

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By

CHARLES DICKENS

With an Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

A Tale of Two Cities was written in the later part of Dickens's literary development; and in one respect stands absolutely alone among all his works. It is, I think, the one solitary instance from which a critic in distant days could possibly deduce that this very great literary man had ever read any literature at all. This generalisation may be subject to certain partial modifications, to be considered when we consider the course of his life; but, as a matter of proportion, which is the essential of truth, it is true. In a thousand ways, ranging from the most depressing destitution to the most pantomimic parade and luxury, Dickens showed that he had studied life; and could turn life into literature. In a thousand moods, ranging from the rankest vulgar farce to the most stagey and melodramatic morality, he showed that he had within himself the powers and passions and appetites to stock the whole world with stories. But very seldom indeed, in enjoying the world of Dickens, do we feel that there was really any writer but Dickens in the world. Like all very creative men, he unfixes the dates of history, and stands as a sort of immortal anachronism. It is sometimes with a sort of start that we remember that his Hogarthian farce and tragedy went on long after Keats had written *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and well into the time when Tennyson was writing the poems of his best period, which was his Pre-Raphaelite

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period. Dickens, in practice and in private life, was a very great admirer of Tennyson. Forster, his biographer, says that his literary tastes touching his contemporaries varied very much, but that he never failed in his admiration of Tennyson. But I do not honestly believe that anybody could guess, from any printed word, from the first words about Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Blotton of Aldgate, to the last broken and doubtful sentences that hint at the identity of Datchery or the destruction of Drood, that Dickens had taken any particular pleasure in *The Lady of Shalott* or *Sir Galahad*. It is partly a tribute to the strength of Dickens, that his mind was so teeming with images that he never needed to borrow mere ideas. It is partly, also, a real weakness in his position, that he had never valued the great culture of the past, and therefore could not fully understand its developments all around him, in the culture of the present. But, for good or evil, it is true that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, nobody (to use a popular phrase) ever made a bulge in Dickens; nobody even made a dent in him. He remained, with all his gifts and glories, solidly and almost insolently himself. The one example, among all works of his authorship, in which we feel even faintly the presence, or perhaps the shadow, of another author, is *A Tale of Two Cities*; and that other author is Thomas Carlyle.

As I have said, the normal human conditions, necessary to his normal human life, involved some modification of this statement. He was very largely what is called a self-taught man; which means that he was taught, not by himself, but by other people; but by other people acting as they really act in the real world,

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and not as they pose before pupils they are paid to teach. His domestic circumstances from the first were very insecure ; so that he saw more of books than of school-books ; he learned more from tattered volumes left about in a tavern than from grammars provided primly in an educational establishment. But it is quite true that among the tattered volumes in the tavern, or elsewhere, there were some with titles not yet entirely forgotten ; titles like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tom Jones* and *Roderick Random* and *Tristram Shandy*. In this sense it is true that he, like every other human being who ever wrote or even read, owed something to what had already been written. And indeed the great comic classics, which were the glory of eighteenth-century England, did leave a certain trend or track in his mind ; which is an utterly trackless waste as regards all the things that anybody could ever have tried to teach him in school. It is evident, however, from the very nature of the story itself, that school in his case must have been almost as intermittent as truancy.

Charles Dickens was born in Portsea, adjoining Portsmouth, in 1812 ; and was promptly carried away from it at the age of two. He then became a Londoner for a few years, equally infantile ; and then his wandering family settled down in Chatham, which was about the nearest approach it ever made to settling down anywhere. Thus we find first the two facts, that are both determining and important ; one, that his family was one of very varied economic fortunes, such as leads to frequent change of abode, and has indeed made the modern poorer middle class almost as nomadic as Arabs ; and the other, that such background as a child of genius will always

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feel and value (if he has half a chance to do so) was for Charles Dickens, to the day of his death, the great roads of Kent that go down to Dover ; and the gardens and hopfields and the towers of Rochester Cathedral. In so far as he had any traditions, that was his traditional environment ; just as in so far as he had any culture, it was that of the great comic novelists of England a hundred years before. He was so far traditional by instinct that he never forgot either of the influences ; he named one of his sons after Henry Fielding ; and, when he came to comfort and affluence, he made his home on Gad's Hill, on that great Kentish road where Falstaff had played the glorious fool long ago.

The private life of Dickens, however, is of little importance to the outline of criticism here involved ; and is indeed in its own nature somewhat irrelevant and accidental. Its chief tragedy was almost an accident ; and its premature close was a sort of defeat brought about by an excess of triumphs. It is well known that in his early youth, while he was still a parliamentary reporter living in London after his boyhood in Chatham, he married the daughter of one of his literary patrons named Hogarth, and that by a long process of disagreement, about which critics can always disagree, he came to be alienated from his wife ; though, curiously enough, remaining on terms of perfectly sober and fraternal friendship with one of her sisters. There is no need to pronounce upon a problem which was really kept private, by the not undignified prejudice of the Victorian time ; it is enough to say that no very grave charge was ever brought against either party by any of the small group of people who survive and who knew the truth. It is

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more relevant here to remark that, at almost the same moment as his marriage, occurred his first and perhaps most triumphant entry into literature. His first book, commonly called *Pickwick* or *The Pickwick Papers*, is supreme among his works in many ways, but especially in the way here in question ; that it is a purely personal creation and owes nothing to any other book. It is all the more amusing to remember that a spiteful attempt was made, by some of his enemies, to suggest that it owed everything to its original illustrator ; an artist named Seymour, who drew spirited sporting sketches of the sort then fashionable. It is a peculiarly false insinuation, in a literary sense. For it is the whole point of *Pickwick* that its rush of inspiration not only leaves Seymour's first ideas behind, but leaves Dickens's first ideas quite as far behind. We might say that the whole point of *Pickwick* is that it does not stick to the point ; or at least that the point is not Pickwick, in the sense of the President of the Pickwick Club. The best things in *Pickwick* have nothing to do with the principal characters ; still less with the preliminary chapters ; and least of all with the early illustrations. It is an exceptional case in which the story grows better the more it strays from the story. Dickens did not preserve this limpid and perfect liberty in his later stories. He produced better novels ; but never so good a book. Still, we can say of the ensuing series of books, that whatever else they were, they were not bookish. They showed Dickens interested in different things ; but never any other authors influencing Dickens. Thus, in his next book, *Oliver Twist*, which he seemed resolved to make as grim and lurid as *Pickwick* had been gay and luminous, he was in fact protesting

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against many social evils, which had already produced noble protests from great men of that age. The workhouse he hated had been hated as healthily by Cobbett or by Hood, by Cartwright or by Carlyle. But nobody could say that one word of *Oliver Twist* sounds as if it were suggested by the style of Cobbett or by the style of Carlyle. *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* show him even more obviously walking down his own street, in some ways even a narrow and Cockney street; the same applies to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and, though *Barnaby Rudge* is a sort of experiment in the way of an historical novel, it is not much more really historical than *The Old Curiosity Shop* or its Wardour Street curiosities. *Dombey and Son* has the same now established balance of perfect comedy and rather imperfect melodrama; and though *David Copperfield* strikes far deeper, and releases a much finer spring of inspiration, it is even more personal than the rest. Dickens has found a new source of inspiration, but not by reading anybody else's book; rather by reading his own diary. The same statement applies to that fine book, *Great Expectations*, and a much sharper social criticism, still extorted by contemporary facts rather than contemporary culture, appears in the unconscious or unclassifiable socialism of *Hard Times*. It mixes his own observations less with mere fancies than did his first protest in *Oliver Twist*; but it is always his own observations, and nobody else's. There is little to vary this verdict in the other two novels of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. It is only when we come to the book which is here specially in question, *A Tale of Two Cities*, which appeared in 1859, that we have anything like the particular impression of which I speak: that Dickens

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has felt the pressure of an imaginative atmosphere outside his own bursting sufficiency and energy ; that energy from whose centrifugal fury all fancies but his own had been spurned away.

This compact and competent, and some would say conceited, sense of self-expression does in *A Tale of Two Cities*, for the first time, seem to admit something external ; something that might be called an echo. Indeed, in one way, it might be called the echo of an echo. It is Carlyle's French Revolution rather than Michelet's French Revolution ; in other words, it is not entirely or exactly the French Revolution of the French Revolutionists. Dickens does tend to neglect, as Carlyle did tend to neglect, the extent to which the Revolutionists themselves regarded it not as an explosion of unreason, or even an explosion of passion, but as an inevitable explosion of reason. They themselves might almost have said that the explosion was an explanation ; as is the explosion that occurs during a chemical lecture. Carlyle, who had laboriously studied all the documents and historical literature of the French Revolution, never quite understood this. It is small blame, by comparison, to Dickens, who had never studied any documents or any history or any literature, or hardly any books except his own, if he did not understand it either. But he had studied one book ; and that was Carlyle's book ; and the shadow of that luminous but lurid cloud lies over the whole landscape and scenery of his story. It is very difficult to define or prove these merely atmospheric things. A short if clumsy way of putting it is to compare the general tone of Dickens towards the mere notion of a mob, as it is in *Barnaby Rudge*, with his tone towards

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such a mob in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The comparison, of course, is not quite fair. Even a man so little in touch with history as he could tell that the second was more historic than the first ; that the second was at least an outbreak of liberty, by comparison with an outbreak of bigotry. But there is more in the contrast than that ; we feel that he could never have taken a Gordon Rioter seriously, even if he had liked him, as he did so often seem to like his most ludicrous and indefensible characters ; as the reader does really, in a way, like Sim Tappertit. He did not like Madame Defarge ; but he did take her seriously. If she had occurred in *Barnaby Rudge*, she would have been a vulgar villainess ; as she occurred in *A Tale of Two Cities*, she is a Fatæ. In other words, there is not only a romantic but a mystical element that has entered the story ; and though Dickens was in one sense always a romantic, he was certainly never a mystic. In some sense the comparison involves a paradox. Carlyle, as a Reactionary, declared that the mob, being made of most men, was made mostly of fools. But Carlyle also allowed for a mystical suggestion that the folly of men was the wisdom of God. Dickens, as a Radical, regarded the mob, in so far as it meant most ordinary men, as being composed of reasonable and responsible citizens, whose votes were all valuable and whose intellects were all capable of benefiting by education and discussion. But, in practice, when Dickens did see a mass of men in any sort of elemental disorder, acting in anger or by some accident lawless or unlettered, he was deeply disgusted in every corner of his compact and sensible intelligence ; and hated that very wildness which Carlyle half admired. Dickens felt like this, for instance,

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towards the sprawling licence and spasmodic ferocity of the more wild and western elements of the American Republic. He would, if subjected to the real experience, have been quite as much horrified by the ferocious pugnacity and spontaneous militarism of the mob of the French Republic. Nevertheless, the Carlylean sense of a sort of savage symbolism in the great struggles of history does make the atmosphere of this book, or perhaps of half this book, different from the whole bulk of his other books.

Perhaps it is really impossible for any good citizen to write a Tale of Two Cities. He will always see one from the outside and the other from the inside ; and the line of relative reality and unreality in this case runs fairly clear. Thus the description of the old-fashioned London bank is unmistakably written by the old London Dickens. The story of the sacrifice of Sydney Carton, though genuinely touching and noble, especially as compared with some of the Dickensian melodramas, is still in a sense a London melodrama, with the larger background of a Paris tragedy. The hero is being heroic for private reasons ; whereas nobody understands or does justice to the French Revolution who forgets that half its leaders lost their heads by really being heroic for public reasons.) It is easy enough to make fun of their classical rhetoric about Brutus who killed his sons or Timoleon who killed his brother ; but it is not so easy to deny that, if they had too much of this notion of sacrificing private good to public good, we have far too much of the corruption and cowardice that comes of sacrificing public good to private good. The ideals for which that war was waged were insufficient but largely just ; and it is curious

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and rather moving to note that the author is so far exalted by the atmosphere that he turns in the end to an older and in truth a larger ideal, which exists before and after and affirms the same justice in public and in private life. I know nothing in all the works of this man of genius which is, in the true sense, so imaginative as the last strange voice, coming from nowhere, those great timeless words put into the mouth of no mortal character, spoken suddenly as by a trumpet out of the empty sky, between the click of the knitting-needles and the crash of the guillotine: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. . . ."

G. K. CHESTERTON

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

WHEN I was acting, with my children and friends, in Mr. Wilkie Collins's drama, of *The Frozen Deep*, I first conceived the main idea of this story. A strong desire was upon me then, to embody it in my own person ; and I traced out in my fancy, the state of mind of which it would necessitate the presentation to an observant spectator, with particular care and interest.

As the idea became familiar to me, it gradually shaped itself into its present form. Throughout its execution, it has had complete possession of me ; I have so far verified what is done and suffered in these pages, as that I have certainly done and suffered it all myself.

Whenever any reference (however slight) is made here to the condition of the French people before or during the Revolution, it is truly made on the faith of the most trustworthy witnesses. It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book.

TAVISTOCK HOUSE, LONDON,
November 1859.

QUESTIONS ON THE TEXT

10. What do we learn from "A Tale of Two Cities" of the dress of the period both in England and France?

11. What references occur in the text to working with towels round one's head, being deafened by a gun, mending shoes, drinking frothed chocolate, getting rust on one's hands, sticking a rose in one's head-dress.

12. Draw a picture to illustrate one of the following scenes:

(a) Miss Pross at grips with Madame Defarge.

(b) Mr. Cruncher and his son on duty outside Tellson's Bank.

(c) Monseigneur running down the child at the fountain.

(d) "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done."

THE END

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