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FICTION

THE UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER BY CHARLES DICKENS

INTRODUCTION

Two Sketch Books figure in the Dickens chronicle, giving personal impressions of "many little things and some great things," as he terms them, which were worked into his novels early and late. The first is Sketches by Boz, which marked his induction as a tale-teller and was first written piecemeal for a London evening journal in 1835 or 1836. The second is the present book containing the diverse adventures of The Uncommercial Traveller, written some twenty-four or five years afterwards. Except that in the later book the author has perhaps a more moral voice, and speaks with a sense of responsibility and recognised authority of his types, scenes, and human properties, there is no very marked difference of temper in them. Where the first book was experimental, or inclined to be sentimental or outrageously comic, the later sketch book is content to be real. It is only so far humorous as goes with the sharper presentation of the figures and matters in hand.

Under the rather artificial disguise of *The Uncommercial Traveller*, Dickens contrives, scene by scene, character by character, to give us a vision of England, and of the little England within walls that is London, as he saw them just fifty years ago. Given such a spectator, a born observer, ubiquitous and insatiable, a trained collector of "humours" in the old sense and the new, an almost too expressive moral painter and caricaturist—and the sketches were bound to be amazingly well realised and very memorably drawn. Indeed, they ought to be counted among the books which, under a slight pretence, or in fact, give the inner history of their time, just as Dekker's *Gull's Horn Book*, Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, Arthur Young's *Travels in France*, and Cobbett's *Rural Rides* do in other ways.

Charles Dickens had always been a great traveller in vii

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London, lesser and greater, and in the surrounding home counties. His early training, his craft of journalist, and his physical restlessness all helped to make him a confirmed vagabond. By the year 1859, when he started All the Year Round, the continual draft upon his nervous energy and mental resource had brought a further inducement to bear upon him—the cruel ailment of sleeplessness. which he resolved to fight by heroic means, wandering the streets and purlieus of London from midnight to dawn. Turn to chapter thirteen in the pages that follow, and you have his own account of it. You learn there how it was he managed to see in the dark as well as by day, and to capture many curious and tell-tale glimpses such as only the explorer who dared explore his own city could succeed The late George Augustus Sala, who was a sort of disciple of Dickens, a London chronicler too in his own way, with a Fleet Street point of view, has described how often he met his Master wandering in all sorts of unlikely. uncomely, and unprofitable places. The net result of those itineraries you will find here most carefully set down. He has it all in his stock book. He begins as far away as the Welsh coast; a little later, and he shows us his own personal experience of the very road to France, which he figured so dramatically afterwards in that Tale of Two Cities whose opening cost him so much trouble. Turn the pages and he is back again in the land of Cockayne that he loved, discoursing, like a man who remembered his hungry days, of Scotch Broth-one penny, Minced Beef-twopence, and Plate of Plum-pudding or Rice—one penny.

So, sketch by sketch, chapter by chapter, he writes out for us the story of his emotions and sensations—this shrewd Uncommercial Traveller in human nature, who could individualise anything—from a railway station to a dirty dinner-plate—that he saw on his journeys through England. He could look out of his coach on the road to France, through Rochester, and see his own past, his own boyhood, waiting there, in the shape of "a very queer small boy," who had eyes for the Gads Hill that the man had acquired for his own. He could invoke other ghosts just as real, just as inherent, conceived as creatures of his own region and his own fantasy. There is that pitiful ghost of a drowned woman, seen near Chalk Farm one day

in the hard winter of 1861; there is that desolate ghost of an old stage-coaching house—the Dolphin's Head; and there is the joyous ghost of Globson, Bully Globson: they live in the memory as only real ghosts can.

No one who cares for Dickens, and has made household words of his novels, and knows his people far better than the people in the next street, can afford to neglect this everyday book of his Traveller's Tales. It is like his novels, and yet pleasantly unlike them; it is full of his humour, tenderness, and fantasy, as they were evoked in the years when he had become famous, but was still at heart a man of the street and a man of the common people. It should be read *en route* to somewhere, in a train or on a boat; but it bears to be read, too, by the fire-side, under the shelf that contains his novels, from *Pickwick* to *Hard Times* and *Edwin Drood*.

ERNEST RHYS.

The following is a list of the works of Charles Dickens:-

Sketches by Boz, 1835, 2nd series, 1836 (from "Monthly Magazine," "Morning Chronicle," "Evening Chronicle," "Bell's Life in London," and "The Library of Fiction"); Sunday under Three Heads, etc., 1836; The Strange Gentleman, comic burletta, 1837; The Village Coquettes, comic opera, 1836; Is she his wife? or Something Singular? comic burletta, acted 1837; Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club, monthly numbers, 1836-7; Mudfog Papers (Bentley's "Miscellany"), 1837-9; Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi, edited by Boz, 1838; Oliver Twist, or the Parish Boy's Progress, 1838 (from Bentley's "Miscellany"), Sketches of Young Gentlemen, 1838; Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, monthly numbers, 1838-9; Sketches of Young Couples, etc., 1840; Master Humphrey's Clock, weekly numbers, 1840-1; volume form, 1840, 1841 (Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge); The Pic-nic Papers (preface and first story), 1841; American notes for general circulation, 1842; A Christmas Carol in Prose, 1843; The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, monthly numbers, 1843-4; The Chimes: a Goblin Story of some Bells, etc., 1844; The Cricket on the Hearth: a Fairy Tale of Home, 1845; Pictures from Italy, 1846 (from "Daily News"); The Battle of Life: a Love Story, 1846; Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son, etc., monthly numbers, 1846-8; The Haunted Man, and the Ghost's Bargain, 1849; The Personal History of David Copperfield, monthly numbers, 1849-6; Christmas Stories in "Household Words" and "All the Year Round," 1850-67; Bleak House, monthly numbers, 1852-3; A Child's History of England, 1854 (from "Household Words"); Little Dorrit, monthly numbers, 1855-57; A Tale of Two Cities, 1859 (from "All the Year Round"); Gur Mutual Friend, monthly numbers, 1864-5; Religious

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Opinions of the late Rev. Chauncey Hare Townhend, ed. C. D., 1869; "Landor's Life." last contribution to "All the Year Round"; The Mystery of Edwin Drood (unfinished), in monthly numbers, April to September, 1870.

Other papers were contributed to "Household Words" and "All

the Year Round."

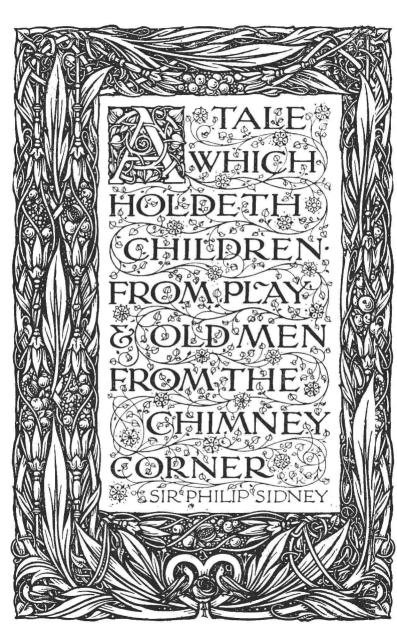
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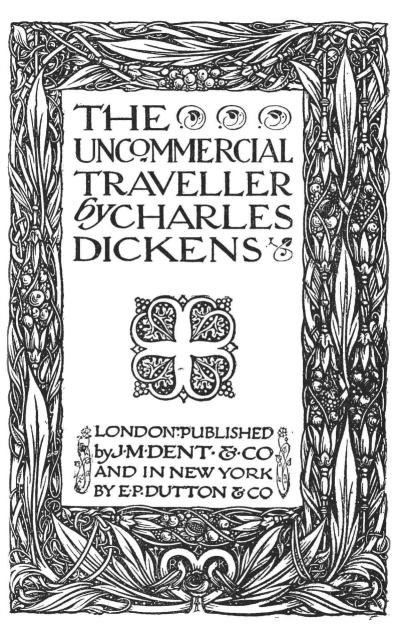
First Collective Ed., 1847-74; Library Ed., 1857, etc.; "Charles Dickens" Ed., 1868-70; Letters, ed. Miss Hogarth and Miss Dickens, 1886; Life, by Forster, 1872-74; "Men of Letters" Series, 1882; "Great Writers" Series, 1887.

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THE

UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER

Ι

HIS GENERAL LINE OF BUSINESS

Allow me to introduce myself—first negatively.

No landlord is my friend and brother, no chambermaid loves me, no waiter worships me, no boots admires and envies me. No round of beef or tongue or ham is expressly cooked for me, no pigeon-pie is especially made for me, no hotel-advertisement is personally addressed to me, no hotelroom tapestried with great-coats and railway wrappers is set · apart for me, no house of public entertainment in the United Kingdom greatly cares for my opinion of its brandy or sherry. When I go upon my journeys, I am not usually rated at a low figure in the bill; when I come home from my journeys, I never get any commission. I know nothing about prices, and should have no idea, if I were put to it, how to wheedle a man into ordering something he doesn't want. As a town traveller, I am never to be seen driving a vehicle externally like a young and volatile pianoforte van, and internally like an oven in which a number of flat boxes are baking in layers. As a country traveller, I am rarely to be found in a gig, and am never to be encountered by a pleasure train, waiting on the platform of a branch station, quite a Druid in the midst of a light Stonehenge of samples.

And yet—proceeding now, to introduce myself positively—I am both a town traveller and a country traveller, and am always on the road. Figuratively speaking, I travel for the great house of Human Interest Brothers, and have rather a large connection in the fancy goods way. Literally speaking, I am always wandering here and there from my rooms in Covent-garden, London—now about the city streets: now,

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about the country by-roads—seeing many little things, and some great things, which, because they interest me, I think may interest others.

These are my brief credentials as the Uncommercial

Traveller.

II

THE SHIPWRECK

NEVER had I seen a year going out, or going on, under quieter circumstances. Eighteen hundred and fifty-nine had but another day to live, and truly its end was Peace on that sea-

shore that morning.

So settled and orderly was everything seaward, in the bright light of the sun and under the transparent shadows of the clouds, that it was hard to imagine the bay otherwise, for years past or to come, than it was that very day. The Tugsteamer lying a little off the shore, the Lighter lying still nearer to the shore, the boat alongside the Lighter, the regularly-turning windlass aboard the Lighter, the methodical figures at work, all slowly and regularly heaving up and down with the breathing of the sea, all seemed as much a part of the nature of the place as the tide itself. The tide was on the flow, and had been for some two hours and a half; there was a slight obstruction in the sea within a few yards of my feet: as if the stump of a tree, with earth enough about it to keep it from lying horizontally on the water, had slipped a little from the land-and as I stood upon the beach and observed it dimpling the light swell that was coming in, I cast a stone over it.

So orderly, so quiet, so regular—the rising and falling of the Tug-steamer, the Lighter, and the boat—the turning of the windlass—the coming in of the tide—that I myself seemed, to my own thinking, anything but new to the spot. Yet, I had never seen it in my life, a minute before, and had traversed two hundred miles to get at it. That very morning I had come bowling down, and struggling up, hill-country roads; looking back at snowy summits; meeting courteous peasants well to do, driving fat pigs and cattle to market:

noting the neat and thrifty dwellings, with their unusual quantity of clean white linen, drying on the bushes; having windy weather suggested by every cotter's little rick, with its thatch straw-ridged and extra straw-ridged into overlapping compartments like the back of a rhinoceros. Had I not given a lift of fourteen miles to the Coast-guardsman (kit and all), who was coming to his spell of duty there, and had we not just now parted company? So it was; but the journey seemed to glide down into the placid sea, with other chafe and trouble, and for the moment nothing was so calmly and monotonously real under the sunlight as the gentle rising and falling of the water with its freight, the regular turning of the windlass aboard the Lighter, and the slight obstruction so very near my feet.

O reader, haply turning this page by the fireside at Home, and hearing the night wind rumble in the chimney, that slight obstruction was the uppermost fragment of the Wreck of the Royal Charter, Australian trader and passenger ship, Homeward bound, that struck here on the terrible morning of the twenty-sixth of this October, broke into three parts, went down with her treasure of at least five hundred human

lives, and has never stirred since!

From which point, or from which, she drove ashore, stern foremost; on which side, or on which, she passed the little Island in the bay, for ages henceforth to be aground certain yards outside her; these are rendered bootless questions by the darkness of that night and the darkness of death. Here she went down

Even as I stood on the beach with the words "Here she went down!" in my ears, a diver in his grotesque dress, dipped heavily over the side of the boat alongside the Lighter, and dropped to the bottom. On the shore by the water's edge, was a rough tent, made of fragments of wreck, where other divers and workmen sheltered themselves, and where they had kept Christmas-day with rum and roast beef, to the destruction of their frail chimney. Cast up among the stones and boulders of the beach, were great spars of the lost vessel, and masses of iron twisted by the fury of the sea into the strangest forms. The timber was already bleached and iron rusted, and even these objects did no violence to the prevailing air the whole scene wore, of having been exactly the same for years and years.

Yet, only two short months had gone, since a man, living on the nearest hill-top overlooking the sea, being blown out of bed at about daybreak by the wind that had begun to strip his roof off, and getting upon a ladder with his nearest neighbour to construct some temporary device for keeping his house over his head, saw from the ladder's elevation as he looked down by chance towards the shore, some dark troubled object close in with the land. And he and the other, descending to the beach, and finding the sea mercilessly beating over a great broken ship, had clambered up the stony ways, like staircases without stairs, on which the wild village hangs in little clusters, as fruit hangs on boughs, and had given the alarm. And so, over the hill-slopes, and past the waterfall, and down the gullies where the land drains off into the ocean, the scattered quarrymen and fishermen inhabiting that part of Wales had come running to the dismal sight—their clergyman among them. And as they stood in the leaden morning, stricken with pity, leaning hard against the wind, their breath and vision often failing as the sleet and spray rushed at them from the ever forming and dissolving mountains of sea, and as the wool which was a part of the vessel's cargo blew in with the salt foam and remained upon the land when the foam melted, they saw the ship's life-boat put off from one of the heaps of wreck; and first, there were three men in her, and in a moment she capsized, and there were but two; and again, she was struck by a vast mass of water, and there was but one; and again, she was thrown bottom upward, and that one, with his arm struck through the broken planks and waving as if for the help that could never reach him, went down into the deep.

It was the clergyman himself from whom I heard this, while I stood on the shore, looking in his kind wholesome face as it turned to the spot where the boat had been. The divers were down then, and busy. They were "lifting" today the gold found yesterday—some five-and-twenty thousand pounds. Of three hundred and fifty thousand pounds' worth of gold, three hundred thousand pounds' worth, in round numbers, was at that time recovered. The great bulk of the remainder was surely and steadily coming up. Some loss of sovereigns there would be, of course; indeed, at first sovereigns had drifted in with the sand, and been scattered far and wide over the beach, like sea-shells; but

most other golden treasure would be found. As it was brought up, it went aboard the Tug-steamer, where good account was taken of it. So tremendous had the force of the sea been when it broke the ship, that it had beaten one great ingot of gold, deep into a strong and heavy piece of her solid iron-work: in which, also, several loose sovereigns that the ingot had swept in before it, had been found, as firmly embedded as though the iron had been liquid when they were forced there. It had been remarked of such bodies come ashore, too, as had been seen by scientific men, that they had been stunned to death, and not suffocated. Observation, both of the internal change that had been wrought in them, and of their external expression, showed death to have been thus merciful and easy. The report was brought, while I was holding such discourse on the beach, that no more bodies had come ashore since last night. It began to be very doubtful whether many more would be thrown up, until the north-east winds of the early spring Moreover, a great number of the passengers, and particularly the second-class women-passengers, were known to have been in the middle of the ship when she parted, and thus the collapsing wreck would have fallen upon them after yawning open, and would keep them down. A diver made known, even then, that he had come upon the body of a man, and had sought to release it from a great superincumbent weight; but that, finding he could not do so without mutilating the remains, he had left it where it was.

It was the kind and wholesome face I have made mention of as being then beside me, that I had purposed to myself to see, when I left home for Wales. I had heard of that clergyman, as having buried many scores of the shipwrecked people; of his having opened his house and heart to their agonised friends; of his having used a most sweet and patient diligence for weeks and weeks, in the performance of the forlornest offices that Man can render to his kind; of his having most tenderly and thoroughly devoted himself to the dead, and to those who were sorrowing for the dead. I had said to myself, "In the Christmas season of the year, I should like to see that man!" And he had swung the gate of his little garden in coming out to meet me, not half an hour ago.

So cheerful of spirit and guiltless of affectation, as true

practical Christianity ever is! I read more of the New Testament in the fresh frank face going up the village beside me, in five minutes, than I have read in anathematising discourses (albeit put to press with enormous flourishing of trumpets), in all my life. I heard more of the Sacred Book in the cordial voice that had nothing to say about its owner, than in all the would-be celestial pairs of bellows that have ever blown conceit at me.

We climbed towards the little church, at a cheery pace, among the loose stones, the deep mud, the wet coarse grass, the outlying water, and other obstructions from which frost and snow had lately thawed. It was a mistake (my friend was glad to tell me, on the way) to suppose that the peasantry had shown any superstitious avoidance of the drowned; on the whole, they had done very well, and had assisted readily. Ten shillings had been paid for the bringing of each body up to the church, but the way was steep, and a horse and cart (in which it was wrapped in a sheet) were necessary, and three or four men, and, all things considered, it was not a great price. The people were none the richer for the wreck, for it was the season of the herringshoal—and who could cast nets for fish, and find dead men and women in the draught?

He had the church keys in his hand, and opened the churchyard gate, and opened the church door; and we

went in.

It is a little church of great antiquity; there is reason to believe that some church has occupied the spot, these thousand years or more. The pulpit was gone, and other things usually belonging to the church were gone, owing to its living congregation having deserted it for the neighbouring schoolroom, and yielded it up to the dead. The very Commandments had been shouldered out of their places, in the bringing in of the dead; the black wooden tables on which they were painted, were askew, and on the stone pavement below them, and on the stone pavement all over the church, were the marks and stains where the drowned had been laid down. The eye, with little or no aid from the imagination, could yet see how the bodies had been turned, and where the head had been and where the feet. Some faded traces of the wreck of the Australian ship may be discernible on the stone pavement of this little church, hundreds of years

hence, when the digging for gold in Australia shall have long

and long ceased out of the land.

Forty-four shipwrecked men and women lay here at one time, awaiting burial. Here, with weeping and wailing in every room of his house, my companion worked alone for hours, solemnly surrounded by eyes that could not see him, and by lips that could not speak to him, patiently examining the tattered clothing, cutting off buttons, hair, marks from linen, anything that might lead to subsequent identification, studying faces, looking for a scar, a bent finger, a crooked toe, comparing letters sent to him with the ruin about him. "My dearest brother had bright grey eyes and a pleasant smile," one sister wrote. O poor sister! well for you to be far from here, and keep that as your last remembrance of him!

The ladies of the clergyman's family, his wife and two sisters-in-law, came in among the bodies often. It grew to be the business of their lives to do so. Any new arrival of a bereaved woman would stimulate their pity to compare the description brought, with the dread realities. Sometimes, they would go back able to say, "I have found him," or, "I think she lies there." Perhaps, the mourner, unable to bear the sight of all that lay in the church, would be led in blindfold. Conducted to the spot with many compassionate words, and encouraged to look, she would say, with a piercing cry, "This is my boy!" and drop insensible on the insensible

figure.

He soon observed that in some cases of women, the identification of persons, though complete, was quite at variance with the marks upon the linen; this led him to notice that even the marks upon the linen were sometimes inconsistent with one another; and thus he came to understand that they had dressed in great haste and agitation, and that their clothes had become mixed together. The identification of men by their dress, was rendered extremely difficult, in consequence of a large proportion of them being dressed alike—in clothes of one kind, that is to say, supplied by slopsellers and outfitters, and not made by single garments but by hundreds. Many of the men were bringing over parrots, and had receipts upon them for the price of the birds; others had bills of exchange in their pockets, or in belts. Some of these documents, carefully unwrinkled and dried, were little

less fresh in appearance that day, than the present page will be under ordinary circumstances, after having been opened three or four times.

In that lonely place, it had not been easy to obtain even such common commodities in towns, as ordinary disinfectants. Pitch had been burnt in the church, as the readiest thing at hand, and the frying-pan in which it had bubbled over a brazier of coals was still there, with its ashes. Hard by the Communion-Table, were some boots that had been taken off the drowned and preserved—a gold-digger's boot, cut down the leg for its removal—a trodden-down man's ankle-boot with a buff cloth top—and others—soaked and sandy, weedy and salt.

From the church, we passed out into the churchyard. Here, there lay, at that time, one hundred and forty-five bodies, that had come ashore from the wreck. He had buried them, when not identified, in graves containing four each. He had numbered each body in a register describing it, and had placed a corresponding number on each coffin, and over each grave. Identified bodies he had buried singly, in private graves, in another part of the churchyard. Several bodies had been exhumed from the graves of four, as relatives had come from a distance and seen his register; and, when recognised, these have been reburied in private graves, so that the mourners might erect separate headstones over the remains. In all such cases he had performed the funeral service a second time, and the ladies of his house had attended. There had been no offence in the poor ashes when they were brought again to the light of day; the beneficent Earth had already absorbed it. The drowned were buried in their clothes. To supply the great sudden demand for coffins, he had got all the neighbouring people handy at tools. to work the livelong day, and Sunday likewise. The coffins were neatly formed;—I had seen two, waiting for occupants, under the lee of the ruined walls of a stone hut on the beach, within call of the tent where the Christmas Feast was held. Similarly, one of the graves for four was lying open and ready, here, in the churchyard. So much of the scanty space was already devoted to the wrecked people, that the villagers had begun to express uneasy doubts whether they themselves could lie in their own ground, with their forefathers and descendants, by-and-by. The churchyard being but a step