him is pushed too far, either will involve wreckage to the central paradox of reform. If the poor man is made too admirable he ceases to be pitiable; if the poor man is made too pitiable he becomes merely contemptible. There is a school of smug optimists who will deny that he is a poor man. There is a school of scientific pessimists who will deny that he is a man.

Out of this perennial contradiction arises the fact that there are always two types of the reformer. The first we may call for convenience the pessimistic, the second the optimistic reformer. One dwells upon the fact that souls are being lost; the other dwells upon the fact that they are worth saving. Both, of course, are (so far as that is concerned) quite right, but they naturally tend to a difference of method, and sometimes to a difference of perception. The pessimistic reformer points out the good elements that oppression has destroyed; the optimistic reformer, with an even fiercer joy, points out the good elements that it has not destroyed. It is the case for the first reformer that slavery has made men

slavish. It is the case for the second reformer that slavery has not made men slavish. The first describes how bad men are under bad conditions. The second describes how good men are under bad conditions. Of the first class of writers, for instance, is Gorky. Of the second class of writers is Dickens.

But here we must register a real and somewhat startling fact. In the face of all apparent probability, it is certainly true that the optimistic reformer reforms much more completely than the pessimistic reformer. People produce violent changes by being contented, by being far too contented. The man who said that "revolutions are not made with rose-water" was obviously inexperienced in practical human affairs. Men like Rousseau and Shelley do make revolutions, and do make them with rose-water; that is, with a too rosy and sentimental view of human goodness. Figures that come before and create convulsion and change (for instance, the central figure of the New Testament) always have the air of walking in an unnatural sweetness and calm. They give us their peace ultimately in blood and battle and division; not as the world giveth give they unto us.

Nor is the real reason of the triumph of the too-contented reformer particularly difficult to define. He triumphs because he keeps alive in the human soul an invincible sense of the thing being worth doing, of the war being worth winning, of the people being worth their deliverance. I remember that Mr. William Archer, some time ago, published in one of his interesting series of interviews, an interview with Mr. Thomas Hardy. That powerful writer was represented as saying, in the course of the conversation, that he did not wish at the particular moment to define his opinion with regard to the ultimate problem of whether life itself was worth living. There are, he said, hundreds of remediable evils in this world. When we have remedied all these (such was his argument), it will be time enough to ask whether existence itself under its best possible conditions is valuable or desirable. Here we have presented, with a considerable element of what can only be called unconscious humour, the plain reason of the failure of the pessimist as a reformer. Mr. Hardy is asking us, I will not say to buy a pig in a poke; he is asking us to buy a poke on the remote chance of there being a pig in it. When we have for some few frantic centuries tortured ourselves to save mankind, it will then be "time enough" to discuss whether they can possibly be saved. When, in the case of infant mortality, for example, we have exhausted ourselves with the earthshaking efforts required to save the life of every individual baby, it will then be time enough to consider whether every individual baby would not have been happier dead. We are to remove mountains and bring the millennium, because then we can have a quiet moment to discuss whether the millennium is at all desirable. Here we have the low-water mark of the impotence of the sad reformer. And here we have the reason of the paradoxical triumph of the happy one. His triumph is a religious triumph; it rests upon his perpetual assertion of the value of the human soul and of human daily life. It rests upon his assertion that human life is enjoyable because it is human. And he will never admit, like so many compassionate pessimists, that human life ever ceases to be human. He does not merely pity the lowness of men; he feels an insult to their elevation. Brute pity should be given only to brutes. Cruelty to animals is cruelty and a vile thing; but cruelty to a man is not cruelty, it is treason. Tyranny over a man is not tyranny, it is rebellion, for man is royal. Now, the practical weakness of the vast mass of modern pity for the poor and the oppressed is precisely that it is merely pity;

the pity is pitiful, but not respectful. Men feel that the cruelty to the poor is a kind of cruelty to animals. They never feel that it is justice to equals; nay, it is treachery to comrades. This dark scientific pity, this brutal pity, has an elemental sincerity of its own; but it is entirely useless for all ends of social reform. Democracy swept Europe with the sabre when it was founded upon the Rights of Man. It has done literally nothing at all since it has been founded only upon the wrongs of man. Or, more strictly speaking, its recent failure has been due to its not admitting the existence of any rights, or wrongs, or indeed of any humanity. Evolution (the sinister enemy of revolution) does not especially deny the existence of God; what it does deny is the existence of man. And all the despair about the poor, and the cold and repugnant pity for them, has been largely due to the vague sense that they have literally relapsed into the state of the lower animals.

A writer sufficiently typical of recent revolutionism -- Gorky -- has called one of his books by the eerie and effective title "Creatures that once were Men." That title explains the whole failure of the Russian revolution. And the reason why the English writers, such as Dickens, did with all their limitations achieve so many of the actual things at which they aimed was that they could not possibly have put such a title upon a human hook. Dickens really helped the unfortunate in the matters to which he set himself. And the reason is that across all his books and sketches about the unfortunate might be written the common title, "Creatures that Still are Men."

There does exist, then, this strange optimistic reformer; the man whose work begins with approval and ends with earthquake. Jesus Christ was destined to found a faith which made the rich poorer and the poor rich; but even when He was going to enrich them, He began with the phrase, "Blessed are the poor." The Gissings and the Gorkys say, as an universal literary motto, "Cursed are the poor." Among a million who have faintly followed Christ in this divine contradiction, Dickens stands out especially. He said, in all his reforming utterances, "Cure poverty;" but he said in all his actual descriptions, "Blessed are the poor." He described their happiness, and men rushed to remove their sorrow. He described them as human, and men resented the insults to their humanity. It is not difficult to see why, as I said at an earlier stage of this book, Dickens's denunciations have had so much more practical an effect than the denunciations of such a man as Gissing. Both agreed that the souls of the people were in a kind of prison. But Gissing said that the prison was full of dead souls. Dickens said that the prison was full of living souls. And the fiery cavalcade of rescuers felt that they had not come too late.

Of this general fact about Dickens's descriptions of poverty there will not, I suppose, be any serious }

dispute. The dispute will only be about the truth of those descriptions. It is clear that whereas Gissing would say, "See how their poverty depresses the Smiths or the Browns," Dickens says, " See how little, after all, their poverty can depress the Cratchits." No one will deny that he made a special feature of the poor. We will come to the discussion of the veracity of these scenes in a moment. It is here sufficient to register in conclusion of our examination of the reforming optimist, that Dickens certainly was such an optimist, and that he made it his business to insist upon what happiness there is in the lives of the

unhappy. His poor man is always a Mark Tapley, a man the optimism of whose spirit increases if anything with the pessimism of his experience. It can also be registered as a fact equally solid and quite equally demonstrable that this optimistic Dickens did effect great reforms.

The reforms in which Dickens was instrumental were indeed, from the point of view of our sweeping social panaceas, special and limited. But perhaps, for that reason especially, they afford a compact and concrete instance of the psychological paradox of which we speak. Dickens did definitely destroy -- or at the very least help to destroy -- certain institutions; he destroyed those institutions simply by describing them. But the crux and peculiarity of the whole matter is this, that, in a sense, it can really be said that he described these things too optimistically. In a real sense, he described Dotheboys Hall as a better place than it is. In a real sense, he made out the workhouse as a pleasanter place than it can ever be. For the chief glory of Dickens is that he made these places interesting; and the chief infamy of England is that it has made these places dull. Dullness was the thing that Dickens's genius could never succeed in describing; his vitality was so violent that he could not introduce into his books the genuine impression even of a moment of monotony. If there is anywhere m his novels an instant of silence, we only hear more clearly the hero whispering with the heroine, the villain sharpening his dagger, or the creaking of the machinery that is to give out the god from the machine. He could splendidly describe gloomy places, but he could not describe dreary places. He could describe miserable marriages, but not monotonous marriages. It must have been genuinely entertaining to be married to Mr. Quilp. This sense of a still incessant excitement he spreads over every inch of his story, and over every dark tract of his landscape. His idea of a desolate place is a place where anything can happen, he has no idea of that desolate place where nothing can happen. This is a good thing for his soul, for the place where nothing can happen is hell. But still, it might reasonably be maintained by the modern mind that he is hampered in describing human evil and sorrow by this inability to imagine tedium, this dullness in the matter of dullness. For, after all, it is certainly true that the worst part of the lot of the unfortunate is the fact that they have long spaces in which to review the irrevocability of their doom. It is certainly true that the worst days of the oppressed man are the nine days out of ten in which he is not oppressed. This sense of sickness and sameness Dickens did certainly fail or refuse to give. When we read such a description as that excellent one -- in detail -- of Dotheboys Hall, we feel that, while everything else is accurate, the author does, in the words of the excellent Captain Nares in Stevenson's "Wrecker," "draw the dreariness rather mild." The boys at Dotheboys were, perhaps, less bullied, but they were certainly more bored. For, indeed, how could anyone be bored with the society of so sumptuous a creature as Mr. Squeers? Who would not put up with a few illogical floggings in order to enjoy the conversation of a man who could say, "She's a rum 'un is Natur'. . . . Natur' is more easier conceived than described." The same principle applies to the workhouse in "Oliver Twist." We feel vaguely that neither Oliver nor anyone else could be entirely unhappy in the presence of the purple personality of Mr. Bumble. The one thing he did not describe in any of the abuses he denounced was the soul-destroying potency of routine. He made out the bad school, the bad parochial system, the bad debtor's prison as very much jollier and more exciting than they may really have been. In a sense, then, he flattered them; but

he destroyed them with the flattery. By making Mrs. Gamp delightful he made her impossible. He gave every one an interest in Mr. Bumble's existence; and by the same act gave every one an interest in his destruction. It would be difficult to find a stronger instance of the utility and energy of the method which we have, for the sake of argument, called the method of the optimistic reformer. As long as low Yorkshire schools were entirely colourless and dreary, they continued quietly tolerated by the public and quietly intolerable to the victims. So long as Squeers was dull as well as cruel he was permitted; the moment he became amusing as well as cruel he was destroyed. As long as Bumble was merely inhuman he was allowed. When he became human, humanity wiped him right out. For in order to do these great acts of justice we must always realise not only the humanity of the oppressed, but even the humanity of the oppressor. The satirist had, in a sense, to create the images in the mind before, as an iconoclast, he could destroy them. Dickens had to make Squeers live before be could make him die.

In connection with the accusation of vulgar optimism, which I have taken as a text for this chapter, there is another somewhat odd thing to notice. Nobody in the world was ever less optimistic than Dickens in his treatment of evil or the evil man. When I say optimist in this matter I mean optimism, in the modern sense, of an attempt to whitewash evil. Nobody ever made less attempt to whitewash evil than Dickens. Nobody black was ever less white than Dickens's black. He painted his villains and lost characters more black than they really are. He crowds his stories with a kind of villain rare in modern fiction -- the villain really without any "redeeming point." There is no redeeming point in Squeers, or in Monks, or in Ralph Nickleby, or in Bill Sikes, or in Quilp, or in Brass, or in Mr. Chester, or in Mr. Pecksniff, or in Jonas Chuzzlewit, or in Carker, or in Uriah Heep, or in Blandois, or in a hundred more. So far as the balance of good and evil in human characters is concerned, Dickens certainly could not be called a vulgar optimist. His emphasis on evil was melodramatic. He might be called a vulgar pessimist.

Some will dismiss this lurid villainy as a detail of his artificial romance. I am not inclined to do so. He inherited, undoubtedly, this unqualified villain as he inherited so many other things, from the whole history of European literature. But he breathed into the blackguard a peculiar and vigorous life of his own. He did not show any tendency to modify his black-guardism in accordance with the increasing considerateness of the age; he did not seem to wish to make his villain less villainous; he did not wish to imitate the analysis of George Eliot, or the reverent scepticism of Thackeray. And all this works back, I think, to a real thing in him, that he wished to have an obstreperous and incalculable enemy. He wished to keep alive the idea of combat, which means, of necessity, a combat against something individual and alive. I do not know whether, in the kindly rationalism of his epoch, he kept any belief in a personal devil in his theology, but he certainly created a personal devil in every one of his books.

A good example of my meaning can be found, for instance, in such a character as Quilp. Dickens may, for all I know, have had originally some idea of describing Quilp as the bitter and unhappy cripple, a deformity whose mind is stunted along with his body. But if he had such an idea, he soon abandoned it. Quilp is not in the least unhappy. His whole picturesqueness consists in the fact that he has a kind of hellish happiness, an atrocious

hilarity that makes him go bounding about like an indiarubber ball. Quilp is not in the least bitter; he has an unaffected gaiety, an expansiveness, an universality. He desires to hurt people in the same hearty way that a good-natured man desires to help them. He likes to poison people with the same kind of clamorous camaraderie with which an honest man likes to stand them drink. Quilp is not in the least stunted in mind; he is not in reality even stunted in body -- his body, that is, does not in any way fall short of what he wants it to do. His smallness gives him rather the promptitude of a bird or the precipitance of a bullet. In a word, Quilp is precisely the devil of the Middle Ages; he belongs to that amazingly healthy period when even lost spirits were hilarious.

This heartiness and vivacity in the villains of Dickens is worthy of note because it is directly connected with his own cheerfulness. This is a truth little understood in our time, but it is a very essential one. If optimism means a general approval, it is certainly true that the more a man becomes an optimist the more he becomes a melancholy man. If he manages to praise everything, his praise will develop an alarming resemblance to a polite boredom. He will say that the marsh is as good as the garden; he will mean that the garden is as dull as the marsh. He may force himself to say that emptiness is good, but he will hardly prevent himself from asking what is the good of such good. This optimism does exist -- this optimism which is more hopeless than pessimism -- this optimism which is the very heart of hell.

Against such an aching vacuum of joyless approval there is only one antidote -- a sudden and pugnacious belief in positive evil. This world can be made beautiful again by beholding it as a battlefield. When we have defined and isolated the evil thing, the colours come back into everything else. When evil things have become evil, good things, in a blazing apocalypse, become good. There are some men who are dreary because they do not believe in God; but there are many others who are dreary because they do not believe in the devil. The grass grows green again when we believe in the devil, the roses grow red again when we believe in the devil.

No man was more filled with the sense of this bellicose basis of all cheerfulness than Dickens. He knew very well the essential truth, that the true optimist can only continue an optimist so long as he is discontented. For the full value of this life can only be got by fighting; the violent take it by storm. And if we have accepted everything, we have missed something -- war. This life of ours is a very enjoyable fight, but a very miserable truce. And it appears strange to me that so few critics of Dickens or of other romantic writers have noticed this philosophical meaning in the undiluted villain. The villain is not in the story to be a character; he is there to be a danger -- a ceaseless, ruthless, and uncompromising menace, like that of wild beasts or the sea. For the full satisfaction of the sense of combat, which everywhere and always involves a sense of equality, it is necessary to make the evil thing a man; but it is not always necessary, it is not even always artistic, to make him a mixed and probable man. In any tale, the tone of which is at all symbolic, he may quite legitimately be made an aboriginal and infernal energy. He must be a man only in the sense that he must have a wit and will to be matched with the wit and will of the man chiefly fighting. The evil may be inhuman, but it must not be

impersonal, which is almost exactly the position occupied by Satan in the theological scheme.

But when all is said, as I have remarked before, the chief fountain in Dickens of what I have called cheerfulness, and some prefer to call optimism, is something deeper than a verbal philosophy. It is, after all, an incomparable hunger and pleasure for the vitality and the variety, for the infinite eccentricity of existence. And this word "eccentricity" brings us, perhaps, nearer to the matter than any other. It is, perhaps, the strongest mark of the divinity of man that he talks of this world as "a strange world," though he has seen no other. We feel that all there is is eccentric, though we do not know what is the centre. This sentiment of the grotesqueness of the universe ran through Dickens's brain and body like the mad blood of the elves. He saw all his streets in fantastic perspectives, he saw all his cockney villas as top heavy and wild, he saw every man's nose twice as big as it was, and very man's eyes like saucers. And this was the basis of his gaiety -- the only real basis of any philosophical gaiety. This world is not to be justified as it is justified by the mechanical optimists; it is not to be justified as the best of all possible worlds. Its merit is not that it is orderly and explicable; its merit is that it is wild and utterly unexplained. Its merit is precisely that none of us could have conceived such a thing, that we should have rejected the bare idea of it as miracle and unreason. It is the best of all impossible worlds.

CHAPTER XII

A NOTE ON THE FUTURE OF DICKENS

The hardest thing to remember about our own time, of course, is simply that it is a time; we all instinctively think of it as the Day of Judgment. But all the things in it which belong to it merely as this time will probably be rapidly turned upside down; all the things that can pass will pass. It is not merely true that all old things are already dead; it is also true that all new things are already dead; for the only undying things are the things that are neither new nor old. The more you are up with this year's fashion, the more (in a sense) you are already behind next year's. Consequently, in attempting to decide whether an author will, as it is cantly expressed, live, it is necessary to have very firm convictions about what part, if any part, of man is unchangeable. And it is very hard to have this if you have not a religion or, at least, a dogmatic philosophy.

The equality of men needs preaching quite as much as regards the ages as regards the classes of men. To feel infinitely superior to a man in the twelfth century is just precisely as snobbish as to feel infinitely superior to a man in the Old Kent Road. There are differences between the man and us, there may be superiorities in us over the man; but our sin in both cases consists in thinking of the small things wherein we differ when we ought to be confounded and intoxicated by the terrible and joyful matters in which we are at one. But here again the difficulty always is that the things near us seem larger than they are, and so seem to be a permanent part of mankind, when they may really be only one of its parting modes of expression. Few people, for instance, realise that a time may easily

come when we shall see the great outburst of Science in the nineteenth century as something quite as splendid, brief, unique, and ultimately abandoned, as the outburst of Art at the Renascence. Few people realise that the general habit of fiction, of telling tales in prose, may fade, like the general habit of the ballad, of telling tales in verse, has for the time faded. Few people realise that reading and writing are only arbitrary, and perhaps temporary sciences, like heraldry.

The immortal mind will remain, and by that writers like Dickens will be securely judged. That Dickens will have a high place in permanent literature there is, I imagine, no prig surviving to deny. But though all prediction is in the dark, I would devote this chapter to suggesting that his place in nineteenth-century England will not only be high, but altogether the highest. At a certain period of his contemporary fame, an average Englishman would have said that there were at that moment in England about five or six able and equal novelists. He could have made a list, Dickens, Bulwer Lytton, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, perhaps more. Forty years or more have passed and some of them have slipped to a lower place. Some would now say that the highest platform is left to Thackeray and Dickens; some to Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot; some to Dickens, Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë. I venture to offer the proposition that when more years have passed and more weeding has been effected, Dickens will dominate the whole England of the nineteenth century; he will be left on that platform alone.

I know that this is an almost impertinent thing to assert, and that its tendency is to bring in those disparaging discussions of other writers in which Mr. Swinburne brilliantly embroiled himself in his suggestive study of Dickens. But my disparagement of the other English Novelists is wholly relative and not in the least positive. It is certain that men will always return to such a writer as Thackeray, with his rich emotional autumn, his feeling that life is a sad but sacred retrospect in which at least we should forget nothing. It is not likely that wise men will forget him. So, for instance, wise and scholarly men do from time to time return to the lyrists of French Renascence, to the delicate poignancy of Du Bellay: so they will go back to Thackeray. But I mean that Dickens will bestride and dominate our time as the vast figure of Rabelais dominates Du Bellay, dominates the Renascence and the world.

Let me put a negative reason first. The particular things for which Dickens is condemned (and justly condemned) by his critics, are precisely those things which have never prevented a man from being immortal. The chief of them is the unquestionable fact that he wrote an enormous amount of bad work. This does lead to a man being put below his place in his own time: it does not affect his permanent place, to all appearance, at all. Shakespeare, for instance, and Wordsworth wrote not only an enormous amount of bad work, but an enormous amount of enormously bad work. Humanity edits such writers' works for them. Virgil was mistaken in cutting out his inferior lines; we would have undertaken the job. Moreover in the particular case of Dickens there are special reasons for regarding his bad work, as I have previously suggested, under a kind of general ambition that had nothing to do with his special genius; an ambition to be a public provider of everything, a warehouse of all human emotions. He held a kind of literary day of judgment. He distributed bad characters as punishments and good characters as

rewards. My meaning can be best conveyed by one instance out of many. The character of the kind old Jew in "Our Mutual Friend" (a needless and unconvincing character) was actually introduced because some Jewish correspondent complains that the bad old Jew in "Oliver Twist" conveyed the suggestion that all Jews were bad. The principle is so light-headedly absurd that it is hard to imagine any literary man submitting to it for an instant. If ever he invented a bad auctioneer he must immediately balance him with a good auctioneer; if he should have conceived an unkind philanthropist, he must on the spot, with whatever natural agony and toil, imagine a kind philanthropist. The complaint is frantic; yet Dickens, who tore people in pieces for much fairer complaints, liked this complaint of his Jewish correspondent. It pleased him to be mistaken for a public arbiter: it pleased him to be asked (in a double sense) to judge Israel. All this is so much another thing, a non-literary vanity, that there is much less difficulty than usual in separating it from his serious genius: and by his serious genius, I need hardly say, I mean his comic genius. Such irrelevant ambitions as this are easily passed over, like the sonnets of great statesmen. We feel that such things can be set aside, as the ignorant experiments of men otherwise great, like the politics of Professor Tyndall or the philosophy of Professor Haeckel. Hence, I think, posterity will not care that Dickens has done bad work, but will know that he has done good.

Again, the other chief accusation against Dickens was that his characters and their actions were exaggerated and impossible. But this only meant that they were exaggerated and impossible as compared with the modern world and with certain writers (like Thackeray or Trollope) who were making a very exact copy of the manners of the modern world. Some people, oddly enough, have suggested that Dickens has suffered or will suffer from the change of manners. Surely this is irrational. It is not the creators of the impossible who will suffer from the process of time: Mr. Bunsby can never be any more impossible than he was when Dickens made him. The writers who will obviously suffer from time will be the careful and realistic writers, the writers who have observed every detail of the fashion of this world which passeth away. It is surely obvious that there is nothing so fragile as a fact, that a fact flies away quicker than a fancy. A fancy will endure for two thousand years. For instance, we all have fancy for an entirely fearless man, a hero; and the Achilles of Homer still remains. But exactly the thing we do not know about Achilles is how far he was possible. The realistic narrators of the time are all forgotten (thank God), so we cannot tell whether Homer slightly exaggerated or wildly exaggerated or did not exaggerate at all, the personal activity of a Mycenæan captain in battle; for the fancy has survived the facts. So the fancy of Podsnap may survive the facts of English commerce: and no one will know whether Podsnap was possible, but only know that he is desirable, like Achilles.

The positive argument for the permanence of Dickens comes back to the thing that can only be stated and cannot be discussed: creation. He made things which nobody else could possibly make. He made Dick Swiveller in a very different sense from that in which Thackeray made Colonel Newcome. Thackeray's creation was observation: Dickens's was poetry, and is therefore permanent. But there is one other test that can be added. The immortal writer, I conceive, is commonly he who does something Universal in a special manner. I mean that he does something interesting to all men in a way in

which only one man or one land can do. Other men in that land, who do only what other men in other lands are doing as well, tend to have a great reputation in their day and to sink slowly into a second or a third or a fourth place. A parallel from war will make the point clear. I cannot think that anyone will doubt that, although Wellington and Nelson were always bracketed, Nelson will steadily become more important and Wellington less. For the fame of Wellington rests upon the fact that he was a good soldier in the service of England, exactly as twenty similar men were good soldiers in the service of Austria or Prussia or France. But Nelson is the symbol of a special mode of attack, which is at once universal and yet especially English, the sea. Now Dickens is at once as universal as the sea and as English as Nelson. Thackeray and George Eliot and the other great figures of that great England, were comparable to Wellington in this, that the kind of thing they were doing, -- realism, the acute study of intellectual things, numerous men in France, Germany and Italy were doing as well or better than they. But Dickens was really doing something universal, yet something that no one but an Englishman could do. This is attested by the fact that he and Byron are the men who, like pinnacles, strike the eye of the continent. The points would take long to study: yet they may take only a moment to indicate. No one but an Englishman could have filled his books at once with a furious caricature and with a positively furious kindness. In more central countries, full of cruel memories of political change, caricature is always inhumane. No one but an Englishman could have described the democracy as consisting of free men, but yet of funny men. In other countries where the democratic issue has been more bitterly fought, it is felt that unless you describe a man as dignified you are describing him as a slave. This is the only final greatness of a man; that he does for all the world what all the world cannot do for itself. Dickens, I believe, did it.

The hour of absinthe is over. We shall not be much further troubled with the little artists who found Dickens too sane for their sorrows and too clean for their delights. But we have a long way to travel before we get back to what Dickens meant: and the passage is along a rambling English road, a twisting road such as Mr. Pickwick travelled. But this at least is part of what he meant; that comradeship and serious joy are not interludes in our travel; but that rather our travels are interludes in comradeship and joy, which through God shall endure for ever. The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point at last to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters: and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.

(Provided by Mitsuharu Matsuoka, Nagoya University, Japan,
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