# THE SOUL OF DICKENS

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By

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"The Pageant of Dickens," &c., &c.

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TO

MY MOTHER

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# PREFACE

WE shall all agree, I think, that the most startling and dramatic change which has followed on the heels of the great War has been the wonderful transformation of Continental opinion in regard to the Englishman. Someone recently remarked that the War has discovered our fellow-countrymen and has revealed them not only to themselves but to the world. Certain it is that the present nations of the earth will never take again quite the same view of John Bull as that in which their fathers for so long rejoiced: the view that he was an obese, irascible, though withal a good-natured old gentleman, not perhaps too proud but certainly too self-indulgent to fight, whose occasional boastfulness and truculence did not really matter. Even were we to embark seriously upon a great campaign, our detractors asserted, we should not count. Our lack of preparation, our carelessness in detail, our disregard for efficiency—all these things would nullify any of those old qualities that once made us formidable in the eyes of men.

Strangely enough we ourselves seemed to

concur in the legend. From Matthew Arnold downwards, a whole generation of distinguished publicists had pointed to our decrepitude and had sought to demonstrate it with a liveliness and an eloquence that increased with the depth of the gloom into which they penetrated. The man in the street took these scourgings meekly enough. As a matter of fact he said nothing about them, but went about his daily life with a provoking cheerfulness that rather added to the fury of our critics both at home and abroad. The latter were wont to exclaim: "Here are a people whose ablest thinkers proclaim them decadent; whose reviews and magazines teem with lamentations as to the frivolity of their tastes, their indifference to culture and their refusal to be serious. And the people themselves pay no heed; they are unconcerned! They continue to attend football matches, race-meetings and music-halls; they will not go to evening classes and they are stolidly indifferent to Eugenics. It is clear that they are doomed. *Ichabod*. The glory has departed."

And then? . . . Why then the War clouds burst; something happened, and people began to talk differently about us.

Now I honestly believe that there was only one set of persons in the United Kingdom who did not share to the full extent in the depression of this mood and in the astonishment that followed

on its falsification. They were consciously or unconsciously, the Dickensians.

The present War, it has been remarked, has divided the nation into two classes of men—those whom Dickens loved and those whom he loathed. The first are the men who have saved the situation for ourselves and Europe—the men in the trenches, both "lordly and lowly born," the simple, unpretentious, blithe and yet indomitable men, most of whom at one time or another have been admonished, talked about, wept over and frequently given up as hopeless. It is these men who have preserved us from irredeemable disaster. The men Dickens loathed are not in the trenches; they have stayed at home to hector or to preach at, to control harrassingly or regulate those left to do the nation's work; they have stayed to hamper with unsound criticism, to exasperate by uncontrollable fears, to exploit noble passions for ignoble ends, to assail strong silent emotions with vulgar elations, to become unscrupulous profiteers as well as false prophets; men constantly proclaiming our imminent ruin and doing not a little to encompass it.

For these and such as these Dickens would have had a supreme disdain. In the simple man of whatever class he had a supreme belief. Those who have partaken of and been uplifted by his spirit have never lost that faith and have never despaired of their fellow-countrymen. Dickens

would never have doubted the ultimate issue of this great crisis because he was a great patriot. He believed in his race because he himself personified its own qualities to an extent that no other author has done since Shakespeare. And knowing that race—he understood not only its limitations but its strength—he realised that its power lay in the quiet, simple and even unsophisticated Englishman, "too modest to think a boast," too blithe and genial to join in the Jeremiad against his kin, too great-hearted to be depressed, too kindly as a rule to show anger. Such men he has depicted for us with matchless fidelity. Such men he loved and understood. Bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh he could portray them as no writer of this day has done. We may see them mirrored in his soul. We may meet them again and again in each of his immortal works. . . . Let us look at them with him for an hour or so; it will help us to understand the victory we have won. Perchance also, it will teach us a lesson necessary in Victory—even to Englishmen—the lesson of a superb and courageous humility. That at least is my earnest hope in offering this further tribute to the master's memory.

W. WALTER CROTCH.

LONDON, *October*, 1916.

# CHAPTER I

# DICKENS THE ENGLISHMAN

# I

## DICKENS THE ENGLISHMAN

FOR an author to surprise himself at the opening of his book is, it will be agreed, an event so rare that he may reasonably expect it to excite a modicum of interest. That is my position at this moment. I am beginning a new book upon Charles Dickens, a book intended and designed to make clear the value and significance of the message he bequeathed to his fellow countrymen and to reveal the growth of the man and his mind. Perforce it must be a book, necessarily of definitions, of simplification, and of exactitudes, wherein, as I hope, I may separate the mere adventitious excrescences of the master from the essential teachings that come from the very pith or marrow of his genius. Yet, at the outset, I must confront my readers with a paradox: a paradox so simple, however, that it will be readily understood. It consists in this: that Charles Dickens, who in his habit of life, business arrangements and domestic minutiæ (or, if the reader prefer it, in his conduct) had little of those qualities or defects peculiar to the English was yet in his outlook, his sympathies, his philosophy, above all in his artistic methods, the supreme

exemplar and the most brilliant exponent that the English people have rejoiced in since Shakespeare passed away. He was, like Shakespeare quintessentially English, and for that very reason he was, and is superlatively valuable, for he, more than any author, had real insight into the dangers, as into the glories, the depths and the heights of our race. He knew our weaknesses and our strength as no one else has known them since " Will of Avon " and Chaucer laid deep and wide the foundations of our literature. He had the large and ample carelessness, the formlessness,* if I may use the word, that only very great realists—realists as great as Shakespeare—may permit themselves in their effort to depict and dramatise that chaoticand disorderly,yet triumphant and gorgeous pageant which we call life. He had that avid hunger of humanity that we find in Fielding and Hogarth—hunger that seizes on the dirtiest drab, or the most squalid wreck of the streets, and rejoices in its lineaments equally as in those of the powdered dandy or the resplendent monarch. And he had, above all, that resilience, that intuitive reliance on the individual will and the individual effort that is at once the strength, and (need I say it ?) the danger of the English to-day.

* Up till within a very few years of his death Dickens made no notes and recorded no references to the characters that came in and out of his story, which grew naturally out of his own mind. Their exits and entrances were as unaccountable as in real life itself.

In a word, he was, and is, the most brilliant vindicator, as he is the most faithful monitor of the race he loved ; the race that in his books he portrayed with a fidelity matchless and unsurpassed.

Dickens was born in 1812. At this period the mixed and motley remnants of eighteenth century manners, morals, garbs and comforts of the people were a scandal to the historian and reformer. The curious medley of formless character and institutions of the time were waiting for those dormant forces which were to strike into vigorous and ordered life and individuality the loose, incoherent, invertebrate and inarticulate whole. Means of communication and contact were scant. The chasm between rich and poor was socially speaking wider than that between the British Australasian and the Bushman. Reading and writing were rare accomplishments. Mails were almost non-existent. *The Times* was but a four-paged sheet about 17 inches by 12. Dingy and sparse were the few provincial prints. They retailed for the most part paragraphic small-talk of society, which even some of the wealthy were unable to read. Pictorial art was in its infancy. Some of the cartoons we see to-day in the secondhand print shops were as blatant and vulgar in colour and design as they were openly indecent in humour. And the whole Press was stamped with the same characteristics. All were

produced by the same primitive hand-machines which were invented in mediæval times and installed in Westminster by Caxton. Every medium of sympathetic *rapport* which would have linked peoples in the unities of progressive advance were absent or nascent. Wordsworth and Shelley sang to unlistening ears. The clergy shared the prevalent immorality. Literature and poetry were an affectation of the few. Criticism was mere pedantry and egotism. The drama and opera were limited to short seasons and confined to but two or three patent and privileged theatres. Drury Lane, Covent Garden and the King's Theatre were monopolies in favour of the ostentatious rich, for fear that others should encroach and vulgarise high art in favour of the masses! The hustings and politics generally were in that notorious period of cupidity and corruption known as the Pocket Borough period. The bulk of the people remained untouched by any sort of influence which makes for uplift or constructive and co-ordinated advancement.

The rise of the coaching era powerfully contributed to social salvation. Although the first mail was running as long previous as 1784, communication by travel or letter was rare. The pioneer mail started on August 2nd between London and Bristol in the above year. Means of communication and travel for the poor were confined to lumbering waggons that were a

nightmare of the continental diligence. The well-to-do used pillion and saddle and post chaise for considerable journeys. But it was not until 1820 that "post" and coaching travel was fully organised and equipped up to the magnificent speed, comfort and convenience of 10 and 12 miles an hour. Before this the mounted post-boy paced the country through town and village; and, blowing a blast upon his lusty horn on his entry, he called forth the inhabitants in a fluttering expectancy that was rare and exciting compared to our own postman's knock. A mere feather-weight note was then charged 9d. for a distance of 80 to 150 miles, while an ounce packet carried with its insignificant weight a postage charge of 3s. Travelling in those days was a great physical and pecuniary undertaking. What with the postboy's tips and turnpike gates, tips to porters, waiters and guards, our ancestors were victimised during journeys of any length, where waits for change of horses, brief victualling and refreshment, and so forth, were all part of the ordeal. The rates for "posting" were 9d. a mile, 3d. extra for two horses. This was on top of the numerous tips. The journey from London to Edinburgh by "post" ran to £30. From 1820 to 1838 was the high-water mark of organisation in the coaching era. The "crack" coaches on the main road, say from London to Edinburgh, 400 miles, made the breakneck speed of 12 miles

an hour. The " insides " paid some 10 or 12 guineas fare, and the " outsides " five or six. Tips all extra. If you got off your seat for a refresher or a square meal you had to submit to be " kicked" —according to the humorous slang of the road—for half a crown. We can imagine Dickens on some of his Press journeys putting up a pretty bill for expenses !

Dickens was 25 when Queen Victoria came to the throne. During this time social conditions had, of course, improved. Railways were slow to compete with the much improved and exhilarating coaching journeys. The pioneer line was opened from Stockton to Darlington in 1825. But then, more than now, the shy and conservative spirit of England was a bar to any new enterprise. Steam power as a world-spirit came tardily to a people sadly in need of forces to knit and bind them in all those social and commercial intercourses necessary to soften class pride and distinctions, promote confidence and the recognition of mutual rights and duties, and enhance general progress. Nevertheless, the old coaching era, in its roaring days, which are pictured nowhere so graphically as in the writings of Dickens, contributed immensely to the socialising of the people. The England of those days was more replete with rural communities and occupations. Society life gravitated to the country seat and residence. The high roads were the channels of

traffic and social intimacy, which, if slower in pace, facilitated mutual understandings and reciprocal exchange of views, news and hospitalities. The busy inns and hostelries were centres of animated movement and social contact amongst people of varied social status and standing. Travelling in those days must have been a powerful medium in the moral levelling and socialising of the people. Then, as now, travelling was an education in life ; and a preparation for literature if needs be. Then, as now, the commingling of varied personalities in the communitary life and intercourse of a common journey, or a common *locale* or rendezvous, lifted them out of those ruts and routines of the conventional daily round, where distinctions and inequalities are more marked and more repressive. Freedom from the restraints of convention which travel and its Bohemian intercourses bring, releases character and human nature into its freest expression. It brings an uplift and a new vigour which nothing else can. At any rate, in *Pickwick* we get a reflection of the vivacity, the good humour and the good fellowship of those stirring days. It is here that we can perhaps best picture the smilingly observant, buoyant, notetaking and onlooking personality of Charles Dickens, the Englishman. In those days of the stage coach and hostelries of the teeming high roads of England, he seized the opportunities and satiated his interest

in studying the qualities of his countrymen. In those days he was an Englishman amongst Englishmen. He then saw them in their highest feather and frankest moments. He met the City merchant, and portrayed for us the commercial egoist Dombey and the benevolent Cheerybles, the swindlers and speculators Montague Tigg and Sir Mulberry Hawk; he met the cleric and delineated the scholar Dr. Strong, the worldly Dean of Cloisterham, the humbug Chadband, the selfless Crisparkle and Frank Milvey, and the student and ascetic George Silverman; he met types of representative county families, and tracked the tragedy of Sir Leicester Dedlock's private life, the fatuity, and the fall of the pride of pedigree and the misery and aloneness of stately exclusiveness; he met types of country gentry and yeomen, and introduced us to the hearty and hospitable Mr. Wardle of Dingley Dell, the impetuous Laurence Boythorn of Parsonage House, and the handsome, vivacious and humane John Jarndyce, the elderly bachelor of Bleak House. Shallow politicians of the Veneering and Boodle and Foodle type strut across the stage. Sinister attorneys like Tulkinghorn lurk in shadowy ways. Slippery proctors like Spenlow and Jorkins bespeak the supineness of the Church and the Law. Wily attorneys like Dodson and Fogg, and gentleman barristers like Eugene Wrayburn contrast leisurely *insousiance* with mercenary activities. Court physicians like Dr.

Parker Peps, and medical practitioners in numbers; architects like the double-faced pseudo-moralist Pecksniff and the hard-working naive Tom Pinch ; with schoolmasters, military and clerks in great variety, round off the innumerable sorts of professional middle class and aristocratic Englishmen, who are represented in plot, sketch and satire of distinctly Victorian times. Need I extend the list ? Whether set in an atmosphere of humour, humanity, or the normal round of every day life, it is a picture essentially English ; convincing in its character, penetrating in its portraiture, striking in its domestic environ, charmingly picturesque and quaint in scenic fancy and congruity. And whether it is sketch, short story, or the carefully elaborated plot of the larger books, we may see in our mind's eye the shade of the observant Englishman, Charles Dickens, vividly and sympathetically envisaging his countrymen in all their moods and tenses, with the full conviction that their life and their activities are rock-based in native common sense, yet quick to see when they move out of proportion, or drift into insincerity, hypocrisy, pretentiousness, or fastidious vanities, individually or in their institutions. Then in all seriousness and gentleness he brings them to see themselves in the oblique lights and shades of his humanely chastising yet sunny humour, and likewise their fellows in the radiance of a universal charity and pathos. In all this he is wholly English.

In the whole range of his books, strange to say, while you will find presented more than one Frenchman, at least two Jews, any number of Yankees, and a stray Italian or so, nowhere will you find any attempt to draw either a Scotsman or an Irishman. I cannot help thinking that the omission was more than a mere accident. About the Irish, as about the Scotch, there are a thousand and one whimsicalities that, as it seems to me, would have lent themselves peculiarly to the special genius of Dickens, who had but to see, and so be conscious of a man, to possess him and to possess him so thoroughly that he could reproduce at will his walk, his laugh, his gait, his trick of speech, and habit of manner, reproduce him so faithfully that, with our author, we look on fascinated as Carker grins to show his pearly teeth, or feel as Dickens felt, the rhythmic swagger of Micawber sauntering down the City Road.

Dickens must have met many Scotsmen whose speech alone would have given him ample opportunities for his peculiar and indefinable kind of photographic exaggeration, that habit, as it were, of vivid and arresting caricature at once so potent and yet so real, that it transfigures the subject and keeps him before us for all time. The Scotch idiom, the Irish banter, where are they to be found in the whole of Dickens's works? And yet it was in these that he immortalized for us the cockney slang of the long ago and made Sam

Weller, the really representative Englishman, the wit who refuses to mourn, and insists upon being always the comforter ; the genius whose cheeriness and resource, fidelity, sagacity, careless strength and intuitive delicacy (whenever did Sam say a coarse thing or think a namby-pamby one ?) stand as the very types of our strength, the very embodiment of the virtues, the audacity, the reserve, the coolness and detachment of the Englishman ! The banter of Sam the ostler in the yard of the inn where Pickwick found him, his drolleries, his repartee, his *sang-froid*, his seeming irresponsibility, his capriciousness (as well as his strong practical common sense) ; these qualities Dickens realised at a glance were English, and of himself. We can well imagine how a lesser author, observing for the first time the original of the immortal ostler, might have mistaken the very qualities I have instanced, as those of an Irishman, and drawn such a droll and delightful fellow as, say, Lever lightens his sparkling pages with, over and over again. But, as a fact, Sam Weller's wit, his good nature, his worldly wisdom and his satire were intrinsically English. No Irishman would have said of a *Soirée* that it was the first time he had heard a leg of mutton called by that appellation. No Irishman would have achieved quite the success that Sam did in the witness box during the memorable trial of *Bardell v. Pickwick*. His wit might have been more piercing, shrewder, and

more biting: just as, if I am not mistaken, his deference to Pickwick would have lacked that quality of good humoured tolerance, which Sam invariably displayed to his master: a person whom he obviously thought stood in urgent need of his own protection, till whenever they were out together, they stumbled upon a piece of pure fun and jollity; then it was that Pickwick became as good as his servant! Again, I cannot help thinking that if Thackeray had drawn Micawber, he would have most certainly made him come from the Emerald Isle and speak with a brogue, just as he might have been tempted to make Quilp come from North of the Tweed, or Fascination Fledgeby speak with a foreign accent. But Dickens had an eye for the English, for, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, he partook, as I shall show, of every quality of the race down to its very insularity. He could see an Englishman, and he could see a foreigner. Once he contrived to see a Yorkshireman and he forthwith made him immortal. Once again he depicted a splendid and never-to-be-forgotten Lancastrian in Stephen Blackpool. But for the rest, the street in which he lived, the town through which he walked, the people whom he jostled, the crowds whom he mastered even as he walked through them (what man that ever lived could write of crowds as he did?) the solemn humbugs that he passed in the street, the street boys whose jollity he made his

own, even the very houses, the stucco mansions of the great or the warrens of the poor—these were English, or if not, they stirred no responsive chord in that mind at once so retentive and so keenly alert to impressions. In short, Dickens knew and loved his own, and the rest passed by him for the most part like the empty fabric of a dream.

For Dickens was an Englishman to his very finger tips. He had that love of romance and of adventure for their own sakes, that only the English have. Frail creature that he was, he used to delight, when insomnia haunted him, to walk long miles into the country or through the dark streets, peopled only by strange ghosts of that underworld that he made his own, and, as the men and women of the silent night "crept through the City's brain like thoughts," his genius comprehended all the tragedies, humours, and pathos of their lives. He loved that sense of speed, that headlong dash against time, that urge onward to see fresh woods and pastures new. No other writer has left us rides to compare with the magic freshness that his coaches brought his travellers, who, jaded with the towns, delighted like true Englishmen in skirting the greenwood as they coached on "past hedges, gates and trees. Yoho, past donkey-chaises, drawn aside into the ditch, and empty carts with rampant horses, whipped up at a bound upon the little course, and held by

struggling carters close to the five barred gate, until the coach had passed the narrow turning in the road. Yoho, by churches dropped down by themselves with quiet nooks, with rustic burial-grounds about them, where the graves are green, and daisies sleep—where it is evening in the bosoms of the dead. Yoho, past streams, in which the cattle cool their feet and where the rushes grow; past paddock-fences, farms, and rick-yards! past last year's cut, still by, still away and showing, in the waning light, like ruined gables old and brown. Yoho, down the pebbly dip and through the merry water—and past, and up at a canter to the level road again. Yoho! Yoho!"

Elsewhere* I have described at greater length this really English love of the road which Dickens possessed so completely. And just as he had the English love of fun, and of sport, so he had the English capacity for taking pleasures seriously. He entered into private theatricals for instance, with a passion, an ardour and a zealous care for detail that only his works excited in him. He threw himself heart and soul into these enterprises, and Forster, his official biographer, has left us a vivid picture of him "at work" upon this his favourite recreation. "He was the life and soul of the whole business. I never seemed till then to have known his business capabilities. He took everything on himself and did the whole of it without an effort.

* *The Pageant of Dickens* (Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1915).

He was stage-director, very often stage-carpenter, scene-arranger, property-man, prompter and band-master. Without offending anyone, he kept every one in order. For all he had useful suggestions and the dullest of clays under his potter's hand were transformed into little bits of porcelain. He adjusted scenes, assisted carpenters, invented costumes, devised play bills, wrote out calls, and enforced as well as exhibited in his proper person everything of which he urged the necessity on others. Such a chaos of dirt, confusion and noise, as the little theatre was the day we entered it, and such a cosmos as he made it of cleanliness, order, and silence, before the rehearsals were over." Mrs. Cowden Clarke, in her pleasant " Recollections of Writers," pays an equally interesting tribute to Dickens's volcanic energy and whole-hearted zeal at these rehearsals. " He was ever present," she says, " superintending, directing, suggesting, with sleepless activity and vigilance the essence of punctuality and methodical precision himself, he kept incessant watch that others should be unfailingly attentive and careful throughout. Unlike most professional rehearsals, where waiting about, dawdling and losing time, seem to be the order of the day, the rehearsals under Dickens's stage-management were strictly devoted to work—serious, earnest work ; the consequence was that when the evening of the performance came, the pieces went off with a

smoothness and polish that belong only to stage-business and practised performers."

It is worth noting that Dickens himself was no mean actor, and in certain parts he achieved triumphs such as only a really great artist could have commanded. Carlyle compared the "wild picturesqueness" of his performance in Wilkie Collins's play "The Lighthouse" to Nicolas Poussin's bacchanalian dance in the famous picture in the National Gallery. Mr. Henry Compton, perhaps one of the most consummate masters of the profession who ever delighted an English audience, used to declare that Dickens, had he adopted the stage as a profession, would have easily achieved fame and fortune. Indeed, as I have read and re-read of his bubbling delight in all that pertained to the stage I have frequently thought that to him at all events, it was not merely the meeting-place of all the arts, but, as Oscar Wilde cleverly said, "it was also the return of art to life."

But for us it is more important to note that this particular quality of his for losing himself in the task in hand, was not so much due to his passion for the histrionic, as to his essentially English capacity for "playing the game"; playing it thoroughly, earnestly and like a sportsman, and to the exclusion of all other matters great and small, just as, for instance, Drake played it when, intent on his match at bowls, he refused to be

interrupted by the advent of the Spanish Armada. We find this quality running through Dickens's whole life, and it is, as I have said, essentially an English characteristic. Dickens, in fact, had the faculty of being interested in " common things." The carefully calculated detachment of the " precious " school, with their contempt for the mere mundane vulgar details of existence (such as, for instance, trifles like eating and drinking), their assumed superiority to mere matters of household arrangement—all these are in violent contrast to Dickens's attitude to life. His letters to Wills, his Sub-Editor, *factotum* and friend, are full of references to the small things that matter; to the hotel accommodation he will want at Peterborough, for instance; to the champagne and cigars he has left at the office; to the new bathing cap he requires purchased at once; as well as to the MSS. to be accepted or entertained by *Household Words*; the price to be paid for the same; the abuses that are to be exposed; the wrongs that are righted and the public questions that are to be taken up. Through all the letters there runs the same careful exactness that marked him as an artist. He is painstaking, accurate, indefatigable—and withal jolly, whimsical, debonair and full of the careless joy of the born sportsman. He is as pleased to play cricket with his son as to revise the proof sheets of " Cŏpperfield " and as particular and delighted

to note that he scored three " by a high hit over the apple tree which covered me with glory." Then his letters contain delightful pictures of an " Eminent Author," waylaid on Dover beach by women in blue veils, who turn out at 6 a.m. so as to catch him on his way to the Shower Bath; they give Wills explicit directions as to the monies and aid he is to disburse to begging-letter writers (" £2 and a black surtout for the Rathbone Place man and £1 for the needlewoman "). He is keen on correcting Henry Morley's carelessness—" the repetitions of buts and howevers "—and is careful to tell Wills not to be too severe with young Sala, who (one gathers) had a knack of wanting to be paid for his contributions *before* they appeared. Above all, he is ever ready to laugh at a joke—even against himself. Thus he relates gleefully that " When John (his servant) called with the notice at the *Morning Advertiser* Office, pointing out that no newspaper ever charged Mr. Charles Dickens for inserting such announcements, the clerk replied, ' Charles Dickens?—Charles Dickens? *What house does he keep?* ' "

Dickens, in fact, had the true sportsman's view of life: he knew it to be a game and not a business, a game to be played strictly according to the rules, but light-heartedly withal, for, win or lose, a man can do no more than his best. Hence he threw himself into every task that came along with something of the whole hearted earnestness, the

vigour and the delight with which a schoolboy settles down to learn a new game. And for games themselves he had all a schoolboy's joy, all a schoolboy's enthusiasm. Who has not read that delightful description of his, of how he entered himself as the "Gadshill Gasper" in umpiring that famous walking match, when, an old man, with his nerves shattered, his left foot giving him unceasing trouble and his heart in an abnormal state, he yet delighted in the ardours of the struggle and rejoiced in all the pranks and prowess of the day? Dickens, though he was ever of frail physique and slender frame, had yet a fine animality. He had a love of the open air and a delight in a contest, whose edges were never dulled. He had also that steadiness of purpose and presence of mind that marks our race in moments of grim and sudden emergency. Once, when travelling from home, the railway bridge at Staplehurst gave way and Dickens found himself projected, with two lady passengers, half way down a chasm. His quiet courage on that occasion was wonderful. First, he extricated the ladies from their perilous position; then he saved the life of a man, whom he found groaning under a heap of wreckage; then he turned to the work of saving and helping others, and lastly he scrambled back into the carriage to recover the crumpled MS. of *Our Mutual Friend*. For all his debonair blitheness and real jollity of spirit, Dickens was

an indomitable man. When on that last tragic tour of his in America a cold seized him and he became as weak as a child, he yet persisted in carrying out his contracts. " He was constantly faint. He ate scarcely anything. He slept very little. Latterly he was so lame as scarcely to be able to walk. Again and again it seemed impossible that he should fulfil his night's engagement. He was constantly so exhausted at the conclusion of the reading, that he had to lie down for twenty minutes or half-an-hour, before he could undergo the fatigue even of dressing." Mr. Dolby, his agent, lived in daily fear lest he should break down altogether.

" I used to steal into his room," he says, " at all hours of the night and early morning, to see if he were awake, or in want of anything ; always to find him wide awake and cheerful and jovial—never in the least complaining and only reproaching me for not taking my night's rest." " Only a man of iron will," said Mr. Fields, " could have accomplished what he did."

And yet, man of iron will as he was, his native gaiety and good spirits smile like a gleam of sunlight over the story of that last dreadful ordeal. " As he had been the brightest and most genial of companions in the old holiday days," says Sir F. Marzials, " when strolling about the country with his actor-troupe, so now he was occasionally as frolicsome as a boy, dancing a hornpipe in the

train for the amusement of his companions, compounding bowls of punch in which he shared but sparingly, and always considerate and kindly to his companions."

Dickens, like Shakespeare in this as in so many other of his most arresting features, had the love of a carouse, of the laughter of friends, and delighted in their badinage, and in the tavern and its jollity. He cherished the same joyous affection for conviviality that marked the boon companions of Ben Jonson and Marlowe, whose ghosts one may suppose might have been tempted back on occasions from Elysium to those inns that Dickens has immortalised for us " with their great rambling, queer old galleries, passages and staircases, wide enough and antiquated enough to furnish materials for a hundred ghost stories " ; with their hospitable fires, wide portals and spacious noble rooms ; in which Wilkie Collins spun the fine webs of his marvellous romances, and Bulwer's eloquence vied with Dickens's own satire, till both were hushed by the fiery captiousness of Macready or lost in the laughter that followed on some quip of the elder Matthews.

Above all, and mastering all the romantic side of his temperament, with its supreme delight in colour and its insatiable appetite for experience, runs the curious paradox of a love of order and of tidiness, with an intuitive grasp of the most trivial details, so that it was said of him that he

knew the position of every hat-peg and of every cupboard in his house, a house that he worshipped with the rigorous love of the martinet, and whose every arrangement he comprehended even as a sea captain knows the disposition of every gun, every swivel, every tiny adjustment upon the deck of his ship.

I have said that Dickens and Shakespeare were alike in many things. I am not sure that a whole volume could not be written upon their resemblances. They were akin in that strange tenacity which, coupled with a keen eye to the business side of life, enabled Shakespeare to retire a rich man at the close of his days to his native town; just as Dickens, before he died, bought the house at Gad's Hill that had captured his boyish fancy. They were alike in their hatred of the solemn humbugs, the Dogberrys and the Pecksniffs, the Bantams and the Stigginses of life. They were akin in the fact that they delighted in the common people, in the flotsam and jetsam of the towns and the taverns, and in the strange and almost picturesque variety of the quaint vagrom characters of the countryside. And, they were alike also in this important factor, that at the period of their youth both witnessed a quickening of national consciousness, an upheaval of class distinctions and a great surge of strength and inspiration within the minds of their fellow countrymen. "The spacious days of Great Elizabeth," when Drake

and Frobisher revealed the marvels of the new land of the West, when every day Englishmen heard of fresh continents teeming with wealth and opening to the eye scenes of tropical magnificence and luxurious splendour ; when almost every hour brought further tales of conquest amid glories of which we had never dreamed—what a period to have lived in ! What a bursting of old bonds, of stifling conventions, of antiquated restraints, must have ensued, as all the world turned to England and all England flocked to its magic Capital whose streets were paved with gold ! And, if we turn to the days of Dickens something like this was happening also. The old Squirearchy was passing away. Sir Leicester Dedlock was doomed. Men were casting off the final shackles of feudalism. A new world, with new trades and activities, new men and new ideas, was quickening in England and the lights of London flamed again with a magic lure, disconcerting enough to the perplexed old Magnate of the villages, but fiercely stimulating to the new generation pressing forwards :

Yearning for the large excitement that the coming years would yield,
Eager hearted as a boy when first he leaves his father's field.

And at night along the dusky highway near and nearer drawn,

Sees in heaven the light of London flaring like a dreary dawn ;

And his spirit leaps within him to be gone before him then,
Underneath the light he looks at, in among the throngs of men :

Men, my brothers, men the workers, ever reaping something new :
That which they have done but earnest of the things that they shall do.

Into such periods then, of surge, of tumultuous aspirations, of extravagant but inspiring hopes, of feverish activity and of prodigious and superb literary achievement, were both Shakespeare and Dickens born, and it stamps them both as Englishmen and as supreme artists that their sense of the local, of the intimate, of the small things and of the accidents of life, above all of the life they themselves were living in the heart of the vortex, was so keen that a thousand times they have reproduced for us with startling clearness some trifle they had seized at a glance and made their own and ours for ever.

Of Dickens this was true to an extraordinary degree. As Sir A. W. Ward has well put in an inspiring passage : " He could see the scene while he was an actor in it. . . . From his very boyhood he appears to have possessed in a developed form what many others may possess

in its germ, the faculty of converting into a scene —putting, as it were, into a frame—personages that came under his notice, and the background in which he saw them. Who can forget the scene in *David Copperfield*, in which the friendless little boy attracts the wonderment of the good people of the public-house where—it being a special occasion—he has demanded a glass of their ' very best ale, with a head to it ' ? " In the autobiographical fragment already cited, where the story appears in almost the same words, Dickens exclaims :

> Here we stand, all three, before me now, in my study in Devonshire Terrace. The landlord, in his shirt sleeves, leaning against the bar window-frame ; his wife, looking over the little half-door ; and I, in some confusion, looking up at them from outside the partition.

I say this sense of the local and intimate stamps both Dickens and Shakespeare as English because they delight in homely, unconsidered trifling things which yet have associations and suggestions, is inherently an English characteristic. Let me give an example. The other day a writer in *The Nation* related that he asked a Tommy in the trenches why he chose to live alone at a particularly dangerous point in the firing line and was told " Because it was home-like, and he knew the broken old waggon at the corner." We meet that strange, irrational intimacy with inanimate

things in Shakespeare a thousand times, Shakespeare, who saw trees as men walking and knew every leaf of the greenwood. And how many times has not Dickens made a chair live for us or even a door-knocker speak to our souls ?

Finally there is this great cardinal resemblance between the two : that both of them felt there to be an actual correspondence, an invisible but most potent contact between the mind of man and the inanimate nature that surrounds him. I do not think that any other writers in the language were so saturated with the conviction that man, in his most energetic moods, reacted directly with the elements. Shakespeare, indeed, quite clearly held the belief—an old one in the world's history —that to man had been given power over matter, and in the mouth of Prospero he has placed the enunciation of a dogma that is suggested in his plays with copious insistence :

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves ;
And ye that on the sands with printless foot
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him
When he comes back : you demi-puppets that
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
Whereof the Ewe not bites ; and you whose pastime
Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice
To hear the solemn curfew ; by whose aid
(Weak masters though ye be) I have bedimm'd
The noon tide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war ; to the dread rattling thunder

Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt ; the strong bas'd promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up
The pine and cedar ; graves, at my command
Have waked them sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. But this rough magic
I here abjure ; and, when I have requir'd
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)
To work mine end upon their senses, that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.

That, perhaps, is the most explicit avowal of a belief that it is obvious Shakespeare firmly held, and that became, as it were, a part of his artistic method, which presented man continually as perpetually the focus of his physical surroundings so that they partook absolutely of the colour of his mood. On the night of the murder of Duncan, Lennox finds " his young remembrance cannot find a parallel " to the storm :

Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' the air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confus'd events
New hatch'd to th' woeful time ; the obscene bird
Clamour'd the live long night : Some say, the earth
Was feverish and did shake.

That Dickens had the same idea perpetually

present to his mind cannot, I think, be disputed, for the evidence is to be found in innumerable passages of astonishing descriptive power. Perhaps of all these the most remarkable is that which depicts Jonas and Tigg setting out on the drive to Salisbury, when Jonas has resolved on the murder of his companion.

" It was one of those hot, silent nights, when people sit at windows, listening for the thunder which they know will shortly break ; when they recall dismal tales of hurricanes and earthquakes ; and of lonely travellers on open plains, and lonely ships at sea struck by lightning. Lightning flashed and quivered on the black horizon even now ; and hollow murmurings were in the wind, as though it had been blowing where the thunder rolled, and still was charged with its exhausted echoes. But the storm, though gathering swiftly, had not yet come up ; and the prevailing stillness was the more solemn, from the dull intelligence that seemed to hover in the air, of noise and conflict afar off.

" It was very dark ; but in the murky sky there were masses of cloud which shone with a lurid light, like monstrous heaps of copper that had been heated in a furnace, and were growing cold. These had been advancing steadily and slowly, but they were now motionless, or nearly so. As the carriage clattered round the corners of the streets, it passed, at every one, a knot of persons,

who had come there—many from their houses close at hand, without hats—to look up at that quarter of the sky. And now, a very few large drops of rain began to fall, and thunder rumbled in the distance.

" Jonas sat in a corner of the carriage with his bottle resting on his knee, and gripped as tightly in his hand, as if he would have ground its neck to powder if he could. Instinctively attracted by the night, he had laid aside the pack of cards upon the cushion; and with the same involuntary impulse, so intelligible to both of them as not to occasion a remark on either side, his companion had extinguished the lamp. The front glasses were down; and they sat looking silently out upon the gloomy scene before them.

" They were clear of London, or as clear of it as travellers can be, whose way lies on the Western Road, within a stage of that enormous city. Occasionally they encountered a foot-passenger, hurrying to the nearest place of shelter; or some unwieldy cart proceeding onward at a heavy trot, with the same end in view. Little clusters of such vehicles were gathered round the stable-yard or baiting-place of every wayside tavern; while their drivers watched the weather from the doors and open windows, or made merry within. Everywhere the people were disposed to bear each other company, rather than sit alone; so that groups of watchful faces seemed to be looking

out upon the night and them, from almost every house they passed.

" It may appear strange that this should have disturbed Jonas, or rendered him uneasy, but it did. After muttering to himself, and often changing his position, he drew up the blind on his side of the carriage, and turned his shoulder sulkily towards it. But he neither looked at his companion nor broke the silence which prevailed between them, and which had fallen so suddenly upon himself, by addressing a word to him.

" The thunder rolled, the lightning flashed; the rain poured down, like Heaven's wrath. Surrounded at one moment by intolerable light, and at the next by pitchy darkness, they still pressed forward on their journey. Even when they arrived at the end of the stage, and might have tarried, they did not; but ordered horses out immediately. Nor had this any reference to some five minutes' lull, which at that time seemed to promise a cessation of the storm. They held their course as if they were impelled and driven by its fury. Although they had not exchanged a dozen words, and might have tarried very well, they seemed to feel, by joint consent, that onward they must go.

" Louder and louder the deep thunder rolled, as through the myriad halls of some vast temple in the sky; fiercer and brighter became the lightning; more and more heavily the rain

poured down. The horses (they were travelling now with a single pair) plunged and started from the rills of quivering fire that seemed to wind along the ground before them; but there these two men sat, and forward they went as if they were led on by an invisible attraction.

"The eye, partaking of the quickness of the flashing light, saw in its every gleam a multitude of objects which it could not see at steady noon in fifty times that period. Bells in steeples, with the rope and wheel that moved them; ragged nests of birds in cornices and nooks; faces full of consternation in the tilted waggons that came tearing past; their frightened teams ringing out a warning which the thunder drowned; harrows and ploughs left out in fields; miles upon miles of hedge-divided country, with the distant fringe of trees as obvious as the scarecrow in the bean-field close at hand; in a trembling, vivid, flickering instant, everything was clear and plain; then came a flush of red into the yellow light; a change to blue; a brightness so intense that there was nothing else but light; and then the deepest and profoundest darkness."

Re-reading that arresting and vivid description I am prompted to apply to Dickens, words which Hazlitt once used of Shakespeare, when he said that he had made his imagination the hand-maid of nature, and nature the plaything of his imagination.

I am aware, of course, that to some critics the interpretation of such passages and parallelisms can only be expressed in terms of artistic methods. They belong to the art-forms which both Shakespeare and Dickens used. They are intended as dramatic artifices to bring into relief the deeds and the careers of the *dramatis personæ* of the plot. They accentuate them through congruities of scena and surroundings. They emphasise them by linking them up to an impressive background or atmosphere of elemental similarity. This is so. But for my present purpose they also express a certain soul-affinity with external environ which both Shakespeare and Dickens perceived as a vital principle of life. It seems to me that both received a revelation of this immense truth: the presence of some great enveloping action in the affairs of human life which influences men in the mass, which colours and determines moments of crisis in the human soul, and which contains within the onward sweep of its moral order the affairs of man with all its potent issues of ominous destiny or majestic future. It is this view of man, his affinities of soul and fate, seen at a high altitude of vision which incites the will to energy and the power to avert the catastrophe of souls. It is this which is the hall-mark of men of real genius; the cognisance of a spiritual relationship one to the other and to some inclusive principle of law that

is ultra-human. Sometimes this is presented as historical and familiar, sometimes as supernatural and mystical. The Wars of the Roses were for Shakespeare creative of irony and destiny in the private and personal career of Richard III. The French Revolution forms for Dickens the enveloping and determining action in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In *King Lear*, the French war of that period became the atmosphere of a fateful and pitiful career. The Gordon Riots of *Barnaby Rudge* make an encompassing action of considerable dramatic and sometimes spectacular and lurid force. They are suggestive of that irony and Nemesis which dog the careers of both the individual and the nation. The witch-element in *Macbeth* provides a fitting atmosphere for the dark crimes of its chief personages and embodies some remarkable psychological significances. That wonderful description of elemental disturbance in the vicinity of Peggotty's Hut on Yarmouth beach presents an impressive counterpart to the fate of Steerforth. And so one might proceed. For me, these things convey something more than the mere deliberate devices of art. They are indicative of that distinctive genius and insight which recognise through fellowship of soul the realities of the common life which we all share. They are the marks of the true humanist—the man cognisant of that mystical unity, or as Emerson puts it, that Over-Soul, " within which

every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other ; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship . . . that over-powering reality which confutes our tricks and talents and constrains everyone to pass for what he is. . . . ." In this Dickens was like Shakespeare, the great Englishman of his time. Rich and poor, high and low, patrician and plebeian, cultured and ignorant, were

> But souls that of his own good life partake,
> He loves as his own self. . . . . .

# CHAPTER II

# THE CONVALESCENCE OF LITERATURE

## II

## THE CONVALESCENCE OF LITERATURE

IF we are to trace the travail of the soul of Dickens, to measure the strength of his impulses, to find the founts of his inspirations and to discover wherein its true limitations must be looked for, then inevitably we must regard scrutinizingly alike the age in which he lived and the effects of his work upon it, upon its aims, thoughts, aspirations and ideas ; those intangible verities that rule the world ! The soul, let us remember, is that part of a man which can be measured only in action—to the neglect of which fact we may confidently ascribe much of the morbid tediousness and depressing banality of a certain school of modern biography. It is a school which loves to depict its heroes in dressing gown and slippers at the breakfast table, to portray their tantrums at the coldness of the matutinal coffee, or their anger at the addled egg ; a school that chronicles with avidity the most trivial, not to say squalid, details of the daily life of the great, and delights in exhibiting every foible and folly of the man they are supposed to be depicting and whose efforts for the most part end without telling us anything of value about him.

This elaboration of the trivial has reacted with deplorable results upon modern journalism, which regales us in some of its cheap and nasty effusions, with intolerably dull accounts of how and where celebrities consumed their luncheons, what sort of walking sticks they were observed to carry on certain occasions, and whether they arrived at the theatre in a taxi-cab or a motor; all of which, together with inaccurate vulgarities and insipid comments, are served up to a bored public day by day, until we begin to fear that the valet has not only abolished the hero but the real journalist also. These trivialities of degenerate gossip teach us nothing of value either about the living or the dead. No one but a dullard, no one with a soul above a fashion plate, or a mental horizon broader than a lackey, wants to know how the Prime Minister eats his chop or wears his hat. To a robust intelligence such "news" is if anything a little more depressing than the reading of Bradshaw, and of the minds of the few who really like such tedious "exercise," we can only recall that couplet of Pope, which warns us that

> The absence of employment is not rest;
> A mind quite vacant, is a mind distressed.

The fact is that the most important piece of self-revelation in which a man can indulge is his work, and it is this fact which much of modern biography and journalism ignores. "Let a man,"

said Ruskin, " hide himself from you in everything else, yet you shall find his true self there expressed."

His friend Carlyle, himself a chief victim of the school of microscopic biography to which I have just referred, left us, by a strange irony, its most brilliant refutation. " The latest Gospel in this world," he says, in an inspired passage, " is Know thy work and do it, ' know thyself ' ; long enough has that poor ' self ' of thine tormented thee ; thou wilt never get to know it, I believe ! Think it not thy business, this of knowing thyself ; thou art an unknowable individual ; know what thou can'st work at ; and work at it like a Hercules ! That will be thy better plan. It has been written, ' an endless significance lies in Work ' ; a man perfects himself by working. Consider how even in the meanest sorts of labour, the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work ! Doubt, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like hell-dogs lie beleaguering the souls of the poor day worker, as of every man ; but he bends himself with free valour against the task, and all these are stilled, all these shrink murmuring far off into their caves. The man is now a man. The blessed glow of Labour in him, is it not as purifying fire, wherein all poison is burnt up, and of sour smoke itself there is made bright blessed flame."

I am therefore on sure ground when I declare that if we are to realise the intrinsic value and the essential strength of Dickens, we must find them in the conflict which he waged with the England that he loved : the England that he satirised and excoriated, the England that he at once depicted and in part destroyed, the England that learnt to love him even as he scourged it. In a word, we must find the real revelation of Dickens in that work, in which there is " a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness."

In 1832, the year of the great Reform Bill, Dickens was 20 years old. He was then in his reporting and journalistic days. He was originating the *Sketches* under the familiar pen-name of " Boz " : those miniature portraitures of the poor and their environment, the middle-class and their parish, the life of the mean and magnificent streets, the shops, the theatres, the fairs, the slums, the suburbs, the river, the *olla podrida* of the humanity which had yet to be brought under the influence and the quickening of a Press and a Literature then slowly emerging from the voiceless depths, and to which Dickens himself was destined to vibrate into powerful and articulate utterance.

After the distress of Waterloo (1815) and up to this time there may be discerned many underlying ideas of a new life and a golden age which were injected into the lurid atmosphere which

still lingered after the interning of Napoleon at St. Helena. They tended to soften and hold in solution the troublous and rancorous elements of the aftermath. In the twenties " the dignity of man as man " was already becoming vaguely vocal. The " Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty " which Wordsworth threw off in brilliant scintillations in the first quarter of the century were percolating the masses and moving the people to a new but as yet formless patriotism. Vague and unformed enthusiasms of " Liberty, Equality and Fraternity " were being projected from Revolutionary France. The passion and turbulence of the Napoleonic wars, and their product of a new crop of seething and tumultuous sentiments, may in fact be not inappropriately compared with our own time. Well we know that the gentle Wordsworth's lament over Liege and Namur and the " blood-stained Meuse " has had its historic replica. And the burning emotions of his ineffable Invocation to Earth :

> Rest, rest perturbèd earth,
> Oh rest, thou doleful mother of mankind ! . . .

and the passionate thrill of gratitude in the " Thanksgiving Ode," are already surging in the subconscious mind of our period. Like ourselves, Wordsworth, by reason of the very sensitiveness of his gentle and tranquil nature, was sharing the passions and hopes of his day. He never failed

to protest against egoistic oppression and aggression as their own blind and predestined destroyers; all the time watching, as we to-day watch :

> . . . the auguries of the time,
> And through the human heart explore my way
> And look and listen, gathering whence I may
> Triumph, and thoughts no bondage can restrain.

The pre-Dickensian spirit was leading up to the day when the master was destined to strike. The prophets of a period rising gradually to self-consciousness were already instilling the seething reservoir of resentments and eager expectancies with more liberal and humane ideals. Painters, poets and publicists were pointing to wider mental horizons and proclaiming a higher gospel of humanity. Mrs. Fry, the tall, handsome and demure Quakeress, moved with stately and benignant progress through the filth and chaos of the prisons. She had already discovered the promise of the infant in the school-child. An association for the promotion and " improvement of the lot of the infant chimney sweepers " was at work. Bentham was promulgating his doctrine of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." Everywhere a new spirit was quickening that had yet found no adequate expression.

During the early years after the Reform Act there were already unmistakable symptoms of social agitation which were drastic and ambitious. They synchronised with continental revolution,

and bore unpleasant resemblance to its socialist spirit. The political feeling of the Radicals against the Whigs rose to extreme class hatred. The rigors of the new Poor Law (1830) did nothing to mitigate the ruin of the moral fibre of the poor. Unemployment left them no choice but the dreary barrack life of the Workhouse. Lord Brougham, like Herbert Spencer later on, interpreted Benthamism coldly, heartlessly and cynically by declaring that Nature had no room for the starving artisans of Spitalfields at her already " overcrowded table." The working classes were not slow to realise that the *laissez faire* of the Benthamites might make a good weapon for an assault on aristocratic privilege, but to be told that the best thing the State could do was to leave them alone, was of no use to them. They projected the " six points of Chartism " and incontinently leaned towards Socialism.

Meanwhile the fight for a Free Press, with sporadic attempts to promote the evangel of the poor through the propaganda of the printed pocket-handkerchief, proceeded. The poor recognised in the taxes on paper a motive for keeping them ignorant. And journalists like Hetherington, Lovet and Vincent, with statesmen like Grote, Molesworth, Hume and Bulwer-Lytton, entered ardently into the conflict. Cobbet adroitly avoided the paper tax by publishing his *Register* as a letter. The demand for cheap books was seen by the

unique and striking publication of Charles Knight's *Penny Encyclopædia*, which, owing to the taxes, resulted for him in a capital loss of £30,000. Although in 1836 the agitation brought some relief, Dickens had passed to middle-life before the final remnants of the taxes on knowledge and literary diversion for the people were abolished. Well might the lyrical Ebenezer Elliott sing :

> Oh Pallid want
> Oh Labour stark
> Behold we bring the second Ark
> The Press ! The Press ! The Press !

Throughout all the early years of the nineteenth century literature had contributed little or nothing to the amelioration of the lot of the people. It existed in the clouds, contemplating the poetic glories of the dawn even before the sun had penetrated to the mean and frowsy streets. It dreamed of the benign spirit of men enthroned amid the delights of nature and the sensual expansiveness of dream-cities. Its head was amongst the stars, and it saw not the festering filth-heaps amidst which man scraped for his daily livelihood. It had visions of the radiant raiment of the gods and goddesses of Olympus, and discerned not the rags and tattered remnants of the real life of the poor in slum, prison, workhouse and Bedlam. It vainly endeavoured to teach and hortate in the classical spirit of the moral maxim, ordering life

by rule, verse and apothegm. It was the sermonising attitude of mind, not that of the humanist, which gets down in sympathetic *rapport* with realities of the everyday round. When Dickens came upon the scene he saw with penetrative insight the whole monstrous anomaly, and plunged into the troublous waters of human life even as the Revd. Mr. Crisparkle did into the weir of Cloisterham. And he initiated a new and intimate ministry of souls in the robust spirit of a muscular Christianity.

The *Pickwick Papers* first burst upon the England of the thirties, an England that as I have said was charged with vibrant life and full of quickening bustle: an England still flushed with the enthusiasm of the golden era of reform; that heard with Dr. Arnold "the death knells of feudalism" in the piston strokes of the locomotive and that thought it saw in the cotton spinny (and in the fortunes that followed it), a new chapter in the economic emancipation of mankind. In that era of boundless, if crude, enthusiasms, of high aims and intense energy, unmatched almost for vitality, enterprise and elasticity, literature was sick: sick of a palsy, sick almost unto death! The "vim," the "go," the restless and purposeful ambition of the new forces that were coalescing to direct and re-shape England, these, alas, found no expression, no recognition, and so neither corrective nor inspiration in the reading matter of the masses.

True it is that " there were giants in the land in those days," but even giants are not proof against disease, and the malady that had struck at literature was a mortal one that poisoned the very strongest. Literature had lost the sense of the mob : the sense of realities, the touch of the common people, the resilience that can come only from contact with life itself. It had fallen into a decline, from which only a great elemental force could rescue it, a decline that pulsed feebly and decorously between a sickly and grotesque gentility and a sham and unconvincing romanticism. If I am asked for the cardinal cause of its distressing condition, I say boldly that the English note in literature had been drowned for half a century or more by the staccato shrillness of Celtic enthusiasm. For half a century Fielding had been neglected : for half a century and more Shakespeare had been buried. The eighteenth century, that chuckled over the polite but brilliant witticism of Sheridan's *School for Scandal*,— how could it help it ?—or applauded the extravagances of John Home, had no stomach for the rough, virile, but resplendent genius of Shakespeare. Tom Jones (no hero, but indeed a man and a brother), his contagious laughter and convincing wholesomeness, they were forgotten in the tears that rained over Clarissa Harlowe, surely the most unreal heroine, who ever excited the anguish of the sentimentalists. An age, at

once the most sceptical and the most sentimental that the world has ever known, turned its back upon the greenwood of Shakespeare and the high road of Fielding to take refuge in *The Castle of Otranto*, there to live with *The Man of Feeling*, and Beckford's *Vathek*, or to listen to the half crazy mysticism of the poet Blake, whose invincible insanity was streaked with a thin vein of real genius.* Thackeray, in that charming novel, *The Virginians*, caught the mood of the period with the happy knack of historical verisimilitude that was peculiarly his own. He depicts the ladies accompanied by the General and young George Warrington, listening to the tragedy of John Home, in preference to one of Shakespeare's, "who say what you will," comprised "many barbarisms that could not but shock a polite auditory; whereas Mr. Home, the modern author, knew how to be refined in the very midst of grief and passion; to represent death, not merely as awful, but graceful and pathetic; and never condescended to degrade the majesty of the Tragic Muse by the ludicrous apposition of buffoonery

* Perhaps the unreality of the sham sentiment which obsessed the pre-Dickens period in literature and feeling, is best illustrated by one of the most explosive and brilliant retorts of that fine old Englishman, Dr. Johnson. He was challenged by Boswell as to the propriety of the conduct of a bereft lady of title, who, deprived of her spouse, had ensconced herself in a round tower. The Doctor replied: "Sir, had she been a washerwoman with six children she would not have done so."

and familiar punning, such as the elder playwright certainly had resort to." Mark what follows. As the play goes on a principal character —" Lady Randolph—explains how it is that she is so melancholy. Married to Lord Randolph somewhat late in life, she owns, and his lordship perceives, that a dead lover yet occupies all her heart, and her husband is fain to put up with this dismal, second-hand regard, which is all that my lady can bestow. Hence, an invasion of Scotland by the Danes is rather a cause of excitement than disgust to my lord, who rushes to meet the foe, and forget the dreariness of his domestic circumstances. Welcome, Vikings and Norsemen ! Blow, northern blasts, the invaders' keels to Scotland's shore ! Randolph and other heroes will be on the beach to give the foemen a welcome ! His lordship has no sooner disappeared behind the trees of the forest, but Lady Randolph begins to explain to her confidante the circumstances of her early life. The fact was, she had made a private marriage, and what would the confidante say if, in early youth she, Lady Randolph, had lost a husband ? In the cold bosom of the earth was lodged the husband of her youth, and in some cavern of the ocean lies her child and his !

" Up to this the General behaved with as great gravity as any of his young companions to the play ; but when Lady Randolph proceeded to say, ' Alas ! Hereditary evil was the cause of my

misfortunes,'* he nudged George Warrington, and looked so droll that the young man burst out laughing."

And so the play goes on: the ladies still are struck, the gentlemen frankly incredulous and scornful till at last—" When the applause had subsided, Lady Randolph is made to say:

' My son, I heard a voice ! '

' I think she did hear a voice ! ' cries papa. ' Why, the fellow was bellowing like a bull of Bashan.' And the General would scarcely behave himself from thenceforth to the end of the performance. . . . When Lady Randolph's friend described how her mistress had ' flown like lightning up the hill, and plunged herself into the empty air,' Mr. Lambert said he was delighted to be rid of her. ' And as for that story of her early marriage,' says he, ' I have my very strongest doubts about it.' "

This was the sort of fustian that had played Shakespeare off the stage and that the great

* What strikes me on re-reading this perfectly fair summary of the Scotsman's tragedy (on hearing which a triumphant fellow countryman called out from the pit " Where's Wully Shakespeare noo ? ") is its almost startling resemblance to the " modern drama "—that is to say, to the drama which has followed on the partial decline of the first impact of Dickens's genius. Save for the invasion of Scotland by the Danes—the mere accident of the period chosen—the essentials are almost identical with the play of the period. I return to this point later when I deal with the fuller hopes of the more complete Dickens revival.

Garrick was blamed for rejecting! With the novel, things were no better. The three-deckers of the period deal with the heartaches and hysterics of the young yet old ladies of the day, and described at inordinate length the vapours of the Lydia Languishes who were distracted by the obduracy of their parents and the unaccountable eccentricities of their impossible lovers. Jane Austen, it is true, drew women of more real flesh and blood, but Jane Austen was unread, and Scott, when he traced across the splendid flow of his romanticism some life-like presentiment of the common man, found it welcomed South of the Tweed, merely because the *locus* was in Scotland. In the long, depressing period between the passing of Fielding, and the arrival of Dickens, Scott and Burns may be said to be the only exponents of that wholesome, grim and arresting realism which Dickens came to fulfil, and their success, real and inspiring as it was North of the Tweed, partook in the South of the nature of an exotic. Burns and Scott were, in the common view, great writers, who were graciously permitted to depict the common mass of mankind *when their studies were of an alien race :* a race whom the Englishman felt in his insularity was *capable de tout !*

If we turn to poetry we shall find a condition of affairs scarcely less depressing. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Byron—above all Shelley

—these are great names indeed, whose voices have sung in symphonious pride, whose work is imperishable and will endure while our language lasts. But, for the most part, that work reacted little on the people, and for the most part it was, despite the genius of its authors, so strained, so unnatural, so hectic and so remote from life that, in the nature of things, it could not do so. If we except the *Ancient Mariner* of Coleridge—almost certainly the greatest ballad in the language ; the lyrics unsurpassed in beauty in which Shelley sang the loveliness of nature ; and a few splendid stanzas of Byron and some half dozen sonnets of Keats and Wordsworth—achievements that I agree are of an order so high that we cannot appraise them—if we except all but the finest flowers, the most brilliant gems of these immortals, then we shall be left with long and, for the most part, dreary dissertations, whose flights were incomprehensible to the mass of mankind, then and now. Byron has himself left us in no doubt as to his verdict upon the aberrations and extravagances of the poetic genius of his contemporaries who, great as they were, yet strike us now as touched with a perversity perilously near madness and without its fire :

> Next comes the dull disciple of thy school
> That mild apostate from poetic rule,
> The simple Wordsworth, framer of a lay
> As soft as evening in his favourite May,

Who warns his friend " to shake off toil and trouble,
And quit his books, for fear of growing double " ;
Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose ;
Convincing all, by demonstration plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane ;
And Christmas stories tortured into rhyme
Contain the essence of the true sublime.
Thus, when he tells the tale of Betty Foy,
The idiot mother of " an idiot boy " ;
A moon-struck, silly lad, who lost his way,
And, like his bard, confounded night with day ;
So close on each pathetic part he dwells,
And each adventure so sublimely tells,
That all who view the " idiot in his glory,"
Conceive the bard the hero of the story.

Shall gentle Coleridge pass unnoticed here,
To turgid ode and tumid stanza dear ?
Though themes of innocence amuse him best,
Yet still obscurity's a welcome guest.
If Inspiration should her aid refuse
To him who takes a pixy for a muse,
Yet none in lofty numbers can surpass
The bard who soars to elegise an ass.
So well the subject suits his noble mind,
He brays the laureat of the long-ear'd tribe.

Thus Byron on his contemporaries. Had they retorted in kind they might have pointed out that, great man as he was, nothing more ridiculous or, indeed, pitiable than his pose could be conceived. As Macaulay, one of his warmest admirers, pointed out, his philosophy was as bad as his

verses were good. It was the strangest mixture of misanthropy and voluptuousness ever foisted on mankind, who, according to the Byronic gospel, were enjoined to hate their neighbour, and to love their neighbour's wife, with equal fervour.

Thus, then, stood literature and the drama in those first years of the greatest century since Elizabeth. Fustian stalked the stage. Shakespeare was discounted or unknown. The novel had sunk to a position pitiable and grotesque. The poem was so charged with the vapours and aberrations of insanity, from the vegetarian Shelley to the recluse Wordsworth and the opium-eater Coleridge ; that not even the immanence of their surpassing greatness could give it that vitality and contagious strength, without which the most exquisite verses are left unread upon the library shelves. Literature, in a word, was sick or at best convalescent, when there burst suddenly upon the world, and in the most unlikely guise, a new force, at whose impact all was changed. Charles Dickens opened a fresh era in the literature and in the life of our people. *Pickwick* was published, and swept England like a hurricane ; a hurricane that blew and chased away the noxious vapours and gases that were poisoning the pure air of Heaven ; and so the shadows fled and men came out again to feel the sun.

# CHAPTER III

# THE FIRST OF THE REALISTS

## III

## THE FIRST OF THE REALISTS

IT was on the 25th of November, 1836, that there appeared the first number of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club:* appeared, as I have said, to open a new chapter of literature—and so of life—for the English-speaking peoples throughout the Globe and to achieve a success as instantaneous and as universal as it was wholly and entirely unprecedented in the history of English letters. Those were the days, let us recollect, when the art of the " boomster " had still to be applied to the reading matter of the masses : when huge poster announcements of new literary projects rivalling those devoted to pills or hair dyes were unknown : when publishers' advertisements occupied but modest space in the press ; when, in a word, literature had still to be vulgarized by the Cheap Jack methods of the cheap and nasty journalist. The hustler was unknown in Fleet Street, and the days had not arrived when a new author could, like a new cigarette, be placarded into fame. Yet despite, perhaps because of, the absence of these adventitious aids, Dickens achieved with *Pickwick* a literary sensation that has never been approached,

let alone equalled, before or since. Nothing like the *furore* that followed the introduction of Weller into that immortal work—" that great romance of adventure "—has ever happened before in England. To parallel the enthusiasm, the avidity, the joy with which successive numbers of the work were welcomed, we must think, not of great literary, but of great historic, perhaps even of military, events ; events so charged with interest that men forget class distinctions, ceremonial observances, temperamental distinctions, and eagerly buttonhole each other to exchange commonplaces on the theme that is uppermost in every mind. *Pickwick*, in its triumph, partook somewhat of the delirious enthusiasm that follows a great victory of British arms, when all sorts and conditions of men make common cause in their rejoicing. The romance captivated the imagination and held the affections of the British public as no other work has ever done. Men stopped each other as they went up the office stairs to ask if the new monthly part was yet out, or begged for a loan of the much-bethumbed copy from their neighbours on coach or 'bus. City Aldermen used to peruse it unashamedly on the bench. Vestries used to adjourn in order that the Chairman might read aloud the current issue. Men who had never before been moved to tears or laughter over the written word, cried and laughed and cried again like little children, now over the

*sang-froid* of Weller, now over the horrors of the Fleet, or the adventures of Mr. Jingle, or the famous trial when Dodson and Fogg triumphed over plain British honesty. The whole of England was seized with a new enthusiasm as infectious as the tarantula, as wholesome as laughter itself, and as abiding as even the charm of Dickens's own writing.

What was the cause of this extraordinary, this incalculable success? It is well worth our while to try and discover, for, having found this out, we shall get the real clue to the soul of Dickens himself. It would be folly to pretend that it lay in the story, for in sober truth the fascination of *Pickwick* was that, like the needy knife-grinder of Canning, he had "none to tell, Sir." To some extent it was due to the quite unmistakable fact that the English people found themselves described and portrayed by one after their own heart. "I have shown my soul to the people," says a neglected poet in one of Mr. Crosland's clever *Literary Parables*, "and they were not interested. What shall I do?" And the wise mentor answers: "*Show them their own!*" That Dickens did in *Pickwick*. The English people had at last an interpreter, a man, whose outlook on life was theirs, who worshipped with them at the very shrines of their idolatry, whose pulse quickened with theirs, and whose sorrows partook of their own; a man, who loved the wholesome

carelessness of jocund strength, who delighted in the same irresponsibility that finds its vent in badinage and quips, who enjoyed an exhilarating walk through the English country, with a carouse at an inn to bring the day to a close ; a man who revelled in good cheer, good feeling and good fellowship and had an eye for the strange unaccountable paradoxes that go to make up the life of that strange race which he instinctively understood ; a man " who expressed," as a great Dickensian has told us, " with an energy and brilliance quite uncommon the things close to the common mind." " In everybody," says Mr. G. K. Chesterton, " there is a certain thing that loves babies, that fears death, that likes sunlight ; that thing enjoys Dickens " ; and, as that thing is in ninety Englishmen out of a hundred, *Pickwick* was greeted with an ardour and hilarity of spirit that left the continent breathless with amazement. Greater works of art assuredly have been written. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Dante's *Inferno*, Homer's *Iliad*—these must come first in the final judgment of mankind upon the great achievements of the past. But none did quite what *Pickwick* accomplished. None caught and preserved for us so faithfully the spirit of a people. None mirrored so completely their soul or showed so vividly the essence of their being. *Pickwick* became at a bound, and remains for ever, the great epic of the English !

But there was another and perhaps a deeper reason for the instantaneous success and the abiding hold that Dickens secured upon the race by this, his masterpiece. In the best sense of a cruelly abused word, Dickens was, over and above everything else, a realist. Indeed, properly considered, he was the first, and the greatest, of all the realists. We have seen that literature had fallen since the days of Fielding into a strange and dangerous decline—due almost entirely to its failure to face the facts of life. It had become exotic, unreal, unnatural. Dickens it was who restored it from its palsied decay and brought it back to life. It is well to remember that Dickens was bred upon the strong meat of Fielding and Smollett, men who assuredly did not lack the salt and savour of realism. Forster tells us how in that little room at Chatham, where he first conceived *A Child's Dream of a Star*—"The birth-place," says his biographer, "of his fancy"—he made the acquaintance of *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphry Clinker*, "a host of friends where he had none." Later, alas, poor boy, "when everything by degrees was sold or pawned, little Charles being the principal agent in these sorrowful transactions, such of the books as had been brought from Chatham" (he and his family were now at Bayham Street, in direst poverty) "were carried off from the little chiffonier which his father called the library, to a bookseller

in the Hampstead Road. But he had made them his own by that time." " Comprehension," said Erasmus, " is our only true possession," and Dickens, boy as he was, had drunk deep of the great writer whose mantle fell on him, and under whose inspiration he wrote of the common people, and of the cares, the troubles, the tragedies, the jollity, and the splendour of their lives, on which literature had turned her back for close upon half a century.

To find how profound an influence Fielding left on the mind of the youthful Dickens, and how deliberate, not to say remorseless, was his adoption of the rôle of realist, we must turn, not to the *Pickwick Papers*, but to the work that followed hard upon its heels—*Oliver Twist*, the preface to which I have always thought was one of the most arresting of those personal disclosures that Dickens permitted himself concerning his art, its purposes, and its motives. In that remarkable document, Dickens stamps himself as a realist *sans phrase*. Let me reproduce his own words. They are, it seems to me, pregnant and quickening for all who value literature, for all who realise its profound and ineradicable influence, upon the thoughts, the aims, the sympathies—in a word, upon the *life* of a people.

" When I completed this Tale," he writes . . . " it was objected to on some high moral grounds in some high moral quarters.

" It was, it seemed, a coarse and shocking

circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London's population ; that Sikes is a thief, and Fagin a receiver of stolen goods ; that the boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute.

" I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil, I have always believed this to be a recognised and established truth, laid down by the greatest men the world has ever seen, constantly acted upon by the best and wisest natures, and confirmed by the reason and experience of every thinking mind. I saw no reason why the dregs of life . . . should not serve the purpose of a moral, at least as well as its froth and cream. Nor did I doubt that there lay festering in Saint Giles's as good materials towards the truth as any to be found in Saint James's."

And he goes on (in a masterly passage that shows the " extraordinary common sense " to which his " extraordinary uncommon sensibility " was allied) to point out that :

" I had read of thieves by scores—seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket, choice in horseflesh, bold in bearing, fortunate in gallantry, great at a song, a bottle, pack of cards or dice box, and fit companions for the bravest.'* But I had never met

* Even to-day the figure abides with us. Witness Gerard and " Raffles ! "

(except in Hogarth) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as do really exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid poverty of their lives; to show them as they really are, for ever skulking uneasily throughout the dirtiest paths of life, with the great black, ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they may; it appeared to me that to do this would be to attempt a something which was greatly needed, and which would be a service to society. And therefore I did it as I best could."

"But," he continues with matchless scorn, "there are people of so refined and delicate a nature that they cannot bear the contemplation of these horrors. Not that they turn instinctively from crime; but that criminal characters, to suit them, must be, like their meat, in delicate disguise. A Massaroni in green velvet is an enchanting creature; but a Sikes in fustian is insupportable. A Mrs. Massaroni, being a lady in short petticoats and a fancy dress, is a thing to imitate in *tableaux* and have in lithograph on pretty songs, but a Nancy, being a creature in cotton gown and cheap shawl, is not to be thought of. It is wonderful how Virtue turns from dirty stockings; and how Vice, married to ribbons and a little gay attire, changes her name as wedded ladies do, and becomes Romance."

" But I did not . . . abate," he says, " one hole in the Dodger's coat, or one scrap of curl paper in the girl's dishevelled hair. I have no faith in the delicacy which cannot bear to look upon them. I have no desire to make proselytes among such people, I have no respect for their opinion, good or bad ; do not covet their approval ; and do not write for their amusement.

" I venture to say this without reserve ; for I am not aware of any writer in our language having a respect for himself, or held in any respect by his posterity, who ever has descended to that taste of this fastidious class."*

Dickens went on to call to witness " all the great names in the noblest range of English literature "—Fielding and De Foe, Goldsmith and Smollett, above all the immortal but now neglected Hogarth, " the moralist and censor of his age—in whose great works the times in which he lived, and the characters of every time will never cease to be reflected. Where does this giant stand now," he asked, " in the estimation of his fellow countrymen ? And yet, if I turn back to the days in which he or any of these men flourished, I find the same reproach levelled against them every one, each in his turn, by the insects of the hour, who raised their little hum and died and were forgotten."

* But till Dickens penned this splendid protest it *was* this class that held literature in the hollow of its feeble and frigid hand !

And finally he closes this, the classic defence of Realism in literature—a vindication too little known, though it cannot be known too well—with this defence of Nancy, a defence that should endear him for ever to every man who says with Seneca—" I seek the truth, by which none have suffered " :

" It is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. *It is true*. Every man, who has watched these melancholy shades of life, knows it to be so. Suggested to my mind long ago, by what I often saw and read of, in actual life around me, I have tracked it through many profligate and noisome ways, and found it still the same. From the first introduction of that poor wretch, to her laying her bloody head upon the robber's breast, there is not one word exaggerated or overwrought. It is emphatically God's truth, for it is the truth He leaves in such depraved and miserable breasts ; the hope yet lingering behind ; the last fair drop of water at the bottom of the dried up, weed-choked well. It involves the best and worst shades of our common nature ; much of its highest lives and something of its most beautiful ; it is a contradiction, anomaly, an apparent impossibility, but it is a truth. I am glad to have had it doubted, for in that circumstance I find a sufficient assurance that it needed to be told."

It is very important that we should glance, however briefly, at a sample of the sort of criticism that incited Dickens to this protest—so refreshing in its vigour and yet so dignified in its fearlessness and restraint, a protest that really marks a turning point in the history of English letters and has only been forgotten because of its triumphant and convincing success. We find the type of mind against which it was directed most clearly portrayed in *The Quarterly Review*, whose critic regarded the introduction of Oliver, the workhouse boy, with horror; "the young person" (who was to prove so powerful a factor in literary development) was at all costs to be protected from his contamination. "We object," said this austere journal, which, do not let us forget, with the *Edinburgh* then nurtured the mind of literary London, "we object to the familiarising (*sic*) our ingenuous youth with slang; it is based in (*sic*) travestie of better things. Noble and generous ideas, when expressed in low and mean terms, become ludicrous from the contrast and incongruity; '*du Sublime au ridicule il n'y a qu'un pas.*' . . . The jests and jeers of the slangers leave a sting behind them. They corrupt pure taste and pervert morality, for vice loses shame when treated as a fool-born joke, and those who are not ashamed to talk of a thing will not be long ashamed to put it into practice."

"This," *The Quarterly* continued, "is the

great objection which we feel towards *Oliver Twist!* It deals with the outcasts of humanity, who do their dirty work in work, pot and watch houses, to finish on the Newgate drop. By such publications the happy ignorance of innocence is disregarded. Our youth should not even suspect the possibility of such hidden depths of guilt," etc., etc.

Now, the first reflection that occurs to me on reading this rhetoric is, that to-day it would be, if not impossible, then entirely ineffective. Its appearance in any periodical or review worth counting would cause some mild surprise and then be forgotten. Literature has ceased to taboo the " outcasts of humanity " and has, indeed, refused to regard the poor as outcasts at all. The very words have a different connotation in our ears, and by the immensity of that difference may we measure the enormous impulse that Dickens has contributed to human progress. We have learnt to refuse even to think of the people of the abyss as outcasts of humanity. Rather we are eager to lift them up, to serve them, to prove our brotherhood with them, and in this wiser, saner day, when we come to consider the boy-thief or the child-prostitute, we blame Society, or in other words we blame ourselves, for our neglect of the human treasure that we have allowed to be choked by the weeds of a sordid environment. All this, I know, is a mere commonplace of the thought

of the time, but who was responsible for this changed attitude? Surely Dickens! We refuse to regard the poor as outcasts of humanity to-day because he would not regard them as outcasts of literature sixty years ago. "Ideas rule the world," and in this matter Dickens has been the most potent liberating force that the nineteenth century produced. If Dickens had achieved nothing more than this: that the protest of the *Quarterly*, and the view of life for which it stood (the view, let us remember, that held the field at that time), if he had done no more than render it obsolete and ridiculous, so that we wonder it was ever held by sane publicists; if he had only liberated literature from the basest of all thraldoms—class subjection—and restored it to the people as their heritage; if to this Herculean task he had never added one of his innumerable and diverse services to the race; this alone would have stamped him as a reformer whose influence can scarcely be exaggerated. Since *Pickwick* and *Oliver Twist* there has grown up in England a new literature that has refused to regard one half of humanity as "booted and spurred to ride the other half to death"; that has embraced all sorts and conditions of men; that has shown us how mean and pitiful are the class distinctions and misunderstandings that divide mankind, and how strong is the human chord within us all, binding us together. From the days of the great Victorians,

from George Eliot and Thackeray right down to our own time, to the novels of Besant and Gissing and the plays of Galsworthy, we may see the great humanistic movement reaching through literature in the mind of England.* It was the realism of Dickens that inspired the movement, and its triumph is that of the man who restored literature to life, and so brought life to literature. As Dickens said of the good Physician in *Little Dorrit*, so may we say of himself: "Where he was, something real was. And half a grain of reality, like the smallest portion of some other natural production, will flavour an enormous quantity of diluent."

And, as Dickens remarked of the same character, so may we say of him also: "Many wonderful things did he see and hear, and much irreconcilable moral contradiction did he pass his life among: yet his equality of compassion was no more disturbed than the Divine Master's of all healing was. He went, like the rain, among the just and unjust, doing all the good he could and neither proclaiming in the Synagogues nor at the corners of the streets." Not only were some of the brightest spirits and the most robust minds of the great Victorian Era saved from stifling by

* Even as I write my attention is drawn to the following: "What made me determined to live and work in the East End was reading about Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*, said the Bishop of Chelmsford (Dr. Watts-Ditchfield) yesterday."—(*Daily Mail*, May 31st, 1916).

the fresh air that Dickens forced into the prison-house where he found fiction confined ; but the note of humanism that has reverberated loud and clear through our generation was first struck by the man who moved the world to laughter and tears over the " Marchioness," and made it shrink with terror from the brutal soul of Sikes.

It would be a mistake to regard this contagious triumph of Dickens's art as due entirely to that art itself. After all, we can boast of other realists, whose creative energies were even more successful than his in producing startling and arresting effects, straight from life itself, but whose influence did not endure, as his has done. To go no further than Shakespeare and Fielding, we have seen how their power waxed dull and faint once the immediate effect of their genius had worn itself out, whereas the whole tone and colour of the literature that followed hard on Dickens corresponded to his own. Why is this ? It is to be found as I suggest, in a certain quality that distinguished Dickens from all his predecessors, and that vitalises to quite an extraordinary degree almost the whole of his output ; vitalises it even when it is apparent that he is writing not at his best or even so as to do himself bare justice. I find it difficult to express that quality except by saying that realism with him was not only a matter of instinctive craftmanship, a mode of art to which his powers lent themselves peculiarly, but it was

deliberate and purposeful. He had what Shakespeare and Fielding had not—a definite political and social philosophy, broad enough, indeed, to be free from the empty political shibboleths of the time, but based quite obviously on certain ideas of social justice, which, though their application may differ, still lie permanently at the root of all reforms which aim at the emancipation of mankind. Dickens was in revolt against the Society in which he moved and had his being. Shakespeare most clearly was not, and if Fielding was a dissenter from the established order of things, he, unlike Dickens, had not a political creed to which he could refer that compassion which suffering humanity always stirred in his robust yet tender heart. On the other hand, Dickens had clear-cut beliefs and conceptions, to which he referred the human object-lessons that he found on every side of him, and that reinforced his work, even when, as I say, it was at its weakest. "Poor Jo" is not a particularly arresting character, nor is he a very inspired sketch of a human boy. Contrasted with "Rob the Grinder," or "The Artful Dodger," he is greatly lacking in vitality or interest. But he is one of the best known juvenile creations of an author whose juveniles are unsurpassed in the whole realm of literature. Why is this? Because Dickens made him deliberately the text for an indictment of the nation that was content to leave "Poor Jo," the

starveling, bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh, to be moved on by the policeman, while it went delirious over the sorrows of " the natives of Borrioboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger," those interesting protégés of Mrs. Jellyby, who that lady constantly reminded us, " were brothers.' Alone, " Poor Jo," the neglected crossing sweeper, does not greatly appeal to us: but with Mrs. Jellyby, and her missions to natives in the background, he becomes a figure of irresistible accusation, terrible and satiric enough to make us all wince. He is the very complement to Pecksniff and Chadband, the most potent comment that genius could achieve upon our too prevalent sins of hypocrisy, self-satisfaction and lethargy.

Sometimes it is the very abuses that Dickens exposes which give his characters verisimilitude. Poor crazed Miss Flite, how unconvincing, how incredible she would be with her " caged birds," " her expectations of a settlement shortly," and her half-maudlin, half-spiteful irrelevances, if we had not been with her to the Court of Chancery and witnessed its cruel delays, its preposterous procedure, its inhuman and heartbreaking yet pompous absurdities. Miss Flite is incredible by herself: but once put her with Conversation Kenge and the Court of Chancery in the background, and how true her mad laughter rings! The novels of Dickens are crowded with characters that would be unintelligible to us if they were

not introduced deliberately and of set purpose, not, be it noted, to advance the action of the story, or to clear up any characterisation, but unmistakably to expose an abuse in the body politic. I am aware, of course, that it is customary to condemn as inartistic and deplorable the introduction of such matters which (for realism has still its enemies) is held to be a violation of all the canons that should govern the art of storytelling. But my answer to that is simple : it is that, however inartistic it may be in theory, in practice at any rate it gave Dickens his greatest successes. It was when Dickens wrote with a purpose that he wrote at his best, and as he was rarely without a purpose, his work rarely falls below a certain standard of excellence. The most amusing chapter of *Pickwick* is when he deliberately exposes the follies of the law, in the memorable trial scene that has moved all the world to mirth. The most powerful chapter in that immortal romance is when he exposes, also deliberately, the horrors of the Fleet on whose tortured prisoners Pickwick the man cannot bear to look. Again, think of the countless creations that troop through his pages, some of them mere human arguments to prove a case that Dickens is pleading, but yet how vibrant with life, how instinct with humanity, they are ! There is Doyce, " the man with the Patent " in *Little Dorrit :* there is Fagin and his child victims ; there is Bounderby with his poisoned

creed, and Squeers the bogus schoolmaster ; all of them introduced, or, perchance, dragged in, for no other reason than that they prove the thesis that it is the purpose of the novel to maintain. If I am told again that that is bad art, I can reply only that it has resulted in creations that will endure as long as English literature itself. When George II was told that General Wolfe was mad, he expressed the fervent hope that that Commander would bite some of his brother officers, and if the characters I have named are inartistic, let us pray that inartistry may overtake, and at once, every contemporary writer. The fact is that Dickens is too real, too vibrant, too arresting, and has too compelling an interest to please the weak stomachs of his detractors and the belated apologists of gentility. A man who shrinks from the realities of Dickens will shrink from the realities of life. For it is with life itself that the works of the master confront us, and life, like death, needs a brave man to look upon.

* * * *

The fact that to the quenchless fires of his genius Dickens added the burning zeal of a propagandist, obsessed with a consuming compassion for outraged humanity ; that he brought to bear upon his work a fierce, a passionate indignation and resentment at the injustices that he found blackening the soul of man ; this, that we may

call the deliberate or didactic part of his mind, in contradistinction to his unconscious and artistic self, yet reacted upon his art in innumerable ways. He wrote with an energy, a vigour and a freshness of the wrongs that cried out to him, and for their human victims, such as has never been equalled, let alone surpassed, in our literature. Ruskin has voiced the cry of the poor for justice with an eloquence and a rhetorical power more stupendous. Swift has pleaded for them with a fiercer, a more terrible note. Hogarth and Cruikshank have brought them before us with a realism and fidelity that was at once more dreadful and momentarily more arresting. But none of these Titans had exactly that quality of humour, that power of satirical raillery, which was Dickens's own special gift from the gods. " Cruikshank drew criminals," said Mr. G. K. Chesterton, " with something of the cramped and desperate energy of the criminal himself." Now Dickens's energy was never cramped. The propagandist in him, though it roused the humourist, and unconsciously enlisted those powers of matchless satire, never caused him to lose that sense of humour, by which alone the man of intense convictions can retain sanity ; can keep that wide vision which sees all things in their due proportion and inter-relation each to the other. Frequently this power of using humour, not only to describe, but to reveal a character, came almost unbidden to his aid when his more

serious and deliberate attempts to portray a phase of human nature had wholly failed. A great Dickensian has pointed out that, even if Little Nell does not succeed in moving us to a sense of the pathos of suffering and neglected childhood, the Marchioness, that consummate creation of wayward but convincing fancy, does make us gulp down our laughter or find it choked in tears. I have always felt that the Artful Dodger, with his *sang-froid*, his wit, his cheery audacity, makes a great deal more moving appeal on behalf of the neglected boyhood of our country than the anæmic and spiritless Oliver. Over and over again, Dickens having failed to move us, and perhaps having failed also to satisfy himself, by a staid and deliberate study of some type of human nature, yet succeeds, as it were by mere accident, in producing the impression by some creation (thrown off apparently in random carelessness), which stays with us all our lives. Unconsciously, the humour that was Dickens's own was harnessed to the over-mastering idea that was struggling for expression in his mind.

But all these considerations, however stimulating and suggestive, sink into insignificance when we come to consider the really essential reason why Dickens's realism remained to influence profoundly the thought and literature of his time, while that of other and even greater artists did not exercise so potent a sway. The fact is that, as

I have said, Dickens was in revolt and his realism had the note of challenge to a degree that neither Shakespeare nor Fielding could claim. Dickens, in short, was the first great realist to be successful, because he was the first man in our literature who interwove with his wonderful romances, " the Problem Story," that *bête noir* of the orthodox. That this statement will cause lively surprise even among Dickensians, I do not doubt. We have got to think of the Problem Play, and of the Problem Novel, as things as different from Dickens as, let us say, the fresh air of Hampstead Heath, is from the strained vitality and vulgarised atmosphere of a Notting Hill *séance* presided over by a neurotic medium.

The strained, the unnatural, the erotic, and the degenerate, all these have found their habitations in this particular realm of literature, which, for the most part, though lit up by some works of the first orders, is still gloomy and depressing to a degree. Yet after all what do the words " problem novel " really mean ? They mean, as Mr. Bernard Shaw has pointed out with convincing logic, that the morality underlying the work is different from the conventional morality, and that the work is therefore in itself a challenge to the view of ethics obtaining at the time. All novels, all plays, of course, must have as a background some moral assumptions, some more or less definite moral creeds, since without that it is impossible

for anyone to write. Now, when a creative work is based largely upon the morality current at the moment, to which we are all more or less accustomed, and which we accept as a matter of course, then its moral quality does not strike us and is passed unnoticed. Let us make no mistake about the matter: morality of some sort or another *must* be there, since it is impossible for human beings, real or imaginary, to engage in any sort of relations without moral issues being raised. But, just as we do *not* notice the taste of water, because we are all perfectly accustomed to it, so do we not notice the conventional morality of the conventional play or novel, though all the time the morality is present. But if the moral concepts or assumptions on which the work is written challenge our own, then inevitably we are arrested by them at once. Sometimes we denounce the work as poisonous; sometimes we are converted more or less to its point of view; sometimes we laugh it away; and not infrequently we are at once puzzled and bored as to what the author is aiming at. But, if he has a definite clear-cut quarrel with the morality of his time, then we are more likely to be influenced by his work, than by that of an orthodox subscriber to those conventions which mutely rule our world. Now, Dickens had that sort of a quarrel with the morality of his day, and by reason of that fact, I suggest we get the extraordinary influence and

abiding power of his work. He definitely and positively believed, nay he felt it in his very bones, that the current ethics of his time were cruel and hideous, and needed to be destroyed, if civilization were to be saved. The Gradgrinds and Podsnaps of his day, for instance, saw nothing disgraceful in the spectacle of "Poor Jo"; nothing that called for drastic action, still less for an arraignment of society. But Dickens did, and he arraigned society on "Poor Jo's" behalf; as he did on behalf of Nancy. Of Nancy, the current, conventional view would undoubtedly have been that the girl was a prostitute and the consort of thieves and that the gallows or, at the best, the prison was her natural end. But Dickens showed her more sinned against than sinning, and directly countered the view then prevalent upon the particular human problem that she raised. It was not, be it observed, merely that he had compassion and genuine pity for such as Nancy and Charley Bates. He meant quite definitely that they were wronged and that society was to be ridiculed and attacked unsparingly, until the conditions that forced children into premature vice were eradicated. His whole attitude towards poverty was the most direct and uncompromising challenge that he could give. According to the orthodox view of his day, poverty was a sin for which the individual rightly suffered. But Dickens traced the sin to society, and demanded justice

for the individual, thus enunciating in literature the most revolutionary doctrine of our time; a doctrine upon which the whole of the great working class movement of the nineteenth century was based.

This, I take it, was the quality that made and keeps Dickens a living force, so that he being dead yet speaketh. Men read him, and they read him yet, not merely to laugh and to cry, to find nepenthe from the cares of existence or to be moved to fresh sympathy with their fellows in the battle of life; but they read him because they are moved furiously to think; because they are made to challenge notions that they had accepted as automatically and as easily as that breakfast is necessary, and that death and Quarter Day are inevitable. Dickens opens to them a new train of thought, a new vision, a new conception of mankind, with the result that their minds never wholly revert to that dull torpor of acceptance from which he raised them. It is in his quality as a thinker, not less than in his power as an artist, that we must find the source of his continued ability to sway the minds of men, and which to-day makes him a living force wherever the English tongue is spoken.

Before we come to consider with more particularity the precise results that his thought achieved, it would be well that I should deal, though briefly, with two or three objections that

I am aware may be urged against my description of Dickens as a realist. One of them is particularly important to those who revere the art and genius of the master apart altogether from its social or political significance. It may be objected that Dickens was not a realist because his most successful creations were by way of caricature. Now that is true. But it is just that fact which, as a greater authority than I has pointed out, stamps him as a realist. The truth is that most people, when they think of realism, think of it in the terms of Mr. Gradgrind's " Hard Fact " school, and even then they think of it loosely and inaccurately. For the whimsical, the irrational, the irresponsible and poetic parts of man are as much facts as the serious, solid and sombre qualities which draw their strength from them. Wemmick is as real in his castle at Walworth as in Jaggers's office, and who would say that Jaggers would have been better served had that castle never existed and had Wemmick gone home to read law reports or, like his master, to dine in solitary state with a murderess to wait on him ? The best proof that this part of the nature of man is real is to be found in the fact that Dickens is read today with an avidity that no other author has excited. The best proof of the existence of that side of a man which only caricature can express is that when Dickens points it out in caricature, we are convulsed by our sense of the reality of it.

That sense may be atrophied in every day life. We look, in our business relations with a man, for the responsible not the irresponsible side. But it is there though we may not see it: a man's oddities are still a part of the man himself. It is as true of Dr. Johnson that he touched every post he passed with his stick as that he wrote his Dictionary. It is as true of Dick Swiveller that he quoted and misquoted poetry and did all sorts of irrational and absurd things, as that he married the Marchioness. It is true also that you and I, and every sane son of Adam, delight in much the same whimsicalities as delighted Dick's heart. In Dickens there is only one caricature that is unreal: that is the caricature of the methodical unhuman, and mechanical Bitzer. In life there is only one man who is free from exaggeration, from the sense of whim, from jollity and irresponsibility; and that is the lunatic, who is nearly always wholly serious, solemn, and deliberate.

And that brings me to my last point concerning the realism of Dickens. I may be told that, first and last, he was a romancer; that Pickwick was nothing but a wild romance, and that the high spirits and sense of adventure, the abounding optimism, and quenchless *joie de vivre* that mark the great romantic writers, were his in abundance. That again is true. But it was true also that these qualities in him had their fount and inspiration

in his preternaturally keen sense of the immanent actuality of things: a sense that never left him in his wildest flights nor caused him to lose his grip upon life. Perhaps there we have the clue to the paradox. After all, where can we find a romance, so varied, so startling in its suddenness, so dramatic in its contrasts, so bewildering in its lightning changes, so matchless in its thrilling interest, as the life, the real life led by real men and women, under our very eyes, day by day? We may find it dull, drab, colourless and depressing. But the dullness, depend on it, is with *us*. It is *we* who lack discernment, insight, sense of personality. Dick Swiveller is still to be found in the Strand. You may, if you have eyes for him, see Dombey a dozen times a day, not a hundred miles from the House of Commons. But, if you are still unbelieving and insist upon the name of an actual man, in whose life romance and realism were so blended that they became almost indistinguishable, then I refer you to Charles Dickens himself.

# CHAPTER IV

## "OPEN SESAME!"

## IV

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CHARLES DICKENS achieved a success unparalleled in the history of letters at an age when most authors have not dared to hope for recognition, or even to attempt great literary projects. Thackeray, his brilliant contemporary, was thirty-eight before he sat down to write the novel—his first—which placed him among the immortals. Scott was a middle-aged man of assured position before he achieved fame, and, in our own day, we have seen authors of real genius and power compelled to wait until the autumn of their days before being able to win the homage that was their due. But Dickens's success was instantaneous, and it was the success of youth. Ere he was much over twenty, *Pickwick* had set England alight, and its author had captured a position of authority in literature such as no other writer has ever effected. That position he has never lost. His sway over the minds and his grip upon the affections of his fellow countrymen were, and are, unequalled ; a fact that can be proved by contrasting the figures of his sales with those of other classical or, if it be preferred, with those of " popular " authors. Dickens, as a seller,

beats them all. His power over our race is unparalleled, and his hold upon the British public can be likened only to the strength and intensity of his grasp of the realities of the life of which he wrote.

Now, seeing that it is my thesis that the one is the direct and immediate consequence of the other, it will be well worth while to discover exactly in what his hold upon life consisted, and exactly wherein lay his power as an artist of bringing it with such direct and startling suddenness home to the English mind. I suggest that it lay in his unconscious, or at all events, unstudied mastery of two forms of art, both of which appeal in the nature of things swiftly and directly to the Englishman. Dickens was a consummate master of horror and of humour, by means of which he produced nearly all his greatest effects; and, if we consider the matter for a moment, we shall be driven to the conclusion that it is exactly these two elements of art which are most likely to appeal to our countrymen. For both are things entirely outside reason, which acts directly on the fundamental, or, if you prefer more scientific and less descriptive language, on the sub-conscious man. Both are outside the intellect. Somebody has described wit as the " sneeze of reason," but nobody has ever yet been able to intellectualize or rationalize a joke, which is a thing entirely independent of mental development; a thing

that appeals equally to the *savant* (who has not ceased to be human) and to the servant-girl ; to the prince and to the peasant. You may go into ecstasies of laughter over the first man you meet in the street who makes a droll face, and for the life of you, you will be unable to explain why. I am aware, of course, that some philosopher has perpetrated the definition that " humour consists in the incongruity of ideas," but that is one of those definitions that define nothing, for it leaves you still wondering where the incongruity or ideation comes in. You can point out, of such and such a character or situation in a play or a book, how and why it was pathetic and explain, more or less clearly, how it moved you to tears. Such pathos as is possessed by Little Nell, for instance, can be readily and succinctly set forth. But if you were to say of the Marchioness that you laughed over her because of the incongruity of ideas that she presented, everyone would think you a pretentious ass ! For not only can humour not be defined, but nobody wants to define it. It is only the troubles, the problems and the vexations of life that require reason. The gifts of the gods need no apologies. Pathos, tragedy, the sense of drama even, these may bear arguing about. But the man who wrangles over the meaning of a joke, is obviously impossible. It is of the very essence of humour that it appeals —why we do not know, how we cannot say—but

instantaneously and magically to every vitalised son of Adam, to every one who has ears to hear and eyes to see. Hence to a highly energized race like the English—a race, not intellectual, or at all events not bookish—humour, and especially the humour that plays about the thousand and one everyday details of their lives, appeals with resistless force. Hence we have the first clue to Dickens's hold upon them.

But if humour be independent of reasoning, so to a much greater degree is horror. For a man may feel the sense of horror even when, and as he tells himself, that horror is unreasonable. A man may not believe in ghosts, and yet be thrilled —as who has not been ?—when Hamlet's father appears on the battlements. A man may regard the return of the departed as a delusion, and yet feel his soul creep and cringe within him, as he takes fright at some fancied return of the dead. It is no use pointing out that he has been the victim of his fancy ; that the ghost, which reduces the poor yokel to terror is only a turnip, placed on the top of a whitened stick. Without going into the questions raised by the suggestion that because some ghosts are proved to be sham ghosts, therefore there are no real ghosts, which seems equivalent to saying that because there are bogus companies, no genuine companies can live ; without touching on the larger issue, the point is that the horror that the turnip inspires

is *not* a delusion : that, in short, the sense of horror, of terror, of there being something awful and menacing at the root of life—is not fancy : that is real enough, and it is universal. All of us know it ; all of us have felt it. The sense of the awesome, of horror, or of fear ; that is there all the time ! The sense of horror is as universal as the sensation of humour. But there is this difference : that whereas we are glad to tell a funny story, we most of us keep our experiences in the other direction severely to ourselves. Yet we feel them none the less. Dickens himself has pointed this out with his usual clear-sighted vision.

" . . . A certain awful hush pervades the ancient pile, the cloisters, and the churchyard, after dark, which not many people care to encounter. Ask the first hundred citizens of Cloisterham, met at random in the streets at noon, if they believed in ghosts ; they would answer you ' no,' but put them to choose at night between these eerie Precincts and the thoroughfare of shops, and you will find that ninety-nine declared for the longer round and the more frequented way. The cause of this is not to be found in any local superstition that attaches to the Precincts—albeit a mysterious lady, with a child in her arms and a rope dangling from her neck has been seen flitting about there by sundry witnesses as intangible as herself—but it is to be sought in the

innate shrinking of dust with the breath of life in it from dust out of which the breath of life has passed ; also, in the widely diffused, and almost as widely unacknowledged, reflections : ' If the dead do, under any circumstances, become visible to the living, these are such likely surroundings for the purpose that I, the living, will get out of them as soon as I can.' "

Now, I have no doubt that I shall be told, indeed I can almost hear the objection being urged even as I write that, while humour may be a passport to the hearts of the English people, then for that very reason horror cannot be, since it will be argued, nothing more diametrically opposed than these two emotive factors can well be imagined. The man who takes his ease at his inn, and cracks his jokes like the good fellow he is, smacking his lips the while over his glass, he to whom a good story appeals more than anything else, is the very last person in the world to dabble in anything so inane as horrors. That is true ; but my answer is that he is the very sort of person to feel them even though he says nothing about them, just as the man who seeks the occult is the very last person likely to find it, or anything much less tedious than the contents of a report of the Psychical Research Committee. The philanderer, we know, is the last person in the world to get him a wife or the sheet anchor of a permanent affection. The man, who forever talks of his

conquests, seldom has any worth talking about. The soldier who has killed many men is uncommonly silent about the business. Similarly, the person who has seen even one spirit from the vasty deep would be chary of saying over much in public on the subject, and would not be over eager to recall the experience to his own mind. And there is this further consideration to be borne in mind : that humour and horror are, as derivatives show us, pretty closely associated in their personal manifestation. It is the wildest spirits who have known the ghastliest experiences. Once, at least, in his life a man learns that

> The pain that is all but a pleasure we'll change
> For the pleasure that's all but pain.

and the gulf between joy and terror—that is as easily bridged !

Pan was the name of a great Greek god who stood for the lusty life of the forest, for joyousness and unrestrained exuberance ; and Pan it was, and none other, from whose name we get the extreme form of the terror which flies from man to man, till we say that it has " seized them." The transition from the ecstasy of delight to abject horror and nameless dread is so swift that every musician worth counting knows how to bridge it ; and even through the most colloquial talk of the people we may find running the same haunting paradox. The eloquent young lady tells us that she is " frightfully glad " to have seen her boy

from the trenches, and she is right. She may, of course, have used the phrase wholly as an inane affectation, but the fact remains that she has unconsciously expressed the real idea. The joy was so keen, so poignant, so intense that only a word like fright, a word summoning every ounce of energy, focussing every particle of vitality we have in us would suffice. Intense exuberance, that finds its vent in jocund laughter and wild mirth and intense and paralysing terror—these are divided with but thin partitions. The physician who has watched the mother descend into the garden of Gethsemane with glazed eye-balls and drawn mouth to bring forth her babe, sees her face radiant and transformed when the child is in her arms. Yet we may suppose that never was a human being more vitalized than at the moment when the fear of death passes away in joy at the new life. And perhaps that is the explanation. The more vitalized a people, or an individual, the more keenly alert are they to the joy of life and to the fear of death; to the fundamental, innate and basic passions to which Dickens appealed with a directness and simplicity that was followed by instant acceptance. This indeed was his great secret: he appealed primarily, not to the intellect but to that subconsciousness self, which lies behind it and at the heart of life itself.

There is a passage, one of the most striking as I have always thought in the whole range of his

works, in which the master himself mingles in tints so faint as to be almost indistinguishable, this very awe we feel at the life force itself, with that sense of the comic which achieves its first manifestation. It is when Rogue Riderhood is brought back from the river nearly drowned, and they are trying to restore him to life.

" In sooth, it is Riderhood and no other, or it is the outer husk and shell of Riderhood, and no other that is borne into Miss Abbey's first floor bedroom. Supple to twist and turn as the Rogue has ever been, he is sufficiently rigid now ; and not without much shuffling of attendant feet, and tilting of his bier this way and that way, in peril of his even sliding off it, and being tumbled in a heap over the balustrades, can he be got upstairs.

" ' Fetch a doctor,' quoth Miss Abbey. And then, ' fetch his daughter.' On both of which errands quick messengers depart.

" The doctor-seeking messenger meets the doctor half-way, coming under convoy of police. Doctor examines the dank carcase, and pronounces, not hopefully, that it is worth while trying to re-animate the same. All the best means are at once in action, and everybody present lends a hand and a heart and soul. No one has the least regard for the man ; with them all he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion ; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a

deep interest in it, probably because it *is* life, and they are living and must die.

" In answer to the doctor's enquiry, ' how did it happen, and was anyone to blame ? ' Tom Tootle gives in his verdict, unavoidable accident and no one to blame but the sufferer. ' He was slinking in his boat,' says Tom, ' which slinking were, not to speak ill of the dead, the manner of the man when he come right athwart the steamer's bows and she cut him in two.' Mr. Tootle is so far figurative, touching the dismemberment as that he means the boat and not the man. For the man lies whole before them.

" Captain Joey, the bottle-nosed regular customer in the glazed hat, is a pupil of the much-respected old school (and having insinuated himself into the chamber in the execution of the important service of carrying the drowned man's neckerchief), favours the doctor with a sagacious old-scholastic suggestion that the body should be hung up by the heels, ' sim'lar,' says Captain Joey, ' to mutton in a butcher's shop ' and should then, as a particularly choice manœuvre for promoting respiration, be rolled upon casks. These scraps of wisdom of the Captain's ancestors are received with such speechless indignation by Miss Abbey that she instantly seizes the Captain by the collar, and without a single word ejects him, not presuming to remonstrate, from the scene.

" There then remain to assist the doctor and Tom only those three other regular customers, Bob Glamour, William Williams, and Jonathan (family name of the latter, if any, unknown to mankind), who are quite enough. Miss Abbey, having looked in to make sure that nothing is wanted, descends to the bar, and there awaits the result with the gentle Jew and Miss Jenny Wren.

" If you are not gone for good, Mr. Riderhood, it would be something to know where you are hiding at present. This flabby lump of mortality that we work so hard at with such patient perseverance yields no sign of you. If you are gone for good, Rogue, it is very solemn, and if you are coming back, it is hardly less so. Nay, in the suspense and mystery of the latter question, involving that of where you may be now, there is a solemnity even added to that of death, making us who are in attendance alike afraid to look on and to look off you, and making those below start at the least sound of a creaking plank in the floor.

" Stay ! Did that eyelid tremble ? So the doctor, breathing low, and closely watching, asks himself.

" No.

" Did that nostril twitch ?

" No.

" This artificial respiration ceasing, did I feel any faint flutter under my hand upon the chest ?

" No.

" Over and over again No, No. But try over and over again, nevertheless.

" See ! A token of life ! An indubitable token of life ! The spark may smoulder and go out or, it may glow and expand, but see ! The four rough fellows seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them ; but a striving human soul between the two can do it easily.

" He is struggling to come back. Now he is almost here. Now he is far away again. Now he is struggling harder to get back. Yet—like us all, when we swoon—like us all, every day of our lives when we wake—he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence, and would be left dormant if he could.

* * * *

" Poor Pleasant (Riderhood's daughter), fortified with a sip of brandy, is ushered into the first floor chamber. She could not express much sentiment about her father if she were called upon to pronounce his funeral oration, but she has a greater tenderness for him than he ever had for her, and, crying bitterly when she sees him stretched unconscious, asks the doctor with clasped hands : ' Is there no hope, Sir ? Oh, poor father ! Is poor father dead ? '

" To which the doctor, on one knee beside the body, busy and watchful, only rejoins without

looking round : ' Now, my girl, unless you have the self-command to be perfectly quiet I cannot allow you to remain in the room.' Pleasant, consequently, wipes her eyes with her back-hair, which is in fresh need of being wound up, and, having got it out of the way, watches with terrified interest all that goes on. Her natural woman's aptitude to give a little help. Anticipating the doctor's want of this or that, she quietly has that ready for him, and so by degrees is entrusted with the charge of supporting her father's head upon her arm.

" It is something so new to Pleasant to see her father an object of sympathy and interest, to find anyone very willing to tolerate his society in this world, not to say pressingly and soothingly entreating him to belong to it, that it gives her a sensation she never experienced before. Some hazy idea if affairs could remain thus for a long time it would be a respectable change, floats in her mind. Also some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him, and that if he should happily come back to resume his occupation of the empty form that lies upon the bed, his spirit will be altered. In which state of mind she kisses the stony lips and quite believes that the impassive hand she chafes will revive a tender hand if it revive ever.

" Sweet delusion for Pleasant Riderhood. But they minister to him with such extraordinary interest, their anxiety is so keen, their vigilance

is so great, their excited joy grows so intense as the signs of life strengthen, that how can she resist it, poor thing! And now he begins to breathe naturally, and he stirs and the doctor declares him to have come back from that inexplicable journey where he stopped in the dark road, and to be here.

" Tom Tootle, who is nearest the doctor when he says this, grasps the doctor fervently by the hand. Bob Glamour, William Williams and Jonathan of the no surname, all shake hands with one another round, and with the doctor too. Bob Glamour blows his nose, and Jonathan of the no surname is moved to do likewise, but lacking a pocket-handkerchief, abandons that outlet for his emotion. Pleasant sheds tears deserving her own name, and her sweet delusion is at its height.

" There is intelligence in his eyes. He wants to ask a question. He wonders where he is. Tell him.

" ' Father, you were run down on the river, and are at Miss Abbey Potterson's.'

" He stares at his daughter, stares all round him, closes his eyes and lies slumbering on her arm.

" The short lived delusion begins to fade. The low, bad, unimpressible face is coming up from the depths of the river or what other depths, to the surface again. As he grows warm, the doctor and the four men cool. As his lineaments soften

with life, their faces and their hearts harden to him.

" ' He will do now,' says the doctor, washing his hands, and looking at the patient with growing disfavour.

" ' Many a better man,' moralises Tom Tootle, with a gloomy shake of the head, ' 'ain't had his luck.'

" ' It's to be hoped he'll make a better use of his life,' says Bob Glamour, ' than I expect he will.'

" ' Or than he done afore ! ' adds William Williams.

" ' But no, not he ! ' says Jonathan of the no surname, clinching the quartet.

" They speak in a low tone because of his daughter, but she sees that they have all drawn off and that they stand in a group at the other end of the room, shunning him. It would be too much to suspect them of being sorry that he didn't die when he had done so much towards it, but they clearly wish that they had had a better subject to bestow their pains on. . . . The spark of life was deeply interesting while it was in abeyance, but now that it has got established in Mr. Riderhood, there appears to be a general desire that circumstances had admitted of its being developed in anybody else, rather than that gentleman."

The passage I have quoted is pregnant with reflections. But perhaps its most characteristic

effect is that which describes the " four rough fellows " shedding tears at the first tremor in Riderhood's body of the magic spark of life, for in truth their tears typify humanity and express for us our own feelings. Like them, none of us would give a tear to Rogue Riderhood dead. Like them, none of us would give a thought to Rogue Riderhood alive. But, like them also, none of us could watch unmoved that awful spectacle of the life within a man fluttering, now leaving him mere sodden clay, now returning so that he becomes again a human being " so that we are equally afraid to look on him or to look off him," so that we are face to face with one of the primal overshadowing mysteries of our existence, nay, the greatest mystery of all, seeing it is that of life itself. This scene, when the four men and the doctor crouch round the empty form of Riderhood, stretched lifeless on the bed, has always seemed to me one of the most breathless and arresting in the whole of literature, though it is presented to us with all the quaint touches of satire and humour in which the exuberant spirit of Dickens delighted. The very humour of it throws up the tension of those moments when a human soul is hovering tremblingly between life and death. And this is the great and peculiar distinction of the genius of Dickens. He could lead one straight on from the wildest hilarity to a sense of the awfulness of life ; to a realisation,

keen as a sword, not only of the joyousness and mirth that life encloses, but of the mystery that lies behind it and that will always keep its solemnity, nay its terrors for man. We find this quality in his work perpetually expressed not only in the dramatic contrast and startling paradox of scenes, like that which I have instanced, but in his characters themselves. To take one at random. Quilp, one of his most masterly creations, was a figure of Satanic, almost of catabolic evil ; more like a gargoyle than a man, more like a devil than a gargoyle ; the very personification of the principle of evil. And yet, who has not rocked with laughter over Quilp ; say at the moment when he described his nose as " aquiline " to his astonished spouse, then mourning his decease, or when he forced the reluctant Brass to swallow red-hot rum and pretend he liked it. Fagin held more of wickedness in his soul than ten other men, and nine out of ten artists would have made the mistake of depicting him as gloomy, saturnine. But Dickens knew better and made him, for all his profound depravity, amusing even in his villainy. Mrs. Skewton, one of his most successful efforts in psychology of another kind, is the wreck of a woman that one shudders to recall, and smiles at even as one recalls her. Indeed, the only villains of Dickens that fail to grip us are those endowed with a solemnity so preposterous that it shows that their creator's humour had failed him. For

to Dickens, let us remember, humour, fresh spontaneous and resistless, was more than a mere relaxation. It was the magic touchstone that he applied to personalities, so that their elements fell into dross or gold before him; the signpost that, in all the winding perplexities of this world, kept the feet of the wayfarers to the paths of sanity and of sweet reasonableness, the light that held aloft and radiant, gladdened their vision—but yet showed them the dark, cavernous recesses that lie hidden in the soul of man.

# CHAPTER V

# THE ASCENT TO TRAGEDY

# V

## THE ASCENT TO TRAGEDY

DICKENS'S mastery of the sense of horror that lurks in every human mind, and of the particular side of our nature that it primarily affects, led directly, as we have seen, to some of his most masterly triumphs in characterization, and to scenes that, for sheer dramatic power, have no equal in English literature. But it achieved more than this for him. It gave him a grip of psychological phenomena, an insight into mentality, that no other modern author can boast. His sense of the weird, and of the uncanny (as they affect the common average, prosaic man), can be described only as unique. He had a peculiar, an intimate knowledge of those moments of semi-stupor, and yet of unprecedented apprehension, that beset the most prosaic, the most unimaginative of staid citizens; moments that come to all of us when all things seem possible and the affrighted soul can nowhere find sanctuary. Other authors—Poe, Kipling, Jacobs—have given us studies of horror as vivid and arresting as those of the master himself. But there is this great difference: that they deal with states of the mind, or of the body that seem strained, and

unnatural, or if I may use the word, exotic; states whose interest rises either from an unusual, not to say morbid, character, or from a situation that one may hope is not often encountered. "The Pit and the Pendulum," for instance, does not strike one as very likely to be re-enacted in our time, and Kipling's "Mark of the Beast" can be avoided easily enough by the homely dweller in the London radius.

But with Dickens it is different. As with the humour, so with the horror that he portrays. It is the common lot of the common man, and for that very reason is it immeasurably more sincere and arresting. Dickens realised instinctively (at least his art suggests it) that in every man there lie latent hopes, fears, emotions, states of mental exaltation, as well as hordes of black doubts and sable fears that have come down to him through the centuries, and whose very existence he may not suspect. As Kingdon Clifford well said: "Through every human soul speaks the voice of our Father Man. . . . The inherited instincts of the race overflow in each one of us as though the sea had been poured into a cup."

Dickens held fast to this great fact, the full appreciation of which must lead inevitably to that realisation of the equality of man, which is present in almost everything he wrote. He knew that there is hidden in the soul of the most limited, or the most vulgarised human being,

chords that can be made to respond to unsuspected vibrations ; that it is a mere accident which makes one man alive to the radiance of the universe and so a poet, and another apparently an incurable dullard. I do not say that this was a deliberate philosophic conception on his part (though that, I think, might be maintained), but undoubtedly it was the cardinal assumption upon which he wrote, and through which he surveyed the men he studied. It was a favourite surprise for him to spring upon the readers of his monthly parts, that one of the apparently weak or grotesque characters had achieved something specially difficult and important, and so saved a situation, while the pretentious and solemn person invariably failed to rise to the occasion.

If we turn for a moment from his stories to one of his most remarkable essays, we shall find ourselves confronted with another phase of the same idea.

" I have a fancy," he says in his " Night Walks," " which could best be pursued within sight of the walls and dome of Bethlehem Hospital. And the fancy was this : ' Are not the sane and the insane equal at night as the sane lie a dreaming ? Are not all of us outside this hospital, who dream more or less, more or less in the condition of those inside it, every night of our lives ? Are not we nightly persuaded, as they daily are, that we associate preposterously with Kings and Queens,

Emperors and Empresses, and notabilities of all sorts? Do we not nightly jumble events and personages, and times and places as these do daily? Are we not sometimes troubled by our own sleeping inconsistencies, and do we not vexedly try to account for them or excuse them, just as these do sometimes in respect of their waking delusions? Said an afflicted man to me, when I was last in a hospital like this, 'Sir, I can frequently fly.' I was half ashamed to reflect that so could I—by night. Said a woman to me on the same occasion: 'Queen Victoria frequently comes to dine with me, and her Majesty and I dine off peaches and Macaroni in our nightgowns, and His Royal Highness the Prince Consort does us the honour to make a third on horseback in a Field-Marshal's uniform.' Could I refrain from reddening with consciousness when I remembered amazing royal parties I myself had given (at night), the unaccountable viands I had put on the table, and my extraordinary manner of conducting myself on those distinguished occasions? I wonder that the great master who knew everything, when he called sleep the death of each day's life, did not call Dreams the insanity of each day's sanity."

One might ask, perhaps, if tempted by the fascination of the subject to pursue it independently of Dickens, whether it is not at least possible that some humans are in part dreaming while awake; whether, that is, some cells of their brain do

not lie locked in stupor all their lives, and whether it is not this accident that determines very frequently the difference between a mind alert, powerful and resilient and one cloyed and heavy, so that any response seems impossible. The late Professor William James used to maintain that the stories of sudden conversion, when men were moved swiftly and, as it were, violently to a new view of life, and a new sense of imperfection, was due to some such phenomenon, to some subtle change in the alchemy of the brain which made them conscious of much till then sunk in oblivion. But be that as it may, this at least is certain as regards Dickens : that he had that same sense of the compensations in soul which a contemporary philosopher once declared was possessed pre-eminently by women, "who," he said, "have a keen eye alike for the strong points of a fool and the weak points of a man." Dickens had more : he had that power of close, but detached observation, which teaches the wise man that within the sanest of all of us lies that madness that finds its home in Bedlam. Nadgett, the spy in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, was sane and balanced enough, one would have said on a cursory view, in all conscience. No idle fancy entered that hard head ; no side issue drew him off the scent he followed so relentlessly ; and Nadget . . . " finally selected a certain memorandum from the rest, and held it out to his employer, who, during the whole of these preliminary

ceremonies, had been making violent efforts to conceal his impatience.

"'I wish you wouldn't be so fond of making notes, my excellent friend,' said Montague Tigg with a ghastly smile. 'I wish you would consent to give me their purport by word of mouth.'

"'*I don't like word of mouth*,' said Mr. Nadgett gravely. '*We never know who's listening*.'"

So mad, in fact, was Nadgett that he wrote down dread secrets on paper, that might easily have been stolen from him, rather than trust his own voice!

Again, let us take Bucket—keen, alert, resourceful Inspector Bucket—do you remember how he looks upon the beautiful bracelets upon Lady Dedlock's beautiful arms, "and rattles something in his pocket—halfpence perhaps?"

The creator of Bucket, and of Nadgett, of Quilp and of Micawber, of Bradley Headstone and of Bounderby, had too keen an eye for the foibles, the morbidities, the limitations of mankind, of the dangers that beset us all, and from which none of us are exempt, not to grasp the fundamental equality, or the kinship that runs through the human race. But it is very important indeed that we should note that he had a profound belief and an unshakable conviction in the reality and permanence of evil. I say this is important, because the whole modern world has mistaken Dickens on the point. It has associated

him, first and last, with a treacly sentimentalism, a wishy-washy kind of pacificism that will not look facts in the face, that preaches peace where there is no peace, and that teaches forgiveness without punishment. Now, of all the charges that can be laid at Dickens's door, this I venture to think is the most absurd. For Dickens had a faculty for depicting evil, and a power of dwelling upon its complete destruction, that I cannot find anywhere equalled in our literature. From whomever else the pacificists—spiritual as well as physical—draw their inspiration for their doctrine of quiescence in evil, they do not get it from Dickens. It is quite true that Dickens had an immense appreciation of some of the qualities or at least the things, for which they stand. He took an intense, almost an extravagant delight in scenes of domestic happiness and of family affection. The sacred innocence and helplessness of childhood, the quiet of the home, the delight in gentle motherhood, the joys of the fireside, the jollity and heartiness and self-sacrifice that protect and cement the family; on all these things he has written with more than usual sincerity. It is true also that he was a man of extraordinary kindliness, who shrank from the very idea of pain being inflicted upon the helpless or the weak. But the notion that evil was to be removed from the world by gentle remonstrance and patient tuition would have received very

severe castigation at his hands. One is almost sorry, in fact, that the kind of liberal theologians and politicians who have in our own day adumbrated this doctrine, did not re-emerge earlier, say during the time when his satire was lashing the Circumlocution Office or holding up the Stiltstalkers and the Barnacles to the ridicule of their generation. But, if Dickens could not answer, because he never met, the Pacificist, he at least has left for us not one, but many scenes saturated with the conviction of sin and stamped with the awfulness of the fate that awaits the transgressor.

Let us look for a moment at such a passage—that which describes the death of Carker.

Carker is waiting on the little wooden stage of the Railway Platform in Kent, a prey to strange thoughts, when he sees Dombey, the man he has wronged, enter by the door through which he has come. " And their eyes met."

" In the quick unsteadiness of the surprise, he staggered and slipped on to the road below him. But, recovering his feet immediately, he stepped back a pace or two upon the road to interpose some wider space between them, and looked at his pursuer, breathing short and quick.

" He heard a shout—another—saw the face change from its vindictive passion to a faint sickness and terror—felt the earth tremble—knew in a moment that the rush was come—uttered a shriek—looked round—saw the red eyes, bleared

and dim, in the daylight, close upon him—was beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill, that spun him round and round, and struck him limb from limb, and licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat and cast its mutilated fragments in the air."

That passage alone, one would think, suffices to clear Dickens from the charge of sentimental pacificism. If not there are many others. Fagin in the condemned cell ; the death of Sikes ; the last moments of Jonas ; or of Dennis at the scaffold ; scenes so terrible that they might have been written by the very characters themselves, these, in their grim power and haunting completeness, once read are never forgotten. We may say, indeed, of the Pacificists and sentimentalists who claim the master as their comrade, that these particular efforts of his genius have passed them by, if not unread at all events unnoticed, and that they have looked on Little Nell and Agnes Wickfield, perhaps on the Boffins and the Brothers Cherryble, but never, never on Squeers, or Jasper, Sikes or Fagin ; that they have, in fact, in reading Dickens, repeated their omissions from the book of life.

Carker is, in one respect, an excellent study for a villain, because, though he is by no means so convincing as, let us say, that grim and relentless fury, Madame Defarge or Jonas Chuzzlewit (perhaps the most perfect and complete triumph

in wickedness that Dickens achieved), he yet illustrates a contention that is of cardinal importance in this matter. The modern conception of villainy, it is very important to note, is generally wrong, because in the main it is the conception that would have been formed, not by Dickens, but by Bounderby and Gradgrind. Those apostles of the " Hard Fact " school would have argued that men would only do wrong when it was to their interest to do so. Give them an inducement to be honest, and honest they would be. Give them, on the other hand, a sufficient incentive to commit homicide, and blood will stain their hands. Not only Bounderby and Gradgrind held this doctrine, but half the writers and philosophers of our own day do so. That view, of course, is in part true, but Dickens knew that it was not the whole truth. He knew that evil men commit evil for evil's own sake. He was not nearly so simple as one half of his critics and detractors; those wiseacres who lay stress on faults, blemishes and exaggerations trivial in their unimportance, in regard to the general value of his work, while they themselves guilty of the cardinal error of blindness of vision, do not see that Dickens's realisation of the fact that evil is a part of the nature of man led him to avoid that particular absurdity of the Utilitarian school which asserts that man seeks only his own self-interest, or, as the formula runs, " the greatest amount of pleasure for the least

amount of pain." That, we know, would if it were true make such a thing as a hero impossible. Perhaps it is important that we should realise that it would make anything like a consistent or convincing villain equally out of the question. Emphatically it would have paid Carker, once he had got over his perhaps pardonable dislike of Dombey, to have run straight; to have kept the firm's affairs in order; to have been faithful to his employer, while poking, no doubt, discreet fun at him; and to have made love to Edith only in a judicious and non-committal manner. But Carker deceived Dombey and sought to bear his bride away, not at all because self-interest dictated the proceedings, but because he took an evil pleasure in doing evil and unspeakable things, just as it gives pleasure to a cruel man to inflict pain or to a dishonest man to rob. Take, again, the case of Jonas Chuzzlewit, to whom I have referred as Dickens's supreme achievement in this phase of his genius. It is true that he had a motive for attempting to kill his father, but that it was not merely inadequate but wretchedly and miserably inadequate, is obvious, and, for the murder of Tigg, it is clear that five minutes' reflection upon Jonas's part would have shown that it was, not only unnecessary, but useless, seeing that Tigg's proofs against him had not been gathered by his own hands, and would not therefore be destroyed by his death. The truth is that

Jonas needed little prompting to murder, for that crime lay in his nature, and while there are men that not all the ill-gotten wealth of the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Discount Co. would tempt to that desperate alternative, others would feel as Jonas felt a positive pleasure in the act.

Dickens's success with Jonas was due to the fact that he employed humour and satire very largely in his presentation of the man, who at the first does not strike us as being anything worse than a rather more than ordinarily uncivil specimen of a somewhat callous and pampered youth. Perhaps when Dickens introduced him to us he did not mean him to commit a murder, to have blood upon his hands and a father's guilt upon his soul; perhaps he did not mean him even to strike his wife, or to amount to much else than a particularly nasty type of young cub, whose bluntness made him an amusing foil to the rhetorical pretensions of Pecksniff. But in any case, the study of Jonas, and the gradual deterioration of his character, is one of the most consummate achievements ever yet effected, and it should be noted that it was effected almost entirely through humour. A conventional artist, working on conventional modes of thought, and depending for his effects upon a common assumption of his craft, would have made Jonas as serious as, say, Bradley Headstone and as intense as, say, Jasper; and he would have missed fire utterly.

Dickens's delineation of Jonas was marked, as was the analysis of all the villains of his imagining, by that same sense of horror and of humour on which his art so largely depended. Jonas, you feel with Dickens is at once a poor ludicrous apology of a man, a creature at whose uncouth demeanour and cramped, distorted vision one might well laugh, even as you draw back with your nerves on edge from the wickedness you realise lay in his muddled and misshapen mentality. Nor is there anything here so incongruous as would at first blush appear. A very bad man is a very grotesque man. Wickedness, it has been pointed out, in reality lies in a development of the personality that is so unsymmetrical, so out of proportion that the very good in the man is turned to gall and bitterness. Properly speaking, indeed, we may say that there is no evil element, no really intrinsically and incurable wicked quality in our nature, though that our nature is permanently affected by evil there is little doubt. This does not mean that men do not become profoundly, even perhaps indelibly, bad. But the process is nearly always the over-forcing of a quality that in itself is not evil. Avarice was the great curse of Jonas; but what is avarice? Extreme love of money. Jonas's undoing lay in the fact that he possessed, in an extreme form, the same desire which causes a man to make reasonable provision for his children by, let us say,

insuring his life. So throughout life. The man who likes his dinner is a good fellow; but if he likes it over much, clearly he is a glutton. The virtue of courage may degenerate at any moment into the vice of foolhardiness, and the admirable quality of caution may turn to cowardice. It is in the due development of all the elements that go to make a man, and so in the over development of none, that virtue consists: in caring enough for everything and not too much for any one object, that manhood manifests itself. To care too much for any one thing means that we can not care enough for others; we shall lose our wholesomeness, our freshness, our balance till we become overstrained, unnatural, or if I may use the word, lopsided and dangerously near a criminal. It is the great value of humour that it detects this sort of one-sided development in a man with unerring precision. A man who has an eye for the ridiculous has generally a keen eye for the criminal in man; for the Headstones and the Heeps, for the Jonases and the Tiggs of this world. He has, in fact, the touchstone that will separate the dross and the gold that go to make up our common nature. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that all of Dickens's triumphs are to be traced to that mingling of horror with humour on which I have laid stress. True, they dominate almost exclusively the earlier phases of his art, and in the more mature

period of achievement, although other forces came into play, he still evokes the same type of character.

The art of Charles Dickens may be said to fall quite naturally and easily into two distinct, almost two antagonistic, periods, which mark very clearly a difference, not indeed in his outlook upon life or in his fundamental beliefs, but a cleavage so great in the artistic method employed that a foreigner, reading his works for the first time, might be tempted to doubt whether the achievements of his youth—those " fine, careless raptures " of his genius (which gave us Bob Sawyer's party and the Tuggses at Ramsgate) were from the same hand that made the carefully detailed study of Jasper, or introduced the world to those strange social portents the Veneerings. True, both in his earlier and in his more mature works the essentials of his art were the same. Time did not stale, nor custom wither, the infinite variety of his characters, which come crowding into all his stories, just as they come crowding into life ; and his inimitable sense of humour, his wonderful power of caricature, his joyous sparkle, and his high-spirited freshness ; these, with his powers of visualising and depicting scenes, and of presenting characters, are as apparent in his last works as in his first. None the less is there a difference between them that it is well worth while to consider.

First of all, the novels of his nonage, those superb achievements that won him recognition and assured him immortality, were not strictly speaking novels at all. Thackeray described *Vanity Fair* as " A Novel Without A Hero." Dickens might have anticipated him by claiming for Pickwick that he was " a hero without a novel." There is, as all the world knows, no plot in *Pickwick :* there is no connected story, no ordered narrative. And as one reads its pages, one feels that these things are supremely unnecessary. *Pickwick* is a great, rambling romance far too realistic in its likeness to life to require even the thinnest or most artificial of links. One does not ask why the characters are there, or how they entered. It is enough that these are with us : that the bagman is telling his story—a perfectly gratuitous one—and that Jingle, that incredible but convincing figure—has bolted with Mr. Wardle's elderly sister. One would as soon think of reasoning upon these things as of asking what Mr. Buzfuz precisely *did* want the jury to think was conveyed by the expression " Chops and Tomata Sauce." *Pickwick*, in fact, is as Mr. G. K. Chesterton has pointed out, more than anything else " a vision of the Dickens world—a maze of white roads, a map full of fantastic towns, thundering coaches, clamorous market places, uproarious inns, strange and swaggering figures." It was, to adopt a more

homely metaphor, as roomy and cheering as one of those inns in which Dickens rejoiced, and like them was full of some of the jolliest company that one can conceive.

What holds good of *Pickwick* holds good broadly of the whole of its author's earlier output: of *Sketches by Boz*, of *Nicholas Nickleby*, of *Oliver Twist*, even to a degree of *Dombey and Son*. It is true that running through all these romances there is a plot, but it is so slight, so negligible, so unimportant, above all so dark and so mysterious that, to be quite candid, no one pays much attention to it. This may not be the case with the meticulous Dickensian, but it is certainly true of ninety-nine readers out of a hundred. Nobody who is "not a prig or a half wit," and has read *Oliver Twist* has failed to laugh over the Artful Dodger, or to shrink appalled from the wickedness of Fagin—in some respects the most impressive figure Dickens ever drew. Mention Fagin, or the Artful Dodger, to any educated man you know, and he will, of course, understand the allusion. But probably not one in a thousand could tell you exactly what was the plot directed against young Oliver's inheritance, or how Monks came to be concerned with it. The plot, in fact, is so detached from the development of the characters, and reacts so little on their views or conduct, and is altogether so minor and subsidiary an affair, that "the Parish Boy's Progress"

might well have been effected without it—and would perhaps have achieved a greater artistic success. Certainly Oliver's virtue would not have been less resplendent had he been genuinely, and not by accident, a pauper child, and the Maylies' compassion for him needed no such justification as the gentility of parentage can afford. *Oliver Twist*, in fact, might as well have been written without a plot as with one. The same remark applies, almost exactly, to the *Old Curiosity Shop*, with the reservation that it is hard to say if this story has a plot or not. So with *Nicholas Nickleby*. Nobody cares to recollect wherein lay the exact relevance of the conduct of Ralph, the wicked uncle. For one thing, his wickedness is too real, and too natural to require a reason for its existence; and, secondly, anybody with a sense of humour is far more interested in the irrelevances of Mrs. Nickleby than in the ramifications of her brother-in-law's plotting. Similarly everybody is far more likely to be interested in young Mr. Toots, and in his amusing habit of writing letters to himself, than in the gloomy and unnatural perversity of Mr. Dombey. Still it is in *Dombey and Son* that we get the break from the old method—the method of sprawling carelessness, random wanderings and haphazard reflections—to the new idea of relating a carefully constructed story, holding the secret which is the essence of plot, and of acting, by its dramatic

sequence, directly on the character of the chief individuals concerned. *Dombey and Son*, for all the obvious fatuity of the narrative, considered *qua* narrative, does correspond roughly to this test. Whether Oliver Twist was the son of a gentleman or not made no earthly difference to the unfolding of his character. But that Carker played Dombey false, and that his wife pretended to encourage him did, of course, materially affect Dombey by driving him to recognise in the agony of his broken-hearted despair the worth of his daughter's love and all for which it stood ; all, in fact, that the proud man had spurned and held of no account. Unfortunately, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton has pointed out, Mr. Dombey's heart could not be softened without his head also being affected. Still, that apart, the analysis of Dombey's character and its illustration by the sequence of events do mark a definite epoch in the art of Dickens—an epoch whose most supreme triumph, perhaps, is achieved in the creation of Mrs. Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, quite the greatest study in femininity, I have always held, that Dickens essayed, and one of the most convincing and deftly handled in the whole of English literature.

Dickens's earlier novels, then, were really pure rambles, rambles for which, as in *Pickwick*, there was no excuse, as certainly none was needed ; or rambles where the excuse was half make-believe. Even *Copperfield*—what is that but a ramble

through life ? But in *Great Expectations*, *The Tale of Two Cities*, above all *Hard Times*—the most purposeful, and in some respects the most successful of all his stories—the rambling instinct is so disciplined as to be secondary. In *Hard Times*, indeed, it is altogether absent. The characters, the interest, the whole work, in fact, is alone among his works centred in one town—a town, however, that Dickens would have probably held was itself exceeding its borders and spreading, with its trailing serpent of black smoke, all over England's green and pleasant land.

It is worth while pointing out, in regard to *Hard Times*, that while it contains at least one first rate Dickensian effort in characterization (for Bounderby surely must be held to take rank with Pecksniff, and with Micawber), and while its pages sparkle with satire, the most deadly and most effective that ever Dickens employed (the satire that killed the " Hard Fact " school for ever), yet in the whole range of its characterization there is not to be found one solitary failure. From Gradgrind to Bitzer, from Mrs. Sparsit to Louisa, from the great Bounderby himself to the vagabond Sleary, there cannot be discovered one single person who is not genuine, real and convincing. I hope I shall not be misunderstood if I say that this, rare for any author, is an extraordinary rarity in Dickens. Dickens's failures were as obvious and unmistakable as his successes—and

a good deal more numerous ; the point being, of course, that one is ready to forgive him a regiment of failures for one of his superb successes. One is quite ready, for instance, to forgive him Mr. Dombey for Joey B.—" tough, Sir, and devilish sly " ; Carker, or a thousand Carkers, may be pardoned him for one Captain Cuttle and his friend Bunsby. Steerforth, that most stagey and intolerable prig, we forget as we listen to Micawber, and how joyfully we see the wraith, the unreal Gowan, " that transient and embarrassed phantom," disappear under pressure from the solid and convincing Stiltstalkers and Barnacles. One might go through the whole of Dickens's books thus—all except *Hard Times*, for, as I have said, there is not within its cover one solitary unreality, not one failure to set off against its many wonderful successes or to dull the vigorous and wholesome moral that it points.

I have said that this fact is worth noting because it is closely related to a controversy which from time to time rages round Dickens ; a controversy that, though by its nature is futile, still exerts a wonderful fascination over the generation that more than any other, not excepting his own, has come to worship Dickens with an idolatry that no other literary man has quite excited. That question may be stated quite simply and most effectually thus : " Ought Dickens to have written novels at all ? " Ought he not to have kept

to his earlier method, the method that produced the unmatched triumph of *Pickwick*; to have written as Sterne wrote—and as Shakespeare also on occasion—without form, arrangement or narrative, merely giving rein to his prolific fancy; writing now random sketches, descriptions and the like, but using freely those twin open sesames to the soul which lay as we have seen in his mastery of humour and of horror. Frankly, there is a very great deal to be said for the idea. *Pickwick*, his high-water mark of achievement, was produced in this way, and *Copperfield*, which most of his devotees would acclaim his greatest work, has all the joys of a real autobiography; that is of a record of events as they happen, and not in their dramatic sequence. The life of a man cannot be arranged, cut and dried, like a masterpiece of Ibsen, or a Shakespearian tragedy, where every line advances the story and develops the argument. Life has its lights and shades, its interludes and irresponsible moments. To quote Dickens himself, " we can't be always a working; nor yet always a learning. We ain't made for it." Life, one can hear the Cockney saying, is too short for that sort of thing. And the great charm of Dickens, his abiding value and incessant power lie in the fact that he is so like life that almost alone among authors, one can take him up at any point and lay him down with the same careless disregard. You dip into Dickens as one

can fancy a recluse dips into the stream of humanity leaving his lonely garret for a walk along the crowded street, and content to be interested in the glimpse he gets of each passing face, without wanting to know what story lies behind them or along what paths their feet have strayed.

Yet, perhaps, it is just as well that we should bear in mind that all these, even the humblest among them, have their story, their drama, their interplay of action, one with another, which, did we but know it, could we but grasp it in all its details, and in all its glory, its pathos and its fears, would move us to laughter and to tears. To find it, to find the supreme crisis in the life of the human being of whom he is writing, to show that man's soul through that crisis is after all the great function of the novelist, who cannot portray for us a personality of any strength, or complexity, save in the long unfolding of a novel. A short story may give us a glimpse of a temperament, such as for instance *The Castle Builder*; an incident may allow us a piercing insight into some peculiar phase, some twist of psychology. But you cannot, after all, " Kodak " character. Personality is one of those things that demands long views. The best men frequently do not " arrive," save after much travail, keen bitterness and with many tears. A lengthy course is the surest criterion and the art that develops a character slowly is inevitably the

most profound. And there is this further consideration to be remembered before we join our regrets to those who deplore that Dickens ever burdened his fancy with the tiresome details of a plot, or cribbed, cabined and confined it within the narrow limits of a manufactured story. Had he written always as when he wrote *Pickwick*, written as it were fancy free, drawing freely on the two fundamental characteristics of his art, he would not, it is certain, have given us another *Pickwick* — that, obviously, would have been impossible. Even the genius of Dickens cannot repeat an unique performance, while just as certainly he would have missed, at least one of his greatest, and most superb achievements ; an achievement in the realm of pure tragedy, that has not merely encompassed a fame equal to that of his earlier masterpiece, but that has wound itself round the hearts and affections of three generations of the English-speaking race, till today he stands as the highest type of self sacrifice, the most consummate tragic figure, perhaps, in modern literature. I need not say that I refer to Sydney Carton.

# CHAPTER VI

# AT THE HEART OF LIFE

## VI

## AT THE HEART OF LIFE

CHARLES DICKENS, as we have seen, gave us *Pickwick*, that " angel in gaiters " whose fame has become immortal, in the first flush of the floral tumult of his genius. Then, in the very April of his youth, it must have seemed to him, as certainly it seemed to the world, that he drew carelessly, almost recklessly, from the magic well of his talents, summoning a host of characters so real, so vibrant, so arresting that the impact of their personalities was almost overpowering. Not so was Sydney Carton created. The great effort of his most mature workmanship, the hero of *Two Cities* was the result of decades of anxious care, and of critical thought. Carton himself was mulcted in years of anxiety and oppression before he could realise the beauty and majesty that lay within his complex personality, and the slow development of his character to the height of tragedy which lies within that wondrous tale, in some respects the most remarkable Dickens ever penned. But we must study more than one novel of Dickens to find how unremittingly his creator laboured, with what loving care he toiled, to perfect the greatest of all

his serious conceptions. For Carton, though he is finally given to us in *A Tale of Two Cities*, is present in at least three other novels of the master.

It needs but a cursory acquaintance with Dickens to know that he was haunted by certain definite conceptions of human personality, which he sought to realise again and again, not always with success. It is quite clear, for instance, that for very many years he was obsessed by the tragedy, perhaps the rather futile and strained tragedy, of old age made miserable by avarice and suspicion. One is continually encountering in those great " rambling romances " of his, the figure of an old man whose wealth has proved a curse to him because it has infected him with a chronic, almost an insane, fear and hatred of those of his own house and family. His days are spent in devising means whereby the real dispositions of his relatives may be discovered and rewarded or punished according to their deserts. Sometimes this old man is called Chuzzlewit, sometimes he is named John Harmon. Perhaps his most successful appearance is that of Scrooge —I mean the earlier, the real Scrooge. But whatever the name, the central idea that he presents is that the habit of suspicion may rot away character till its victim becomes both pitiable and hated, at once a malignant and a ludicrous figure. This figure Dickens is for ever seeking to

bring home to us ; he is for ever showing us an old age from which we shrink with a shudder. Possibly there was among his own acquaintance some one friend whose nature he watched give way under the poison that destroyed Chuzzlewit. The inimitable caricature of Grandfather Smallweed may have suggested to him this particular effort in psychological portraiture. Who can tell ? Anyhow he persisted in drawing for us a man who, in the closing scenes of life abandoned all :

> . . . that should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> . . . but in their stead,
> Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
> Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

So much is obvious to all who know the master's works. Then there is another figure that one meets again and yet again in his chapters, crowded as they are with all sorts and conditions of men. One meets repeatedly that pathetic figure of the child-mother ; the little sister who is taxed far beyond her strength and resources and who has to bear the transgression and iniquities of her elders. Little Nell is, I suppose, the most popular personification of this type, which Dickens matured years later in *Little Dorrit*, and which we find repeatedly in his works. I cannot think that in either series the master was at his best. Frankly there are many pages devoted to these irascible old men, and debilitated young women,

that might well have been spared us. But that is after all a matter of opinion. The fact that I am indicating for the moment is that Dickens perpetually repeated the reproduction of certain characters, and, just as the parents are often fondest of the bad child, or at all events of the most troublesome, so these creatures of his brain were not the less dear to him because they were the most fantastic, and the most difficult to start in life.

But there was a third series of reproductions, and with that series Dickens achieved a signal success—the success of giving Sydney Carton to the world. In all essentials, Sydney Carton and James Harthouse and Eugene Wrayburn are one and the same person. Carton is alone supremely convincing because Carton is, alone among the three, the really developed study of the man of whom the other two are but fugitive, though arresting sketches. If we examine Harthouse and Carton critically we shall be amazed at the resemblances between them; resemblances that are all the more striking because Harthouse is a Dickens villain, and Carton is *the* Dickens hero. It is quite clear, for instance, that their creator had a tenderness for the idle and dissipated barrister to whom he introduces us so early in the story, as marked in its way as his contempt for the exhausted dilettante Harthouse, the man who was bored with everything in the world (as Carton

was) until in each case a woman made them forget themselves. I cannot account for this perfectly irrational distinction between these two. Carton was a " man of good abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own help and his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away." Harthouse had " tried life as a Cornet of Dragoons, and found it a bore ; and had afterwards tried it in the train of an English Minister abroad, and found it a bore ; and had then strolled to Jerusalem, and had got bored there ; and had then gone yachting about the world, and got bored everywhere." Is there such a great gulf fixed between them ? Of the two indeed, Harthouse is by far the most amusing and does not depress us with quite the same gloom as creeps round Carton's personality. It is obvious, however, that Dickens meant the reader to despise Harthouse, and it is quite obvious that Harthouse deserved it. Equally obvious is it that he is far too amusing and on the whole far too good-natured for us to give him his deserts. To use a cant phrase, Harthouse is too much of a gentleman, or, if it be preferred, too much of a sportsman not to be a welcome relief to the intolerable virtues and dulness of the Bounderby household, and it is a striking proof of the fairness, the intuitive fairness of Dickens to his characters that at the end you are made to realise that there was a

certain dignity about his personality to which only one other character in the story attained ; a dignity all the more impressive because, incorrigible idler and cynic as he was, he wore it so easily as to be unconscious of it himself and to save him therefore from the fate of being a bore or a prig. His absence of all convictions is more than a little refreshing after the constant iteration of the dogmatic convictions of the " Hard Facts " that one knows are false as they are uttered.

" You have made up your mind," said Louisa still standing before him where she had first stopped—with all the singular contrariety of her self-possession and her being obviously very ill at ease—" to show the nation the way out of its difficulties."

" Mrs. Bounderby," he returned, laughing, " upon my honour, no. I will make no such pretence to you. I have seen a little, here and there, up and down ; I have found it all to be very worthless, as everybody has, and as some confess they have and some do not ; and I am going in for your respected father's opinions—really because I have no choice of opinions, and may as well back them as anything else."

" Have you none of your own ? " asked Louisa.

" I have not so much as the slightest predilection left. I assure you I attach not the least importance to any opinions. The result of the varieties of boredom I have undergone is a

conviction (unless conviction is too industrious a word for the lazy sentiment I entertain on the subject), that any set of ideas will do just as much good as any other set, and just as much harm as any other set. There's an English family with a charming Italian motto, ' What will be, will be.' It's the only truth going."

Dickens is very severe on this " vicious assumption of honesty in dishonesty—a vice so dangerous, so deadly and so common "—but this at least must be said for it so far as Harthouse is concerned, that it is sincere and frank, or at least as sincere as any assumption can be. It was no doubt the fact that Dickens, like his friend Carlyle, abhorred that " idleness of a Godless mammonism," which in those days seemed to bear the special brand of Satan and which led him so to hate Harthouse. " When the Devil goeth about like a roaring lion, he goeth about in a shape by which few but savages and hunters are attracted. But, when he is trimmed, smoothed and varnished according to the mode ; when he is aweary of vice, and aweary of virtues, used up as to brimstone and used up as to bliss ; then, whether he take to the sewing out of red tape, or to the kindling of red fire, he is the very Devil."

But Harthouse, at all events, was free from any association with red tape, and, as to the red fire that he kindled for Louisa, at least it did not consume her. It is, of course, only too true that

he plotted to seduce his host's wife, and to take her from her home and her friends. One wonders a little what would have happened had he succeeded. Whether, for instance, Louisa would have left him, as she finally did her husband, for her father's roof, and whether the experience might not have given her a little human happiness to treasure and remember instead of the inhumane Gradgrind *formulæ*. The scene in which he is cured is well worth recalling.

"'Mr. Harthouse,' returned Sissy, with a blending of gentleness and steadiness that quite defeated him, and with a simple confidence in his being bound to do what she required, that held him at a singular disadvantage, 'the only reparation that remains with you is to leave here immediately and finally. I am quite sure that you can mitigate in no other way the wrong and harm you have done. I am quite sure that it is the only compensation you have left it in your power to make. I do not say that it is much or that it is enough; but it is something, and it is necessary. Therefore, though without any other authority than I have given you, and even without the knowledge of any other person than yourself and myself, I ask you to depart from this place to-night, under an obligation never to return to it.'"

"If she had asserted any influence over him beyond her plain faith in the truth and right of

what she said ; if she had concealed the least doubt or irresolution, or had harboured for the best purpose any reserve or pretence ; if she had shown, or felt, the lightest trace of any sensitiveness to his ridicule or his astonishment or any remonstrance he might offer—he would have carried it against her at this point. But he could as easily have changed a clear sky by looking at it in surprise as affect her.

" ' But do you know,' he asked, quite at a loss, ' the extent of what you ask ? You probably are not aware that I am here on a public kind of business, preposterous enough in itself, but which I have gone in for, and sworn by, and am supposed to be devoted to in quite a desperate manner ? You probably are not aware of that ; but I assure you it's the fact.'

" It had no effect on Sissy, fact or no fact.

" ' Besides which,' said Mr. Harthouse, taking a turn or two across the room, dubiously, ' it's so alarmingly absurd. It would make a man so ridiculous, after going in for these fellows, to back out in such an incomprehensible way.'

" ' I am quite sure,' repeated Sissy, ' that it is the only reparation in your power, sir. I am quite sure, or I would not have come here.'

" He glanced at her face, and walked about again. ' Upon my soul, I don't know what to say. So immensely absurd ! '

" It fell to his lot, now to stipulate for secrecy.

" ' If I were to do such a very ridiculous thing,' he said, stopping again presently, and leaning against the chimney-piece, ' it could only be in the most inviolable confidence.'

" ' I will trust to you, sir,' returned Sissy ' and you will trust to me.'

" His leaning against the chimney-piece reminded him of the night with the whelp. It was the self-same chimney-piece, and somehow he felt as if he were the whelp to-night. He could make no way at all.

" ' I suppose a man never was placed in a more ridiculous position,' he said, after looking down, and looking up, and laughing, and frowning, and walking off and walking back again. ' But I see no way out of it. What will be, will be. *This* will be, I suppose. I must take off myself, I imagine —in short, I engage to do it.'

" Sissy rose. She was not surprised by the result, but she was happy in it, and her face beamed brightly.

" ' You will permit me to say,' continued Mr. James Harthouse, ' that I doubt if any other ambassador, or ambassadress, could have addressed me with the same success. I must not only regard myself as being in a very ridiculous position, but as being vanquished at all points. Will you allow me the privilege of remembering my enemy's name ? '

" ' *My* name '? said the ambassadress.

" ' The only name I could possibly care to know to-night.'

" ' Sissy Jupe.'

" ' Pardon my curiosity at parting. Related to the family ? '

" ' I am only a poor girl,' returned Sissy. ' I was separated from my father—he was only a stroller—and taken pity on by Mr. Gradgrind. I have lived in the house ever since."

" She was gone.

" ' It wanted this to complete the defeat,' said Mr. James Harthouse, sinking, with a resigned air, on the sofa, after standing transfixed a little while. The defeat may now be considered perfectly accomplished. Only a poor girl—only a stroller—only James Harthouse made nothing of—only James Harthouse a Great Pyramid of failure."

Now, although Harthouse is made to appear at a very great disadvantage in this scene, it is quite obvious that, if we consider his claims fairly, then honours are at least divided between him and Sissy. Had he not been a gentleman—a man accustomed to respond to a certain appeal to his honour, or, if the reader prefers it, to the conventions of good society, had he been a villain, a Lovelace, or even a thoroughly selfish man, Sissy would have appealed in vain, for in that case he would have laughed at her ; or soothed her by sophistry ; or tried to buy her over ; or have

done anything rather than surrender to her pleadings. It may be said that in that case Sissy would have taken a different line. She would have warned, or perhaps have threatened, him and she might have succeeded on a low ground, even with a Lovelace. But the point is, of course, that she took a high ground, that she addressed, not her appeal but her mandate to Harthouse on the ground that he was compelled to observe with strictness certain conventions; that, being a gentleman, he must—to use a cant, but nevertheless a good phrase—" play the game." She spoke to him with the same confidence that a Captain gives the order to charge to his troops. He knows that they will automatically respond to such an order—though it means death to all their hopes in life. Similarly, Sissy Jupe knew that Jem Harthouse would respond unquestioningly to her reminder that he had a certain tradition of conduct to fulfil which made him abandon all hope of seeing again the wife of his host. Perhaps had Bounderby been his social equal, perhaps had Louisa's husband been a less grotesque and embarrassing figure, and a man better able to realise the risk of having Mr. Harthouse in his house and as his wife's friend, the reply of that gentleman to the circus-rider's daughter might have been different. Perhaps had the incident occurred to-day a different sequel might have followed. But, in the Mid-Victorian

period, adultery was regarded as a serious matter and the man who ruined his friend's home, especially when that friend was obviously unequal to the contest, was " cut " ; he became generally a sort of person who was never asked to meet ladies and kept sedulously from the wives of his friends. These considerations may have pressed in on Harthouse when he did as Sissy bid him—and departed ! But that is putting his conduct on the lowest grounds, and in fairness it might be retorted on his behalf, that he (Harthouse) would not very much have minded had society sent him to Coventry after all. Certain it is that Sissy succeeded in sending him away simply and solely because he was at bottom a gentleman : selfish, vicious, idle and, in a sense, worthless, but bound by a certain code of honour and good feeling that made it as impossible for him to ignore her appeal as it would have been for him to have repaired a ruined fortune by, let us say, cheating at cards.

So much for poor Harthouse, a character that one feels Dickens might well have treated with more sympathy and insight. Let us take Wrayburn next and let us put him in Harthouse's place. He would have made exquisite fun of Sissy, her morality, her pragmatism, her innocent and yet virile faith. For Wrayburn doubtless was saved, as I suppose, from being a villain only by indolence of character and lack of decision. It is quite certain that he meant, in so far as he meant

anything, to seduce Lizzie Hexam ; that she knew it, and did her best (though not a very spirited best) to escape from that fate ; that her brother suspected it, and last of all, that Bradley Headstone suspected it ; and that they sought to protect her against it—tactlessly and clumsily at first, no doubt, but still in the main from sincere motives. If Headstone had not half killed the gay Eugene, and if that same debonair person had not been rescued by Lizzie, and so hopelessly compromised that he had to marry her, the sequel to *Our Mutual Friend* would have been vastly different.

And perhaps in that we get the clue to the essential difference between that couple of irresponsibles, Harthouse and Wrayburn, and Sydney Carton, the noblest of them all. Carton cared nothing for society. His action rose from the necessities of his own nature. It needed no Sissy Jupe to plead, and no Headstone to half murder him to get him to act. Carton's tragedy is, in fact, true tragedy because it depended, not upon outside pressure in the exigency of circumstance, but on the necessities of his own nature. There was only one way in which Carton could realise himself, that was by destroying himself. The reader may reply that that is a paradox ; but then paradox lies at the heart of life. It is, in fact, in Carton's energy of soul, and in his final masterfulness of purpose, that we find the difference between him and Eugene the philanderer, and

Harthouse the *blasé* Cosmopolitan. Much as there is in common between the three, it is this quality that raises him far above the others, and gives his figure a majesty, and a charm, that theirs could never achieve. No woman has wept over Wrayburn, though many may have yawned over him. No man, or woman, could bow in reverence before Harthouse, or think of him as we think of that figure in the tumbrils, yet, as we have seen, in the nascence of their character, they were almost indistinguishable; temperamentally they were strangely, almost exactly, alike. But, while Carton took his fate in his hands, the others, as we see them, drifted on to theirs. It was Bradley Headstone and Lizzie Hexam that made Wrayburn a happy husband and, at last, a wholesome man. He contributed very little of his own volition to the metamorphosis. It was Sissy Jupe that saved Jem Harthouse from being a villain. But Carton saved himself, and by his own choice realised his nature, and he becomes, for the English race, the incarnation of those qualities that humanity places highest in its esteem. And from that we get, I think, glimpses of at least two great truths: truths whose recognition, often instinctive but none the less real, have done for our race what perhaps no amount of dogmatic theology or philosophical erudition could have achieved for the countrymen of Shakespeare and of Dickens. We may learn first, that character is not

a fixed, definite, hide-bound thing, independent of human choice and lying outside our own conduct and direction. Man, as John Stuart Mill told us, is not a machine to be put to any work that may seem desirable ; but rather a tree ; a tree that must develop roughly in accordance no doubt with the soil in which it has its roots, but which still contains the wondrous principle of life and will put forth its verdure year by year. I do not pretend that the analogy is a complete one. Indeed, no analogy can be complete in which man figures, since there is nothing in the universe completely resembling him in essentials. But it brings home to us, at all events, this cardinal fact : that the human unit is a living, pulsing, changing creature, who can sink to unsuspected depths, or rise to undreamt-of heights. Harthouse and Wrayburn had in them the same potentialities as Carton, but they did not choose to use them ; that is all. Personality, which is the strongest thing in the world, is the most fluid and most elusive. It may be iron and adamant in certain phases. But even iron comes plastic from the furnace, and the truth is that for most of us our characters, our dispositions, our very selves are in a state of flux, whether we know it or not. We have all heard the story of the great painter who found in the face of a youth a beautiful model of The Christ that he was depicting, and how years later, the fallen image of the same countenance

served him for the Judas of the same picture. It is between those poles that men oscillate, and the idea of a fixed, pre-conceived character, with rigid bounds and hardened limits, is a delusion of the " Hard Fact " school that Dickens exposed in *Hard Times*, and whose final refutation we recognise in Sydney Carton. Bounderby would have seen in Carton only a drunken wastrel incapable of being anything else. Gradgrind, more charitably, would have comforted himself with the reflection that as so many ne'er-do-wells were born, according to statistics every year, it would be unphilosophic to be too indignant with anyone of them. That is the Nemesis of the school which Dickens satirized so remorselessly. If men are born murderers, born criminals, born forgers, then it is folly to be very angry with any of them. Indignation disappears from literature. Right and wrong becomes meaningless terms, and we are left to drift helplessly in a colourless world, deprived of all inspiration or guidance, vainly trying to make ourselves believe that the pick-pocket suffers only from an amiable idiosyncrasy, or to simulate some regard for the man who beats his child or poisons his wife. The fact is that men are born neither heroes nor villains. They are born with the potentialities of both. They are no more born murderers than they are born grocers. We have seen the grocer, that supple, rather too propitiatory figure, turn out a hero in

the battlefield and die with the same gallantry as the fine gentleman of Bond Street whose clothes he used to copy, but who stands now no higher than him. Aye, if we were to take the records of the men whose blood has soaked the soil of Flanders, we shall find many " a lag," many a ruffianly convict fighting like a Knight of old, laying down his life for his comrade, or, like Sir Philip Sidney, taking water from his own parched lips to give to the wounded man he tends with loving care. And the man who seemed a very Sidney, debonair, accomplished, refined, we have seen him in this great War, play a craven's part and coin huge profits out of the blood of our troops.

All this was apparent to Dickens because, though he was a radical of radicals, and a democrat of democrats, the particular philosophy of which I am writing, never appeared to him as being anything but supremely ridiculous. It was a delusion that was to be laughed out of existence with all convenient speed and with as much fun as possible. Dickens had that capacity, rare among philosophers, of determining certain issues along the lines of common sense. He knew instinctively that a thing contrary to the common sense of mankind was false and that recognition it was which made him one of the most formidable satirists in our literature. His satire is one that the most ordinary and least educated of men

accept instantly because they realise instantly that the doctrine Dickens is attacking is one contrary to their own vital beliefs. So on this question of Free Will and Determinism. The average man will not wait to consider arguments that may be advanced by the Determinists : arguments weighty enough in all conscience. He will say with Dr. Johnson, " Why, Sir, we know our will is free and there's an end on't " ; and he will, therefore, laugh at Bitzer in *Hard Times* and rate the " fact " school at its proper value.

But the second great truth which we may distil from the tragedy of Carton is perhaps a little less obvious, though it is also a refutation of the Utilitarian philosophy : that philosophy, which teaches us " that men seek the greatest amount of pleasure for the smallest amount of pain." Now, if this were true, Carton would not be a commanding figure. He would not even be a credible one. He would be a bad joke : a buffoon, whose grotesque *finale* was too inconceivable even for laughter. For, if there be one thing certain about Carton it is that he did *not* follow this formula. He sought deliberately the greatest amount of pain he could bear—the pain of death. What Carton did in fiction, other men have done in fact. Father Damien left comparative comfort to tend the forlorn lepers and to risk the overwhelming probability of incurring a ghastly and loathsome disease. More recently a young doctor suffered

the agony of having his hand burnt away during his investigation for the truth about the operation of certain rays. From time immemorial men have died at the stake, in battle, or under torture because they did not prefer the greatest amount of happiness, etc., etc. I am familiar, of course, with the stock argument that is used to rebut these suggestions. I shall be told, no doubt, that the martyrs would have suffered more inconvenience, not to say torture, if they had politely declined to be burnt, and recanted ; that Damien's misery would have been more poignant in the Convent than with the lepers. But all that seems to me to be juggling with words. It may well be that a man prefers death or even torture to dishonour and foreswearing himself. Witness the response of the nation to the Call to Arms, when thousands, and tens of thousands, of men left comfort and luxuries for the horrors of the trenches and a nameless grave. But do not let us play fast and loose with language. That way muddle-headedness lies. When we speak of happiness and pleasure we do not mean the surrender of comfort ; the risk of a ghastly death : the denial of life itself. That is obvious, and if the formula is to mean anything at all we must take it to mean what it says, using the words in their ordinary, human sense. Again, it is perfectly certain that neither Father Damien, nor the martyrs, nor the heroes ever balanced up an

account as between happiness, pain and themselves. I doubt very much if the villains did either, seeing that it is a commonplace of judicial wisdom for a Judge to tell a prisoner (perhaps a carman on 25s. per week, or with more reason a company director on £40 or £50) that it would " have paid him to go straight." The fact is that, as Mr. Bernard Shaw has pointed out, with rare insight and great force, the true law of action and conduct is that men seek to realise themselves ; to develop their souls and to unfold, if I may say so, their characters. The true law of life is, in fact—to live ; to be oneself, to achieve one's own possibilities. That is the main dominating idea, which holds good alike of the voluptuary and of the saint, both of whom, be it noted, will shorten their own existence to achieve this end. The desire to live to the fullest may not take so violent a form with the ordinary, amorphous mass of mankind, but it is there all the same ; and that race which has the most energy, the most compelling will, and the most distinctive individuality, will suffer most to achieve its ends and gratify itself by its own realisation. Thus it is that we find that no people can be great or enduring in the world that has lost in its literature the note of tragedy, since tragedy consists in a man surrendering everything in order that he may realise himself, even though his own destruction be involved in the process. Now, if we exclude two

or three novels of Thomas Hardy (whose mastery of the tragic element is probably unequalled) we shall find that its only representation in modern English literature is that of Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Tragedy, in fact, is the magic crystal, in which man may peer into the ultimate realities of things, and find their real values; by means of which he may separate the chaff from the wheat, the real essentials of life from its unimportant trivialities and discover for himself the meaning that lies behind the outer show of appearances. A race that has lost the tragic sense is doomed to a craven decay. It will pass as Carthage passed; it will corrupt as Venice. It will have lost the sense of ultimate values; the realisation of essentials will have passed from it. If we lose that we shall lose our Empire and our destiny. For the bluff Englishman, plain, bold, upright, we shall have the lawyer and the politician, smooth, wordy, plausible and discreet. In his wives and daughters we shall find—what travesties of the sex! In place of the girl, whose blithe serenity Meredith caught for us years ago for:

> The daughter of the gods, divinely tall
> And most divinely fair,

we shall have the diminutive, chattering "flapper," full of fuss and flaunt, with her slangy inanities and intolerable talk. For the Tennysonian mother

> A perfect woman, nobly planned
> To warn, to comfort, to command,

we shall get the sort of matron whose finger nails are her main consideration, and who dare not bear children because her figure (which is in reality suffering from over-eating), might be ruined. We shall have a generation that has turned its back upon realities, and that is given over to imagining vain things; a people, who will not suffer the truth, even in novels; that will not look upon the pictures of the life around them because they dare not. Such a race may not lack physical courage (that is a danger not likely to threaten Englishmen); it may not become preposterously cruel and decadent as did the Romans; it may not be wholly given up to avarice, as was Rome's ancient rival Carthage; and from the intellectual excesses of Greece it is assuredly safe. But it is a doomed race none the less. Slowly but surely it will lose its grip upon affairs and will begin to go down hill. It will take Mr. Pecksniff as its guide, philosopher and friend, and it will refuse to think of the Chancery Court and its victims, of Richard Carstone and poor Miss Flite; it will not even think of Poor Jo, or of anything but pleasure, excitement, sensationalism and artificial exhilaration. With that there will be, doubtless, much slobbery sentiment, much vague kindness and emotional generosity. But it will have lost its old simplicity and its old seriousness and it will have lost its contact with the realities of life.

Are we to-day so very far from this? I fear not. True, we have poured out our blood with splendid generosity in the present war; we have given gladly of our lives and those of our nearest and dearest. We have lacked nothing in resolution in tenacity *now that the ordeal has been forced on us*. But have we not been more than a little prone to exaggerate; more than a little apt to disregard vital considerations and to accentuate trifles? We have had flag days, *fêtes*, premature rejoicings, roses for the wounded, all manner of excitements. But of sober recognition of the grim facts; of resentment for the failures of Mesopotamia and Gallipoli; of insistence, even, that the disabled warrior gets justice, or that, in the fields, he has adequate equipment; have we not already more than a little to regret upon these heads?

Shallowness, artificiality, empty convention: these things wither at a touch of tragedy, and for that reason ought we not to realise in the figure of Sydney Carton not merely a great literary achievement but a national asset? I have said that it was the only supreme achievement of its creator in the realm of tragedy. Yet, perhaps, there is one other whose pathos is even more insistent, though it lacks the dignity and the force of Carton. The death of Richard in *Bleak House*, the youth "who was going to commence life over again," and who began it, alas—as his young wife well knew would be the case—"in another world,"

the end of that poor victim of the wretched Court of Chancery with its delays as thick as its dust, and its documents as mouldy and withered as the lives whose fates they sealed; that scene always seems to me to be by far the most compelling stroke of pathos that we owe to the genius of the master.

If it were only for these two great achievements: for Sydney Carton and Richard Carstone, we must, I think, agree that Dickens more than justified his departure from the old rambling method that gave us *Pickwick* and *Copperfield*—admittedly his masterpieces. But, in point of fact, though superior people are found to deride alike his plots and his psychology, as he developed them in his later novels, both were consummate. Let us take one novel only as an example of his genius for blending both—*Little Dorrit*, which Mr. Bernard Shaw described as one of the greatest in any language. The character of Mrs. Clennam; the presentation of her parched and withered soul; supported by an iron resolution and with unbending fortitude; the process of self deception which poisoned the strength of her really robust nature; that, and the method of her final delivery, when the paralysed woman leaves the house, which, unknown to all, has been cracking and tottering for decades, and that falls at last crushing her tormentor, Blandois, to death; the picture here, as it seems to me, is one of the most

convincing and remorseless descriptions of feminine psychology in all literature. Though the personality that it dissects has passed largely unnoticed while thousands of commentators have prosed about Little Em'ly and Agnes Wickfield, few have touched on this, Dickens's greatest achievement in female portraiture. Yet I do not think that it can be matched anywhere. The image of Mrs. Clennam, seated in the doomed house and by sheer strength of will and resolution conducting its business affairs, might have been drawn by Albert Dürer, or rendered in music by Beethoven. Its symbolism is worthy of that greatest of all symbolists, Ibsen, whose fundamental outlook on life partook so much of Dickens's own. If, in his myriad characters, it has escaped attention, it is because that sense of the tragic to which I have referred is one that has dwindled in our time, so that even the touch of a master does not always revive it.

For us it has, perhaps, a peculiar interest. We, who have followed Dickens in all the windings of his genius, and all the varied efforts of his life, would like to form for ourselves some concrete embodiment, perchance a crude one, but still easily recognisable, of the soul of the man himself. It may be that Mrs. Clennam can help us to that visualisation, for nearly everything that made her memorable we can oppose to some element of Dickens; and nearly all her characteristics

were fought by him with all the fire of the intense conviction that burnt in the man, and all the wit and genius that flowed from him.

The England of his time sat like Mrs. Clennam, a frigid prisoner, ice-bound by a false pride, with great reserves of energy and great strength of purpose, but with the cracks almost showing in the walls of her house, and with her own high nature vitiated by a gloomy pride and an insane insularity ; by suspicions that made her charity odious and left her philanthropy a byword. What was Dickens's part—Dickens, who marched into the choking atmosphere of this Mid-Victorian stiffness with the blithe jollity of Pickwick and the high spirits of David Copperfield ? Perhaps it is best expressed in that scene from Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* when the emancipated but human heroine, Lona, finds the choking work-room full of feminine austerities who are making " garments for the lapsed and the lost."

" ' Allow me, Miss Hessel, to ask what *you* will do in our Society ? ' And she, having thrown wide the windows and door, replies : ' I will let in fresh air, Pastor.' "

# CHAPTER VII

# THE PROPHET AND TEACHER

# VII

## THE PROPHET AND TEACHER

QUITE apart from the ascent to tragedy which we have noticed in his work, apart even from the fact that such novels as *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations* would never have been added to literature had not Dickens forsaken his earlier, and, in some respects, his more inspiring method, we have the ultimate vindication of the elaboration of his work in an even more impressive reason. Dickens, as I hope to show in this chapter, was not only the great mentor, "the great moralist and censor of his own age"—to apply to him his own eulogy of Hogarth—but in a peculiar degree, and in a sense that no other man of letters can claim, he was, as it were, at once the interpreter, the guide, and, I may add, the prophet and teacher of the English people; not only for his own generation but for now and for all time. He had an intuitive understanding of their character, an insight into their mentality, and a lively consciousness of their faults that no one in the whole range of literature has possessed, save and except William Shakespeare. His novels are as full of moral significance, as fresh and powerful in their warn-

ing mandates, as timely in their criticisms at once so genial and so effective, as when they were first penned three quarters of a century ago, and as they will be a century hence. It was to all that is permanent in his countrymen that Dickens appealed; appealed as one who knew their limitations and their strength with the intimacy of a parent, and the affection of an elder brother who sees in the younger life the replica of himself. And those rebukes and appeals of his—the most searching and pregnant of our time—would scarcely have been possible had he written merely at random, or confined himself to those short sketches and wayward wandering romances, of which he was admittedly a consummate master. Art, as every thinker knows, can only reach its highest level by long sustained and protracted effort. There is no short story in our language that I know of which will hold quite the same place in our affections as *David Copperfield*; no sonnet, of however bright a lustre, that competes in intellectual majesty and power with *Hamlet*. To portray the effect of certain cardinal errors, errors of belief, and so of conduct, the short story or the sketch is quite inadequate, for the working of character is a gradual process, however dramatic a climax it may reach. Hence we are driven to admit, maybe grudgingly, that the "first fine careless raptures" of Dickens's early genius would never have placed him in so unique a

position of authority as that which he occupies to-day; a position all the more impressive and important because it is unsuspected by the large bulk of his readers.

It is well worth while to ask wherein lay the secret of the peculiar success of which I am writing: the success, to put it shortly, of Dickens as a reformer—a reformer whose warnings were so remarkably prophetic and whose destructive criticisms covered so wide a field that many of them hold as good to-day as when written. The answer is I believe, a very simple one. It has been remarked that before you can destroy a thing you must love it. Startling as the paradox appears at first sight, it nevertheless holds true of life, not merely in theory but in practice also. The man who is effectually to combat a religion—perhaps he would call it a superstition—is a man who knows its strength as well as its weakness, and has studied both with an intensity that has made him their master. The doctor at work upon the cure of a new disease must watch its every development with unfaltering scrutiny. Above all, the man or the woman, the father or the mother, who sees the child enter upon a devious path of life, and seeks to save him—what reserves of patient affection and unrequited love must each of them bring to the task if he or she is to conquer! It is a law of ethics that only the charity which seeketh not its own ends can encompass any noble ends

at all; that a man thoroughly self-centred and selfish is generally capable of but feeble exertion and little effort unless for himself and that we are all of us ready to bear, to struggle, to achieve " and to suffer long, and be not cast down " for others when, if we ourselves alone were concerned, we should probably declare that the whole business was too much of a trial to be endured. I may be told that this is irrational, and I believe that is true. But man is largely an irrational animal, and being so destroys that which he loves, and loves that which he destroys. Take a case in point from Dickens: his satires of the Court of Chancery, and of legal procedure generally, were *more*, not *less*, successful, because he had a real reverence for all that law stands for, all that law means; for orderliness, for justice, for calm and measured decisions; for freedom from violence and prejudice of opinion; for sane and rational procedure. Hence, loving the law, he attacked its abuses. Had he valued it not a jot, quite clearly he would have been indifferent to these also.

It was because Dickens had an inherent understanding and an intense affection for the qualities of our race that he perceived clearly the danger that those qualities brought in their train. No man ever saw with such startling certainty, and no man ever made us see it also, that one of the dangers to which mankind is prone is hypocrisy; hypocrisy born of that good nature, that genial

optimism, that high spirit and confidence in the outward show of things which lead a man, and a race, almost inevitably to believe in, and at times perhaps to practice "humbug." We may take the absolute personification of this sort of mental exhilaration in Pecksniff, in some phases the most successful of all Dickens's social satires. Pecksniff is English, in that his hypocrisy was, when you come to think of it, largely objectless. It was convincing because it fitted in with the view of life held by a large number of Englishmen —a view that, false as it is, is largely the result of their best qualities; the view that everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds; that men, when poor, are poor because of their perversity, not to say of their wickedness, like Montague Tigg or Chivy Slime; and that, when rich or well to do like Pecksniff or old Martin Chuzzlewit, then their characters partake of a grandeur and solemnity that thoroughly justify the selections of Providence. It is not in the least because he is a snob that this type of Englishman sees in old Martin, not a rapacious, selfish and arbitrary old man, but the benign and excellent figure that Pecksniff loved to describe; it is not in the least because he is a groveller before wealth, and mere position, that this sort of person is impressed when men like Pecksniff hope that men like Tom Pinch have not altered his ideas of humanity, nor contracted—"if I may use the

word—my Pinions." Some of the shrewder think that old Martin is rather a close-fisted curmudgeon and that Pecksniff is by way of being a wind-bag. But they would think it bad form to say so, not because of any worship of wealth, but for the same reason that they would not expose Mrs. Gummidge, or for the matter of that, Silas Wegg, who were as poor as old Martin was rich; the reason being a congenital incapacity to look upon the dark side of things, or to see in life anything really bad, anything that is opposed to their own sense of the fitness and the eternal wisdom of things. Such a man is the unthinking Englishman of to-day, who hates the "grouser"; such a man was Mark Tapley; and such a man was even the great Pecksniff himself, the consummate type of English "humbug," even as Tartuffe was the perfect type of the French hypocrite, and who, be it noted, had none of Tartuffe's cruelty, none of his lust, none even of his definite religious dissimulation. Pecksniff in fact gained nothing and could gain nothing, by many of his most successful and grandiose impostures; any more than Bounderby gained anything by the romantic legend of an arduous boyhood on which he for ever loved to dwell. Both sought for adulation it is true, but it was never evoked. "At the time when, to have been a tumbler in the mud of the streets would have been a godsend to me, a prize in the lottery to me, you were at the Italian

Opera," Bounderby would tell Mrs. Sparsit (whose father was a "Powler"), "you were coming out of the Italian Opera, Ma'am in white satin and jewels a blaze of splendour, when I hadn't a penny to buy a link to light you."

Now, clearly Bounderby was not likely to be one penny the better because he worked off this elaborate "spoof" upon his housekeeper. He did so merely because it gave him exquisite satisfaction to weave a perpetual romance about himself and his youth, a romance, alas, that had not the remotest resemblance to the facts. And here we come at once to the true value, the immense and cardinal importance of this kind of delineation. Bounderby was, in actual fact, a bully with that peculiar kind of admiration for strength and efficiency that bullies always have. We can well imagine that, utilitarian as he was, he might have glowed over the Könning Man, as depicted by Carlyle, or rhapsodized over Nietzsche's *Master Morality*. Power, wealth, influence, authority, *prestige*; these were the things he worshipped, and a thoroughly cynical and entirely bad man would never have sought to justify his possession of them. When he tells Harthouse that, short of laying down Brussels Carpets for the workmen in the mills, everything humanly possible had been done for their comfort, we know, of course, that he is lying. When he adds that all of the operatives desire to eat out

of gold spoons, we recognise very easily the type of employer that he is. But we prefer that type on the whole to another easily recognisable type, who would have shrugged their shoulders over the sufferings of the "hands" and not pretended that they did not exist. Similarly, Bounderby's whole imaginary heroic boyhood of untold effort and exertion was a sop to his own conscience, a justification for something that he knew could not be justified upon any terms whatever. That is the crux of the psychological situation, which Bounderby and Pecksniff create; that is their danger to our race. They constitute the standing temptation, which is the great and crowning menace to a great section of our people, to turn our backs upon realities and to take refuge in a rich but sham efflorescent romanticism that has eaten into our bones and sapped some of the vitals of our strength; that has led many of us to see in every manufacturer a great captain of industry, indomitable, resourceful and triumphantly alert, who has raised himself from the gutter to the pinnacle of directing commerce; that has led a large number of us to believe that every slum landlord is even as the Patriarch of Bleeding Heart Yard appeared to his rent-racked tenants before Mr. Pancks exposed him; that has led the great majority of our electors to insist upon the superstition that our legislators are not in the least like that somnolent and oppressive bore, Lord

Decimus; and that our public servants and officials are not a bit like the Tite Barnacles. And what has followed on this? that the "practical" Englishman—the man whose genius consists in making the best of a bad arrangement, is at last content to have no arrangements at all. He has become the most impracticable of Utopians in a world that has none of the legal or mechanical contrivances that even Utopians realise are positively necessary. What need for land reform, what need to ensure proper housing for the poor, if all the landlords are as the Patriarch of Bleeding Heart Yard seemed to be? What need to pass real and thorough going industrial legislation if every employer has the qualities that Mr. Bounderby persuaded himself and others that he possessed? If the men "at the top of the tree" are so perfect, then the measures that Parliament pass need not be considered at all. In actual fact the farce and tragedy of legislation do work out very much like this. We can get an example from the present time [1915-16]. A Bill before Parliament proposes to do certain things; perhaps to conscript men for the army, perhaps to regulate the sale of liquor. During the discussions it is pointed out that, to take the only son of a widow is to go further than any state has so far thought of going. What is the answer from those in charge of the measure? Leave it to the staid, sober, serious sense of the

Tribunals on which, as the members of the House fondly think, Bounderby and Pecksniff are not represented. And when the application is duly made to the Tribunals, the retort is made that there is nothing about leaving it to their discretion in the terms of the Act, by which they are bound ! Again, let us suppose that the other subject is under review ; it is pointed out that to refuse to supply a dying man with drink during prohibited hours, even though no doctor's certificate is forthcoming, is tantamount to killing him. And the answer is made that that must be left to the staid, sober, sense of the publican, who, in actual fact, does refuse to serve the man, with the result that the victim does die. And so on, and so forth, in things large as well as small. The nation leaves to the staid and sober sense of Parliament the question of preparedness for war, and Parliament leaves it to the staid and sober experts ; and the results—have we not seen them on the fields of Flanders, in the horrors of Gallipoli, in the tragedy of the Tigris, and the muddle of Mesopotamia ? We saw such results sixteen years ago in the Transvaal. We see them re-enacted to-day under circumstances that make them more serious. If we are not careful our children may be impotent spectators of their recurrence, when that recurrence will prove fatal. No nation, and no man, can afford unlimited indulgence in its faults, even when

those faults have all the charm of amiability, all the freshness and romance of a youth that is so buoyant that it requires no rejuvenation. A time will come when Fate will exact a bitter reckoning; when the grim logic of facts will prove too much even for the most resilient, the most resourceful and indomitable of peoples.

> The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to scourge us.

But after a time, when scourging proves of no avail to the race that still preserves unbroken its lightheartedness in place of serious purpose, the end is as the end of Spain, of Carthage, or of the Netherlands: great empires that passed away because they heeded not the warnings that to us seem crystal clear.

It ought not perhaps to cause us any very lively surprise that the idolatry of the Englishman for what I may call roughly certain representative types of men—for Bounderby the manufacturer, for Lord Decimus the aristocrat, and for Pecksniff, the middle-class sentimentalist (possibly the best known of the three)—should have resulted in the even cruder and more incredible worship of institutions themselves, and especially of representative institutions, such as the House of Commons. After all, if the members of the House of Commons are really

exempt from original sin and from human infirmity ; if they are only to be exposed to such criticism and attack as we deprive of significance nowadays by describing it as " party " ; if any hint, even of the possibility of improbity is regarded as in the nature of a semi-insane blasphemy, then it is obvious that the institution which these men constitute, partakes of a sanctity akin almost to the reverence that men in the Middle Ages attached to the Holy Grail. The idolatry passes from a blind confidence, an implicit belief in the sagacity and honour of very fallible individuals considered personally, to their sagacity and honour considered collectively. Thereby it becomes a thousand times more dangerous, a thousand times more ludicrous. It is just possible to say of a man whom one knows personally and intimately (as constituents used to know their members in days gone by) that one trusts him well enough to rely upon his individual good sense and fidelity to principle. That is a choice which we are all of us compelled to make in the every-day vicissitudes of life. But to trust one or two men individually whom one knows personally, and to trust six hundred and seventy men, not all of whom are known to oneself personally, to act collectively together, involves something more than trust ; it involves a surrender of common sense. To commence with, men do things collectively in committee, or when on a Tribunal,

which they most certainly would not do individually. There is no gainsaying the fact that the individual judgment, the individual sense of right and wrong and of the true perspective of things, is blunted, when one is compelled to act with other men. For to act with them, compromise is essential, and the man who compromises on principles often ends in compromising himself. There need be no doubt of this in the mind of anyone who follows a public question intelligently, and who sees a measure that, good or bad, does in its original form mean and stand for a definite, concrete and logical idea so whittled away in a series of makeshift arrangements, adjustments and compromises that its final issue is void of any real significance. This has become increasingly clear to us in the years that have followed on the revival of Dickens study. The follies and makeshifts of the Party System have become in our time a by-word so plain that he who runs may read ; so glaringly apparent that no one pretends to justify or even to excuse them. They are accepted merely because at the moment nobody sees how they can be got rid of ; because nobody, in fact, has any cut and dried method for superseding a system that has grown up during the centuries and that, even if only because of its mechanical perfection, cannot easily be dispensed with. But that it inspires any respect among the sincere thinkers of the day, among the men who

shape and mould opinion, no one seriously maintains. Its war cries are as empty of significance as those that proclaimed Capulet against Montague, and the issues that they raised are as dead. The Party System, in fact, may be likened to that wonderful *tour de force* of Edgar Allan Poe, in which the principal character, though life has left him, remains hypnotised, and does not, till the spell is removed, show the signs of dissolution. The politicians themselves may not know they are doomed and devitalised, but nothing is more certain than that the shock which awaits them is one from which they cannot recover.

Now, it is a startling proof of the sagacity and insight of Dickens into the minds of his fellow countrymen that he first saw through the hollowness and falsity of the system which I am condemning. He put his finger on its weak spot eighty odd years ago, when, in a passage of almost miraculous satirical power, he showed us our extreme credulity in believing that as " Sir Thomas Coodle would not come in, and Sir Thomas Noodle would go out ; and there being no one in the country, save Coodle and Noodle, things were in a bad way." It is at that identical spot that one sees not only the mockery and absurdity of the Party System, but the danger of the idolatry resulting from an easy habit of sham idealization. For, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton says : " Supposing

one does not want to be governed by Coodle or Noodle, what becomes then of the pretence that ours is a real democracy "? Supposing one looks squarely and fairly at the two sets of politicians now combined, who in our time have been submitted to the frightfully severe tests of war : in the case of one set, a little but most trying campaign—that of South Africa ; in the case of the other, a campaign unequalled both in magnitude and difficulty. Supposing one asks oneself this question, asks it without heat or irritation : " Are there no men in this country who, allowing for human infirmities, for the unprecedented difficulties of the situation, for the many excuses and justifications that can be advanced for proven inadequacies—are there no men, who in crises of this magnitude might be relied on to give evidence of qualities (such as administrative capacity, foresight and preparedness) now conspicuous by their absence ? " Inevitably the answer occurs to one's mind that such men must indeed exist and can be found among those who, by the exercise of these very qualities, have established large and prosperous businesses, founded great and valuable trading concerns ; who, in a word, have done more under our present commercial system to display the very kind of ability that we need than perhaps any other set of men in the Kingdom. Now, these men are not in politics, and strange to say they cannot be got

in, or rather they will not come in, while the Party System continues, while the sham suit of Coodle and Noodle is still being tried ; or while the two sets of politicians are acting together. These men, will tell you that they care nothing for " Party Politics," nor for the meaningless and barren controversies and the stale and futile sham fights that abound in the Westminster arena. If you catechise them on any concrete question of the day they will tell you that the form which it has taken under the pressure of the politician is altogether unreal and meaningless. They will tell you, for instance, that they differ both from Nationalists and Unionists, but that they have no doubt they could settle the Irish Question, and they will outline proposals that probably Parliament has never heard of, but that more than likely would bring to Ireland all that she stands in most need of ; they will talk to you of her trade, her neglected industrial opportunities, her conditions of labour, her commercial development and her possible future as a great and prosperous country. They will tell you also that more has been done for Ireland by men who worked outside Parliament, men like Sir Horace Plunkett and " A. E.," and who have helped to recreate her peasantry, than by all the prating politicians and wordy disputants who ever voted mechanically and spoke interminably in the great chamber of Westminster, where many things and people

are undone and so little seems ever to be accomplished. So, too, with Free Trade and Protection. They will tell you, these men who have more to do with business in one week than all the Cabinet have ever had in their lives, that the controversy in that form is old, antiquated, out of date, and again they will outline proposals that have never dawned upon the mental horizon of Parliament and that probably never will. On the whole it is more likely that these and other cognate matters will be settled in Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester rather than at St. Stephen's.

Now, if you ask these business men why they are not in touch with national affairs they will answer with a laugh that they " are not politicians " ; that they are not attracted to either Coodle or Noodle, and that they have secretly a profound contempt for them both. And if you contrast them with the gods of our political idolatry you may begin to understand why.

Parliament and " the Party System," the House of Commons and the Cabinet—these were by no means the only institutions that Dickens sought to revitalize, so that they might become actual, living concrete forces in the life of the nation and not mere deadening superstitions. He attacked with a concentrated fury and a passionate conviction the absurd, paralysing and abject worship which another institution began to excite in England in the days of his youth—education. I

need hardly say that in no real sense was Dickens opposed to real education. His earliest writings as a novelist and his most sincere contributions to the Press in the form of articles, were pleas that the people might be taught, so that, as his friend Carlyle put it, " education shall irradiate with intelligence; that is to say, with order, arrangement, and all blessedness, the Chaotic, Unintelligent; for how," asked Carlyle, " how, except by educating, *can* you accomplish this? That thought, reflection, articulate utterance and understanding be awakened in these individual million heads, which are the atoms of your Chaos; there is no other way of illuminating any Chaos! The sum total of intelligence that is found in it determines the extent of order that is possible for your Chaos—the feasibility and rationality of what your Chaos will dimly demand from you, and will gladly obey when proposed by you! . . . How dare any man, especially a man calling himself a minister of God, stand up in any Parliament or any place, under any pretext or delusion, and for a day or an hour forbid God's Light to come into the world and bid the Devil's Darkness continue in it one hour more." That was a plea that Dickens lent all the force of his genius to support. " They have sentenced a child thief to be imprisoned," he wrote some sixty years ago; " when will our Magistrates sentence children *to be taught*? " To be taught,

as he meant, the elements of literature, and of morals : the value and beauty of the universe, the strength and potency of that love which lies at the heart of all things. To such education, Dickens, privately and publicly, was attached all his life. Some of his most carefully executed work was discharged only for the eyes of his beloved children, to whom he was a teacher of invariable kindness and patience. Some of his fiercest philippics were directed against the sham schoolmasters who conserved ignorance, cruelty, wickedness and lies in their caricatures of schools. But it is at least remarkable that Dickens was as fiercely opposed to Blimber and M'Choakumchild as he was to Squeers and Creakle. Mr. Bernard Shaw, in a memorable preface, has left on record the observation, a perfectly plain and obvious, though a most courageous one, that Dickens intended to depict Paul Dombey as a victim to the craze for education ; that he laid the death of that fragile child at its door. It may be said that little Paul languished because, with his mother there passed away nearly all that was tender, sympathetic, and understanding in his life. But that circumstance only completes the analogy between Paul the delicate child who died, and the delicate child-spirit that is killed in too many of us before we grow up to a manhood less picturesque and scarcely more virile than that of Mr. Toots. The fact is that the modern

world has got into the habit of exalting schoolmasters too much and mothers too little, and has lost contact with the vital fact that the mother counts for more in the education of the child than a dozen " specialists " like Feeder, B.A., that " human barrel-organ with a little list of tunes at which he was continuously working, over and over again without any variation." " He might," says Dickens, " have been fitted up with a change of barrels, perhaps, in early life if his destiny had been favourable ; but it had not been, and he had only one, with which, in a monotonous round, it was his occupation to bewilder the ideas of Doctor Blimber's young gentlemen ; those young gentlemen who were prematurely full of carking anxieties. . . ." Under the Blimber forcing system, " a young gentleman usually took leave of his senses in three weeks." The children grew up, as we know, listless, dispirited, sapped in health and strength ; parodies of the healthy, virile men they might have been had their bright boyhoods been passed in the sunshine of a home where love, which is always the best teacher, bends down to help up childhood to strength. It is the mother, in fact, who is the real trainer, and real educator and instructor, who addresses herself directly to the emotions and failings of the child without which any amount of technical knowledge, science, and information is but as dead matter. For the fact is that education *per se* is

neither good nor bad, moral nor immoral. It may be both and it may be neither. As Mr. G. K. Chesterton puts it: "Fagan was an efficient educator in that he educated boys to pick pockets efficiently." There is no moral value in the multiplication table. No benefit is conferred on children by making them memorize the dates of the accessions of the Kings of England, nor do we advance upward in the scheme of things or make a man a better citizen, a truer friend, a braver warrior, because he has had drilled into him the formulæ of the higher mathematics. It was, I think, Lord Macaulay who remarked that he knew many senior wranglers in mathematics who were decided juniors in everything else. If we want to find this paralleled on a grand scale we have but to turn to that nation which boasts, and in a sense truly, of being the most educated in the world; whose technical triumphs have been unmatched; who, from the point of instruction are the best taught and best trained people in Europe, and who have said: "Evil, be thou my good!" Have said it not only in words of fire and in the writings of their most inspired publicists, but have borne witness to their creed by deeds that have arrayed against them the conscience of mankind, and inspired Europe with one paramount, overmastering idea—the final destruction of "Kultur" and its commandments; the overthrow of all its pomps and vanities; the humbling of its

insolence ; the debasement of its teaching ; the annihilation of its power.

The fact is that education is a means and should not be an end. You may have education, efficient, scientific, well-equipped, that will turn men into very devils, and you may have education that will turn devils back into men. It is as silly and as gross a superstition to worship education as it is to worship the stocks or the stones to which the savage bends down. Nay, there is this added danger in this worship : that the mind of the child has in it (I need not here ask how or whence) instincts of wisdom and sanity that the fanatical educationalist may have lost. Little Paul, who wanted to see old Glubb " for I know him very well and he knows me," had more sound practical common sense than Dr. Blimber, who thought that study would cure him of a natural affection, as indeed it would and did. Who knows how many children in the Kindergartens of the Vaterland, who, unlike Paul, having survived the forcing system, have had their spontaneous, human, wholesome instincts turned to gall and wormwood so that they have grown up something more and a good deal less than men !

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What then, it may be asked, has Dickens left us to believe in ? He has made clear to us that our idols have feet of clay ; that our boasted Parliamentary system is a choice between Coodle and

Noodle, with Lord Decimus, the Stiltstalkers, and other camp followers of secondary importance sharing in the plunder, and the people of Britain mightily impressed—and paying the bill; he has shown us this distortion of democracy, "the Venetian Oligarchy," as Disraeli described it, in all its hollowness and insincerity; just as he has revealed to us the emptiness and cruelty of the law's delays, the absurdity of its procedure, the tedious dull and yet positively ridiculous character of its costly and fatuous ceremonials, so far removed, and so unlike that which would accompany swift and simple justice easily accessible to all. Of our dearest illusions he has made a mockery; he has stripped the mask from the face of the monster we have worshipped and shown us the true face of the deceiver in all its ugliness and insolent surprise at detection. The Poor Law that we hailed as a movement of practical benevolence, he showed us was cruel, shortsighted and expensive. The education that we adopted from Germany and then lauded to the skies, was, he made clear to us, a dull pretentious failure. Our philanthropists—has he not shown them to us in Mr. Honeythunder and Mrs. Jellyby? Just as he has exposed for our generation and for eternity that peculiar product of middle-class sentimentality, the eloquent impostor Pecksniff, who is all the more interesting because he is with us to this day. When we look at the wreck that his

iconoclastic satire has made in our national temple of the altars he has razed, the thrones he has demolished, we may be pardoned if we enquire what he has left us to believe in. But a moment's reflection will suffice to those who have read his pages. He has left us the common people, the simple, plain unlettered man and woman, who are yet the salt of the earth, the real strength and marrow of our race, although they cannot preach like Pecksniff or bellow like Mr. Honeythunder. Verily he has put down the mighty from their seats and exalted the lowly and meek. His pages are full of the lesson that it is to the people whom we must look if England is to be redeemed; the common, vulgar, uninstructed and unpretentious people, too simple and too unconcerned to know, let alone to boast of, their heroism; too diffident even to claim their own heritages; too careless of their strength to use it—save in another's cause; and too honest, alas, to see through the wordy rogues and windy hypocrites who hoax them; men who are not educated for the most part, who are rough, uncouth, distressing to the dilettante and to the superfine but men whose labour it is that raised England to her pinnacle of greatness and whose blood and valour saved her yet again on the fields of Flanders, and in the hell of Gallipoli—what time our politicians dawdled over a crisis that shook the Empire, and nearly lounged away the

destinies of the race. The present War has vindicated Dickens because it has vindicated the common man. The master's message to us to-day is to have faith and confidence in that man and in ourselves. To realise our greatness we must realise the greatness of the men in the trenches ; to realise our dangers we must realise the littleness of the pretentious "busybodies" who have bungled so disastrously at every step. Given a tithe of the master's sincerity we shall have some of his appreciation of real worth ; some of his powers of detection for the humbug and the charlatan. We shall envisage the greatness of our race, the strength of our people, the splendour of the common man. That done, we may face the future unabashed. Without it we must go on looking to Pecksniff for deliverance and to Chadband for charity.

# CHAPTER VIII

# DICKENS AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

## VIII

## DICKENS AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

TO trace with any thoroughness the influence of Charles Dickens upon English literature is a task which is at once indispensable to the present volume and yet impossible within its scope, if only for the quite obvious reason that it demands a volume, not to say a library, to itself. To be quite frank in the matter, Dickens did *not* influence modern English literature ; he created it. It is wreathed as a chaplet round his brow—surely the most glorious that a man could wear ! The Victorian period of literature represents, as will I suppose be universally admitted, the most prodigious and luxuriant, in all respects the greatest, in our history since the Elizabethan epoch. Thackeray and George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell and the Brontës, Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade—to say nothing of Bulwer Lytton and the Brownings, Tennyson and Swinburne—these are superb artists who, though they came into their own while they lived, will be read so long as the English language endures. Their own generation responded instinctively to the impact of their genius, and the ages that come

after them will feel the grandeur of their achievements. It would be absurd to say that had not Dickens lived these men would never have written. An artist will write, or paint, or sculpture, no matter what his environment may be, and though his reward may be, like Defoe's, the pillory, or as was Milton's for *Paradise Lost*, a beggarly remittance. We can no more stop a great literary genius from writing than we can make a sham *littérateur* write like him, and so far, of course, it would be absurd to credit Dickens with the performances of the great ones I have selected as representative. But there is just this to be said upon the claim that I have advanced for Dickens. Consciously or unconsciously, whether he knows it or not, an artist is and must be influenced by the mental atmosphere of the age in which he lives. He may, of course, finding himself choked by that atmosphere—as Dickens himself did—determine to destroy it by "throwing open the window and letting in the fresh air." But that is a course which depends not only on the intellect of a writer but also on his character. Few even of the greatest of our men of letters had quite the same pugnacity, the same resistless vitality, that marked the creator of Pickwick, who, let us remember, was not only a great novelist, but a born reformer, always ready to challenge and to ridicule any idea or convention that impinged upon his very lively and combative beliefs. It was

this quality in Dickens that stamped him as a warrior. He refused to compromise with abuses, or what he considered abuses, or to render them either lip service or even the briefest and most formal homage. His life was spent in conflict. He was for ever on the attack, both in his novels and in his contributions—those wonderful, but neglected, contributions to the journalism of his day. Sometimes it was the " Noble Savage " that he was seeking to destroy with all the mercilessness of his biting satire. Sometimes that satire was directed against the Puritans and teetotalers. Sometimes it was turned upon the authors of the Poor Law or the defenders of slum property ; on factory lords and territorial magnates. Sometimes it was astonishingly right, and at other moments curiously wrong. But it was always sincere and provocative, and, at the same time, distinguished by that abundance of common sense that kept Dickens sane and wholesome, even when wrong. But above all, the satire was always there, and the result was that by its insistence, its ubiquity, its power and its force, it *made* the atmosphere which rendered possible the Victorian period of British literature.

For, do not let us forget, the quality which marks that period of our literature is that of challenge of criticism, of resistance, of revolt against the established order of things. For the first time since men read books we and our fathers

became accustomed, though only slowly, to the idea that they were written for something more than amusement, that they had a purpose in them. Until then, until Dickens created the modern mode of questioning men and institutions, beliefs and assumptions, literature had been a handmaiden of the great, content merely to report upon their transgressions with the same sort of shrugging acceptance that we may expect a croupier at a gambling table to extend to the rapacity of those he serves at the tables. It was Dickens who changed all that. It was Dickens who made possible the matchless satire of *Vanity Fair*, and allowed Thackeray to draw the Marquis of Steyne and to add Becky Sharpe to the gallery of immortal women. It was Dickens who first encouraged Mrs. Gaskell to write of factory girls; and the great democratic impulse that he gave to literature, that—and what else?—rendered possible the brilliant inspiration of Charlotte Brontë, who conceived the inspiring notion that the world which had read of "The Parish Boy's Progress" and had revelled in Sam Weller, might feel interested in the troubles, real or imaginary, of a poor nursery governess. Literature awoke to life when *Pickwick* was published, and, leaving the vapours of *Lara* and the dreariness of *The Excursion*, turned its awakened vision upon the men and women who thronged the street and jostled one another on the pavement.

Verily Dickens let in the fresh air. He did more. He burst the prison-house of a cramping chill convention and gave to fiction a freer movement, a richer colour, and a more glowing warmth. The whole of Victorian literature, down even to its veriest dregs and its shallowest imitations, owes its inception to the man whose own intuitive mother-wit fortified only by the intense convictions that always buoyed him up, staked everything on delivering literature from her thraldom and won the battle ere he was little more than out of his teens.

Let us see if we cannot classify some of the most important and distinctive characteristics of the several impulses which his work gave to the great half century of English letters opened by it. First, then, we must remember that the humanitarian impulse that has marked our age, in literature, in thought, and in practice, came from Dickens alone. The idea of compassion for the weak, sorrow for the suffering, the notion that the poor had the right to have their case stated within the sacred covers of the three volume novel, the suggestion that the novelist should bestow more than a passing glance upon the crossing sweeper, or the thief, or the prostitute ; all owe their origin, or rather their modern origin, to Dickens and to Dickens alone. To-day we have become accustomed to see the novelist pleading at the bar of human judgment for justice and redress for the dispossessed. When Pett

Ridge writes of the trials of the boy in the streets, or George Gissing tells us of the workman's lot, its gloom, its hardness, its chill repressing austerity, we no longer raise our eyebrows in surprise. Walter Besant drew some of his most delightful sketches from the people who, soiled with all ignoble use, were sweated, literally, to earn the bread that was their life. Charles Kingsley! —who so dead to pathos that he has not wept over Alton Locke? To-day these are the very commonplaces of literature. No artist now leaves out the poor. No novelist now shrinks from depicting suffering or poverty however foul or forbidding it may be. Some rather revel in it. And the young man from the 'Varsity takes up *No.* 5, *John Street*, and is made to realise that "those fellows in the slums" are men and brothers, although perhaps he does nothing to give an outward and visible sign of the new grace within him.

Yet think of all the manifold activities that have followed on the humanitarian movement in literature. Think of the men and women who have lived and died serving their brothers in the slums, some foolishly and with pride; some, even with the narrow persecuting spirit of Mrs. Pardiggle; some with reverent and complete self-abandonment. Think above all of the complete change in opinion that has followed upon the writings I have mentioned; the change that prevents us

ever imagining the poor as a distinct and separate race who must be ruled out from our view of life. I do not say that Dickens is alone responsible for the metamorphosis ; but I do say that his, the original inspiration, made it possible, and that, had he never written, Kingsley and Besant, Gissing and Pett Ridge—to take four names at random—would have been the poorer for all of us.

But the humanitarian instinct was but a part of a greater, a more compelling impulse. Dickens wrote of the poor, not because they were poor, but because they were and are extremely interesting. " The one place," said a journalist the other day, " where I am never bored is inside a cabman's shelter." And that is true; the occupants have far too keen a sense of fun, far too hearty an appreciation of wit, far too sportsmanlike a sense of the *joie de vivre* to bore other people or allow themselves to be bored. You may meet a poor man who is bitter, or mad, or drunk, or insolent. You will never meet one who is bored. That mood is an affliction of the rich, or of that section of the middle class whose life is spent in aping them. The man whose life is passed in thinking about stocks and shares, whose only relaxation is the tedium of golf, or the excitement of bridge, who could not laugh at a music-hall sketch if he tried, and who gets less fun out of a spin in his motor than does a wholesome human being out of a walk in the country ;—he is the man to pity

and deplore, he is the man who will be driven sooner or later to cocaine or alcoholism or his neighbour's wife, to summon that interest in life and existence which comes readily and spontaneously to the bricklayer or the navvy. We have all met such men: "to whom life droops like a vulture, that once was such a life." Mr. G. K. Chesterton has immortalised him in the following swinging lines:

The Devil is a gentleman, and asks you down to stay
At his little place at What's-its-name (it isn't far away)
They say the sport is splendid; there is always something new,
And fairy scenes, and fearful feats that none but he can do;
He can shoot the feathered cherubs if they fly on the estate,
Or fish for Father Neptune with mermaids for a bait;
He scaled amid the staggering stars that precipice, the sky,
And blew his trumpet above heaven; and got by mastery
The starry crown of God himself, and shoved it on the shelf;
But the Devil is a gentleman, and doesn't brag himself.

O blind your eyes and break your heart and hack your hand away,
And lose your love and shave your head; but do not go to stay
At the little place in What's-its-name where folks are rich and clever,
The golden and the goodly house, where things grow worse for ever.

There are things you need not know of, though you live
and die in vain,
There are souls more sick of pleasure than you are sick
of pain ;
There is a game of April Fool that's played behind its
door,
Where the fool remains for ever and the April comes no
more,
Where the splendour of the daylight grows drearier than
the dark,
And life droops like a vulture that once was such a lark ;
And that is the Blue Devil that once was the Blue Bird ;
For the Devil is a gentleman, and doesn't keep his word.

When literature was in its convalescence it was full of such men. Byron idealised them, and redeemed the absurdity by the vigour of his verse and the transcendence of his genius. Lesser men, like G. P. R. James and Bulwer wrote of them perpetually. Tennyson immortalised one of the tribe in *Maud*, that superb poem in which the prig of a hero has to commit murder before we feel he is human. Well, Dickens has changed that also—in literature and in life. The dull, the pretentious, the solemn, the mysterious—these are at a discount in our time. We think now very little of the vapours of the great ; we are less and less patient of stiffness, decorum, pride. The man who can amuse us, who can make us laugh, who can cause us to forget the cares that are the lot of every one of us ; that man, in life and in literature, is the man who succeeds. I do not

say that this has not its dangers; everything has. I do not say that the reaction may not have carried us too far; reactions have that way with them. But at least this great revival of the Rabelaisian in us; this delight of our staid people in bright colours and gay clothes; in music that wakes the soul of joy in man; in festivals and gladsomeness—all this at all events has the great cardinal advantage that it is only possible to people who forget themselves and their rank, their sorrows and their ambitions and become again as little children. It may be said that it is not good for men to play at being children for too long or too often. Dignity, if it is lost in the outward forms of life, will soon be lost altogether; and if dignity goes, honour, consistency, pride and self-respect go with it. But it is good for man sometimes to feel glad that he is alive, so glad that he forgets dignity and laughs at the clown, or perhaps apes one; so glad that he can romp with children; so glad that his merry laugh rings out to banish sadness from the dull old earth. This note of fierce, exultant joy in life; this note of confidence, of daring, of romance, and of adventure; that thrusts the cares of the day on one side and rejoices in the sunshine, or in the children that we meet playing in the street, or in the strange cries of the street vendor that has wakened us from slumber; that revels in the gracious refreshing green of the trees glistening

after some shower what time the birds are twittering; that delights in the comfort of the hearth, when those dearest to us relax into the smiles that suffuse like a benediction; that loves a good song well sung, or a quaint story well told; this pride in life itself should be the heritage of every human:

> Who may possess in loneliness
> The joy of all the earth.

Let us pity the man who has lost it and so cannot laugh over small things; let us pity the man who like Dombey is a frigid prisoner, icebound in his own pride; let us pity him—for he has never lived. The common jokes of common people must sound strange in his ears. The gloom that has settled in his soul—that must be heavy on him as he moves through a strange, silent, unaccountable world, haunted by quaint fears of men and women who pass him in the street and who laugh or smile (he thinks insanely) at some jest he cannot understand. Such a man is a man who has never read Dickens. Such a man was taken as the typical John Bull ere Dickens wrote. Such a man we have all of us met and wondered at. To-day, thank goodness, he is at a discount. We shrug our shoulders and laugh at him in all his solemn seriousness and peevish pedantries. But when Dombey was written, the Continent would have identified him as the typical Englishman of the period. Nay, come much nearer down to our own day. In that brilliant *tour de force* of

Mr. Anstey's, *Vice Versâ*, when the parent Bultitude becomes the boy, and the boy the parent, we find the thing brought home to us before our very eyes, and we see the typical middle-aged Englishman in whom the schoolboy is dead indeed. To-day that sort of Englishman is voted "old-fashioned," "out of date"; he is unconvincing; he is as great a rarity as Sir Anthony Absolute. But who initiated the change? Dickens, who has taught us to think of life as a splendid festival, a great pageant, a joyous riot of emotions, surprises, witticisms, and hearty hilarious fun. Dickens, who restored the lost sense of romance, even as he restored the lost sense of reality. Dickens, who taught us that it was good to laugh and good to weep; and good to forget ourselves in the laughter and tears of others; good to be alive in the fullest sense of the word. That particular high note of jollity, that fiery passion for experience, that revelling, if I may use the word, in every conceivable and inconceivable type of man, in the grotesque and the ungainly, in the senile and the dissolute, as well as in the sober and the virtuous and the respectable; these qualities have never left English literature since. You will find it in Bret Harte's *Luck of Roaring Camp;* in Kipling's *Bruggle-smith;* in George Meredith's poems and in Mr. Chesterton's philosophy. It will never leave the race while we read Dickens, for it is of the very

essence of Dickens's own view of things. The pessimists, the Nietzschean hysteric, the strange weird resignation that is supposed to characterise the present " Celtic " movement—these things touched Dickens as little as did the Byronic vapours or the attitudinisings of Montgomery. His laughter rings out to-day in every novel worth reading ; that is, in every novel that accepts life and does not mourn over its continuance. The spirit of Dickens is the spirit of the re-birth of our race. When we have lost it, when literature has lost it, we shall be in a perilous way. Decrepitude will have fallen upon manhood. " There will be bitterness in our laughter and our wine will burn our mouths." If we lose the taste for Dickens, we lose the taste for life. We shall be mutes mourning at our own funeral. The nodding plumes and the black horses will lead us to a silence beyond that of the grave, and the literature that will follow, that of the decadent and the pervert (we have experienced some of it already), will fill our mouths with dead sea fruit and our souls with the bitterness of death itself !

It is distinctly interesting to trace, not only the developments that Dickens inspired and directed in the scope of fiction, its methods and aims, but also the changes and diversities of style that must always accompany such a movement of expansion ; a movement that seeks necessarily for new forms of expression and fresher ways of presenting the

new human types that it portrays. In Dickens's own style the influence of Shakespeare and of Fielding are both unmistakable. The intimacy, the frank colloquialism, the racy satire and the inimitable power of caricature (that power which makes Dickens pre-eminent among novelists) can, of course, be instantly recognised in both these authors, whose works Dickens knew almost by heart. The drunken watchman in *Macbeth*; the grave diggers in *Hamlet*; Dogberry and Touchstone—these might have come from the hand of the creator of Dick Swiveller and Micawber. Similarly there are scenes in *Tom Jones* charged with just those high spirits and reckless but irresistible *abandon* that runs through *Pickwick* and breaks out in Dickens's most serious novels. Dickens was, in truth, the literary as well as the spiritual descendant of the old wholesome masters of our language, who wrote in the common language of the common people; and his effect upon style was to carry our literature ever further away from the cramping conventions and frigid polish of the classicists. We can follow with very little difficulty the effect of Dickens's style down to this very hour. Bret Harte was, as is well known, the mere literary child of the master. His *Outcasts of Poker Flat* and *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (which Forster tells us affected Dickens so powerfully) are merely "Boz" in a new setting, and Bret Harte's own

eulogy to the master, which sufficiently explains his indebtedness to him, is made clear to all in *Dickens in Camp*. So it is more than a little significant to find that Rudyard Kipling was a close and careful student of the American writer, and even visited some of the scenes which led to his happiest effects. For my part, I should not have required this evidence from Kipling's autobiography to have felt the influence of Dickens in his work. Though the dissimilarities in the writings of the two men are marked indeed, yet their special artistic gifts frequently led them to achieve almost identical effects by practically the same methods. The capacity that Kipling has of " touching off " a character in a few sentences of exaggerated but happy caricaturisation, is one which certainly has come down to him from Dickens, who could, we know, depict a temperament with a single phrase. Again, Dickens's method in writing of the poor, or of the rich, or of any class was not to describe them but to let them describe themselves and each other. Sairey Gamp's revelation of herself, and Veneering's blatant banalities, disclose their characters far more effectively than do all the lengthy dissertations and analytical disquisitions with which even great novelists like George Eliot, for example, crowd their volumes to prodigious bulk. And that is also true of nearly every one of Kipling's outstanding creations. Kipling has another gift in which, we

may infer with positive certitude, he was helped by " Boz "—a gift that perhaps only Mr. George Bernard Shaw possesses to the same degree: that of permitting his characters to disport in dialogue whose swift and dramatic success depends upon its exaggeration. Both Shaw and Kipling have the habit of letting their creations indulge in utterances that it is quite certain no man ever perpetrated, but which, it is just possible, any man *might* attempt. This power of whimsical and rhetorical exaggeration which was Dickens's special gift to English literature has descended with special force both upon Kipling and upon Shaw—the latter of whom, as I happen to know, is a voracious reader of Dickens and one of the earliest men of genius to lead the public in that Dickensian revival which forms the most conspicuous literary episode of our time.

Style apart, does English literature owe to Dickens anything more than these two great impulses—the humanitarian instinct, which has become inseparable from it, and the Rabelaisian spirit that goes hand in hand with sympathy, love and the desire for amelioration? I think so. We can fairly claim that Dickens was the father of a distinctly new literary idea—new, that is to say, to modern English literature. He was the first of the Victorians to introduce purpose into fiction; to insist that a work of fiction might still have a great moral design, that it might be—nay, ought

to be—didactic, propagandist, educational. To-day there is scarcely a novel that is written of which the "purpose" is not advertised and shouted from the house tops. From *Uncle Tom's Cabin* down to *The Jungle*, from *Oliver Twist* down to *Mr. Britling Sees it Through*, some of the most successful efforts of the imagination have been directed avowedly to exposing political abuses, correcting, or examining existing tendencies with the thought of the day or urging with all the force of illustration and scenes taken from everyday life, some new view of our mode of life. We have only to pause for a moment to remember one of the greatest and most hotly fought controversies that has swayed Europe for the last half century—that affecting marriage and the home—to see how mighty a weapon fiction may be in the arena "where," says Heine, "our ideas force us there to fight for them." Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, Ibsen's *Doll's House*—these are but two works taken at random from the mass that have influenced profoundly the thought of the day. In our time we accept as a matter of course the notion that the novelist may have a moral aim or purpose in his work, but let us remember that we owe the change almost entirely to the success with which Dickens employed fiction as a means for propaganda, for swaying and influencing his countrymen. The dissent that the experiment excited, the ferocity and anger of the opposition

it called forth was, as we have seen, almost unequalled. But *solvitur ambulando*—once the thing was done, its example became so infectious that its triumph was assured, and to-day it is only those people who are themselves too amorphous, or too cynical, to have ideas of their own, who object to the novelist using his art as a means for their expression.

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These, then, are three of the matchless services that Dickens rendered to the literature of our race. He freed it from the icy grip of that deadening class convention that had chilled its warmth and sapped its vigour, so that it had become a negligible quantity in shaping the thoughts and moulding the conduct of men; to its palsied limbs he restored vitality and action, and to its faltering and affected accents he gave the note of power and sincerity. He taught his fellow craftsmen this lesson: that to win respect from the public they themselves must offer no allegiance save to their art, must stoop to no folly, however popular, nor spare it either! He made them use their pens like swords, and from being the butt of lacqueys, when not lacqueys themselves, they found their profession become a powerful and honoured calling. If it has fallen from the high estate that it held fifty or sixty years ago, the fault lies not with Dickens, and it seems certain that it

can never relapse again into the decrepitude from which he rescued it. For good or evil, literature has become a mighty force in the lives of the people, an influence whose immanence, like that of religion in the Middle Ages, nothing seems able to approach, or to confuse ; that challenges all things, and before whom none are sacred. Let us thank Dickens that echoing through it we may hear that wholesome hearty laughter that routed Pecksniff and Chadband, and is the surest refuge against that " high and haughty devil of solemnity " that, as we have seen, destroys men and nations till their strength becomes a curse and their " efficiency " a reproach.

# EPILOGUE

# EPILOGUE

HERE I must take leave regretfully of a task which has been lovingly, if imperfectly, performed. Before I do so, however, I want to make it clear that in my attempt to reflect the soul of Dickens and to reproduce its impress upon his own time and upon ours, I have been painfully conscious of my limitations. To conceive in the grandeur of a generalised outline is one thing; to realise in the faithful rendering of detail is quite another. I feel that I have done little more than reproduce a miniature and a daguerreotype.

The soul itself is elusive; it evades us. To rend the veil of the inner temple were indeed a feat beyond the power of man. It is not easy to know *ourselves* in this higher sense; it is certainly much more difficult to compass the soul of another. Self-revelation is itself a thing of slow and oft-times arduous processes. And when it is achieved it is not so much the result of personal will as of involuntary vision. Frequently it is produced by the thrill of some great emotion, some powerful anguish, some fine careless rejuvenating rapture. Only in the flux and flow of deep-moving states of consciousness may we essay self-examination

by comparison and analysis. Even then we obtain mere glimpses of our soul's qualities and contours like to the passing of changing cloud-shapes across a troubled moon. Reality still eludes us. We are somehow but fleeting and mutating entities within an unknowable whole; a stream of tendency making for righteousness. And in this stream we seem but as a surprised onlooker, watching a flow of being which rides ceaselessly towards some vaster ocean, now moving sluggishly through the muddy routine of the commonplace, now on the wild rapids of the clearer shallows, now stirred to more vigorous visions by some alien energy, anon urged to some ministry of beneficence by a passing insight. Baptism in this troubled Ganges of life may suffuse us with a new awe, a recurring joy, a Brahman-like tranquillity, a larger hope or an all-embracing pity. These experiences are in the nature of crises or calamities in which the soul expands its horizon. They generate and disclose new fellowships; they reveal the sanctions and the sanctities of the common heart; they are the supreme sacraments and communions in the over-arching cathedral of our common nature; they are the fugitive revelations of some great Temple of Unity.

Here is the Holy Grail of this quest of the soul. As we explore the solitudes of the outermost coasts of consciousness our sense of aloneness suddenly reacts to those bonds which anchor us

to our fellows. It is they whom we discover, even as we discover ourselves. We recognise and grasp hands with fellow-voyagers on the great argosies of fate. Affinities of soul and destiny move us to a superlative and all-embracing *rapport* with those who reflect our own travail. The marsh-lights of feeling that gleam and glide and shimmer and vanish take on to our consciousness the tangible form of our own emotions. The externalisms of colour and caste, of wealth and poverty, of health and disease, of beauty and ugliness, of intellect and ignorance merely cover with a transparent veil the soul-emotions common to all mortal clay. It is this recognition of our *one-ness* with humanity which is the distinctive and essential quality of all men who achieve greatness in the service of man. Indeed, it is this which determines greatness through the universal power of its appeal to our common natures. It is this which accomplishes through a mysterious catholicity of reciprocation, a response from the mass of mankind. It is this vision which came to Charles Dickens. In his earlier as well as his later years he passed through experiences such as I have tried to describe. It was this sense of his kinship with his race that enabled him, like his contemporary Tennyson, to exultingly affirm :

I have felt with my native land. I am one with my kind.
I embrace the purpose of God.

Somehow in this wise I have conceived Dickens as the Great Englishman and the First Realist. In this wise he has seemed to me to be the true Idealist. His ascent to Tragedy was by this path.

Maybe I have appeared here and there to have indulged in undue adulation. Some great preacher once observed that we live by admiration, and this surely is true. The sense and appreciation of greatness and beauty in nature and in human nature, despite the grossness and the sin, lies at the very fount of life itself. It invigorates, it reveals, and it strengthens. But all the same we who are lovers and even disciples of Dickens have no need to saturate ourselves with adulation. Still less do we believe as did Carlyle that hero-worship is the moving power of progress. It has always appeared to me that Carlyle's great failure was to perceive the greatness of the man next to him. Distance alone seemed to him to bring enchantment, and this apparently lent a false and refracting romance to greatness. For just this reason Cromwell and Napoleon, became to him fit subjects for a lavish indulgence in hero-worship, and the elements of true greatness and real progress were thus left out of focus. I have often thought it strange that Dickens and other of Carlyle's contemporaries came in for little save atrabiliar comment and contemptuous condemnation.

The fact is that Dickens accomplished what to

many is profoundly difficult. He saw the life of his time as a whole, and he perceived that the true prophet and teacher could only become an influence for effective progress so long as he could arrest and harness the interest and the fealty of the common people. The great man may *conceive* great thoughts and ideas, but their value and effectiveness lie with the mass who *realise* them.

Macaulay once remarked of Dryden " that no man more than he exercised so much influence on the age." And he went on : " The reason is obvious. On no man did the age exercise so much influence. . . . It is not so much the man that forms the age ; it is the age that forms the man. Great minds do indeed re-act on the Society which has made them what they are, but they only pay with interest what they receive. . . . If Luther had been born in the tenth century he would have effected no Reformation. If he had never been born at all it is evident that the sixteenth century could not have elapsed without a great schism in the Church. . . . Society has its great men and its little men as the earth has its mountains and its valleys. But the inequalities of the intellect, like the inequalities of our globe, bear so small a proportion to the mass, that in calculating its revolutions, they may safely be neglected. . . . Those who lead the public taste are in general merely outrunning it in the direction in which it is spontaneously pursuing."

Dickens saw that truth quite clearly also. In *Master Humphrey's Clock* he says: "It is a common remark, confirmed by history and experience, that great men rise with the circumstances in which they are placed." And the logic of the situation is perfectly obvious. The secret of their influence, like the source of their greatness, is in this recognition. The great man is part of the common life of his time. He is merged in the general collective life; he is part of its general conditions and tendencies. They form indeed the source from which he springs, the clay by which he is fashioned, the soil in which he must delve if he is to become effective. Only in the service of others can a man ensure the salvation of his own soul. It is this consciousness of the collective life, the recognition of the rights and qualities of the individual in association with his fellows, or, in other words, in sympathetic relation with the common soul, which has marked the reform spirit of every age in which it has been manifest. It is this, which permeating history, literature, art, poetry, ethics and every intellectual and spiritual category of human work—it is this which really achieves, which really assists and relieves the long and dusty journey in the upward march of man.

In the foregoing pages I have tried to show that the soul of Dickens was in perfect unison with the common soul of struggling humanity.

Once he recognized that fact, as he did, the rest was Open Sesame to him. The human heart was like unto an open book. He could infiltrate it with the moral blood alike of his humour and his horror. He could make it pulsate with the comedy and tragedy of the common life, and he could purify it with new streams of regenerative awe and tenderest pity. So he moved his own age and moves ours to great joy and deep reflection.

Like Shakespeare, he was an Englishman without insularity, a realist without pruriency, an idealist without fanaticism, an optimist without utopianism, a humanitarian without unction, a teacher without pedantry, a reformer without partizanship.

So it seems to me that it may safely be written of him that his soul was throughout in harmonious accord with the hopes and fears, the exultations and agonies of the humblest and most broken of men. Because of this, I believe that Dickens will endure ; because of this I believe that men, and especially Englishmen, will not cease to utter his name gratefully " until we awaken on the hillsides of Eternity in the splendour of the Noonday of God."

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