

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

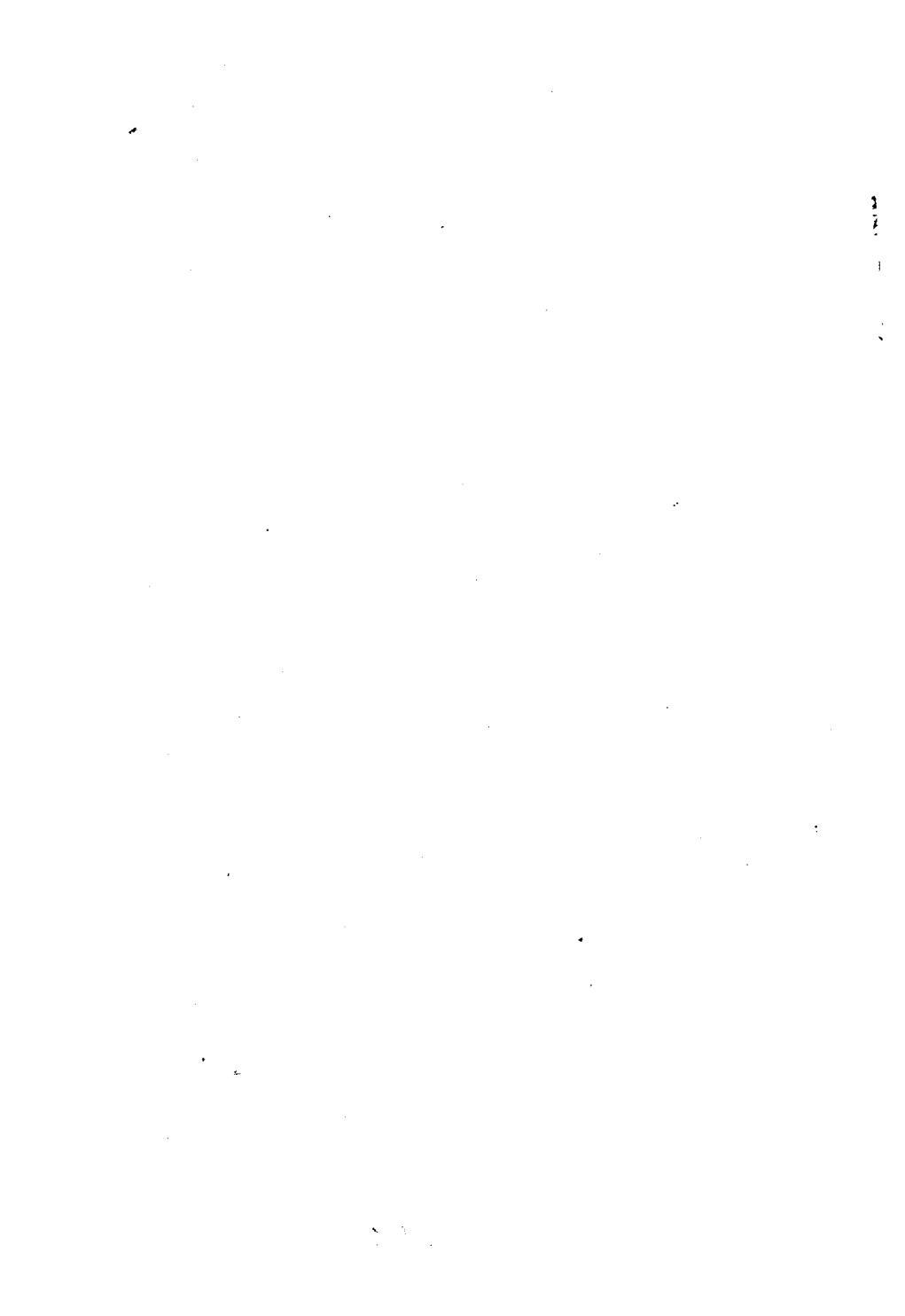
CHARLES DICKENS

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Charles Dickens was born at Portsmouth on 7 February 1812, the second of eight children. Dickens's childhood experiences were similar to those depicted in *David Copperfield*. His father, who was a government clerk, was imprisoned for debt and Dickens was sent to work in a blacking factory at the age of twelve. He received little formal education, but he taught himself shorthand and became a reporter of parliamentary debates for the *Morning Chronicle*. He began to publish sketches in various periodicals, which were subsequently republished as *Sketches by Boz*. The *Pickwick Papers* were published in 1836-7 and after a slow start became a publishing phenomenon and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. He began *Oliver Twist* in 1837, followed by *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41). After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) Dickens set off for America; he went full of enthusiasm for the young republic but, in spite of a triumphant reception, he returned disillusioned. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1842). His first setback came when *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) did not repeat its predecessors' success but this was quickly redressed by the huge popularity of the *Christmas Books*, of which the first, *A Christmas Carol*, appeared in 1843. During 1844-6 Dickens travelled abroad and he began *Dombey and Son* while in Switzerland. This and his next novel, *David Copperfield*, were more serious in theme and more carefully planned than his early novels. In his later work his social criticism became more radical and his comedy more savage. In 1850 Dickens started the weekly periodical, *Household Words*, succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*; in these he published *Bleak House* (1852-3), *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). Dickens's health was failing during the 1860s and the physical strain of the public readings which he began in 1858 speeded his decline and he collapsed during a farewell series in England. His last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was never completed and he died on 9 June 1870.

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CHARLES DICKENS

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CHARLES DICKENS

A NOTE BY ANGUS CALDER

CHARLES DICKENS was born at Portsmouth on 7 February 1812. He was the second of the eight children of John Dickens, a clerk in the Naval Pay Office, whose mother had been in service to Lord Crewe. Although John Dickens was hard-working, he was rarely able to live within his income, and this brought a series of crises upon his family, which lived under the shadow of menacing social insecurity.

John Dickens's work took him from place to place, so that Charles spent his early childhood in Portsmouth, London, and Chatham. He was happiest at Chatham, where he attended a school run by a young Baptist minister, who recognized his abilities and paid him special attention. In 1823 the family moved to London, faced with financial disaster, and, to help out, a relative of Mrs Dickens offered Charles work in a blacking business which he managed. Two days before his twelfth birthday the boy began work at a factory at Hungerford Stairs, labelling bottles for six shillings a week.

Shortly before this, John Dickens had been arrested for debt, and soon the whole family, except for Charles who was found lodgings, joined him in the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The double blow – his menial job and the family shame – gave Charles a shock which transformed him. In later years he told only his wife and his closest friend, John Forster, of these experiences, which haunted him till his death.

After three months in prison, John Dickens was released by process of having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor, but it was not until weeks later that he withdrew Charles from work and sent him to school, where he did well. At fifteen, Charles began work in the office of a firm of Gray's Inn attorneys. Sensing a vocation elsewhere, he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later began to work as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons.

In 1829 he fell passionately in love with Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a banker. Their affair ~~staggered~~ ^{staggered} fruitlessly on until the summer of 1833. Meanwhile, he began to report parliamentary debates, and won himself a high reputation for speed and accuracy. His first *Sketches by Boz* appeared in magazines soon after he was twenty-one. In 1834 he joined the reporting staff of the *Morning Chronicle*. A well-received volume of his *Sketches* appeared on his twenty-fourth birthday.

His growing reputation secured him a commission from the publishers, Chapman and Hall, to provide the text to appear in monthly instalments ~~beside~~ ^{beside} sporting plates by a popular artist, Seymour. He 'thought of Mr Pickwick'. Two days after the first number appeared he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a fellow-journalist, on the prospect. Although early sales were disappointing, *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7) soon became a publishing phenomenon, and Dickens's characters the centre of a popular cult. Part of the secret was the method of cheap serial publication, which Dickens used for all his subsequent novels (some, in fact, being serialized in weekly magazines edited by himself), and which was copied by other writers.

While *Pickwick* was still running, Dickens began *Oliver Twist* (1837). *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) provided him with a third success, and sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) reached 100,000. After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens set off with his wife for the United States. He went full of enthusiasm for the young republic, but returned heartily disillusioned, in spite of a triumphant reception. His experiences are recorded in *American Notes* (1842).

His first setback came when *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) did not repeat the extraordinary success of its predecessors, though he promptly inaugurated his triumphant series of *Christmas Books* with *A Christmas Carol* (1843). He now travelled abroad, first to Italy (1844-5) and then to Switzerland and Paris (1845). During a brief interlude in England he projected, not another novel, but a paper, the *Daily News*. This first appeared in January 1846, but Dickens resigned after only seventeen days as editor.

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His next novel, *Dombey and Son* (1846-8), was more wholly serious and more carefully planned than his early work. In *David Copperfield* (1849-50), he explored his own childhood and youth, thinly disguised. In the 1850s he increased his already intense interest in public affairs. He founded *Household Words*, a weekly magazine which combined entertainment with social purpose; it was succeeded in 1859 by *All the Year Round*, which sold as many as 300,000 copies. *Bleak House* (1852-3) and *Hard Times* (1854) have strong social themes, and *Little Dorrit* (1855-7) continues Dickens's bitter public denunciation of the whole framework of government and administration which had mismanaged the Crimean War.

In 1858 he separated from his wife. Although Kate, a shadowy, slow person, had given him ten children, she had never suited his exuberant temperament very well. He befriended a young actress, Ellen Ternan, who may have become his mistress. He was now living mainly in Kent, at Gad's Hill, near his boyhood home of Chatham. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1862-3) completed his life's main work of fourteen major novels. By the mid 1860s his health was failing, partly under the strain of his successful but exhausting public readings from his own work, which had begun in 1858. An immensely profitable but physically shattering series of readings in America (1867-8) speeded his decline, and he collapsed during a 'farewell' series in England. His last novel, *Edwin Drood* (1870), was never completed; he suffered a stroke after a full day's work at Gad's Hill on 8 June 1870 and died the following day. Lamentation was demonstrative and universal, and he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.

Dickens's extreme energy was not exhausted by his unique success as a novelist. His weekly journalism made heavy demands on his time after 1850, and he constantly turned to the stage, first, in many amateur theatricals, given privately or for charity, where he produced and took leading roles with great brilliance, and later, in his public readings. His concern with social reform in his novels and journalism was matched by an active personal interest in several charitable projects.

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Furthermore, as Lionel Trilling puts it, 'the mere record of his conviviality is exhausting'. His typical relaxation was a long walk at great speed, and he was dedicated to any and every sort of game or jollification. In the early days of his success, observers were sometimes displeased by his flamboyant dress and a hint of vulgarity in his manners, but he had powerful, magnetizing eyes and overwhelming charm. Beneath his high spirits, friends could detect a permanent emotional insecurity and restlessness, which flavours the tragi-comic world of his novels.

Two biographies stand out among many: John Forster's *Life* (1872-4, many times reprinted); and Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph* (London, 1953), which embodies material neglected or suppressed by Forster. Readers interested in Dickens's methods as a novelist will be enlightened by John Butt's and Kathleen Tillotson's *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1957). There are innumerable specialized studies of his work, life and views. A magazine exclusively devoted to this subject, *The Dickensian*, is published three times a year by the Dickens Fellowship.

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The Old Curiosity Shop has long been regarded as something of a black sheep in the family of Dickens's novels. It has been consistent in its remarkable ability to alienate countless readers by its sentimentality, clumsy construction, and arbitrary melodramatic sensationalism. And yet, while it does not easily submit to the conventional disciplines of the novel – disciplines which Dickens himself later developed and mastered – it has a haunting quality, and, as G. K. Chesterton recognized, a peculiar 'unity of sentiment and atmosphere'.* This, coupled with the antics of its bizarre cast of characters, makes *The Old Curiosity Shop* an oddly compelling experience.

The story of Nell, and her persecution by the dwarfish Quilp, came about through Dickens's flirtation with an idea for a brief feature for his new weekly magazine *Master Humphrey's Clock*. His plans for the *Clock*, prior to their submission to his publishers Chapman and Hall, had been outlined in a letter to John Forster during the summer of 1839, when *Nicholas Nickleby* was drawing to a close. From this letter and from Forster's own remarks it appears that Dickens was at this stage reluctant to undertake another full-length novel 'with all the strain on his fancy'. He was still, however, committed to writing *Barnaby Rudge*, which had been continually postponed since 1836. But by the close of 1839, with only two chapters in hand, he put it aside again to concentrate on his new project.

I have a notion of this old file in the queer house, opening the book by an account of himself, and, among other peculiarities, of his affection for an old quaint queer-cased clock.

The new periodical, he had originally decided, was to be a twelve-page miscellany of essays, satirical papers, letters from

* *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, G. K. Chesterton (1911).

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imaginary correspondents, short stories, etc. after the style of *The Spectator*, and given continuity by a small club of characters who would from time to time provide material in the shape of various tales and personal adventures. Master Humphrey himself would make his contributions from the papers stored in the old clock-case. The enterprise was clearly aimed at drawing his readers more closely and more frequently around the warm fire-side of his own creative imagination. Thus when the periodical comes to an end in November 1841, Master Humphrey dies, the chimney-corner grows cold, and the clock stops forever.

Keeping in mind the buoyant summer plans for the *Clock*, one is quite unprepared for the atmosphere of its opening number (4 April 1840) when Dickens introduces Master Humphrey as a 'mis-shapen, deformed, old man', melancholy and timid, but deeply compassionate. Within the first four pages we are acquainted with a traumatic experience in his early childhood, which sets a distinctive tone for the periodical and in many ways prepares for *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

A little knot of playmates – they must have been beautiful, for I see them now – were clustered one day round my mother's knee in eager admiration of some picture representing a group of infant angels . . . and I remember the fancy coming upon me to point out which of them represented each child there, and that when I had gone through all my companions, I stopped and hesitated, wondering which was most like me. I remember the children looking at each other, and my turning red and hot, . . . and then . . . the truth broke upon me for the first time, and I knew, while watching my awkward and ungainly sports, how keenly [my mother] had felt for her poor crippled boy.

Angelic loveliness and deformity, the childhood world and subsequent loss of a kind of innocence – these are key preoccupations in the design of the coming novel. The effect of this experience on Master Humphrey determines the nature of the club's membership.

We are men of secluded habits with something of a cloud upon our early fortunes, whose enthusiasm nevertheless has not cooled with age, whose spirit of romance is not yet quenched, who are content to ramble

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through the world in a pleasant dream, rather than ever waken again to its harsh realities. We are alchemists who would extract the essence of perpetual youth from dust and ashes, tempt coy Truth in many light and airy forms from the bottom of her well, and discover one crumb of comfort or one grain of good in the commonest and least regarded matter that passes through our crucible. Spirits of past times, creatures of imagination, and people of to-day, are alike the objects of our seeking, and, unlike the objects of search with most philosophers, we can ensure their coming at our command.

The spirit of romance, the preference for dream over harsh reality, the search for recovery of youth, and the subjection of time and place and all things to the transforming power of the imagination are again decisive influences on the conception and execution of the approaching novel. Such passages as these from the *Clock* are of considerable interest: for Dickens now has the opportunity to explore certain moods and preoccupations that he could not indulge to the same extent under the pressures of composing a full-length novel. Looking back from *The Old Curiosity Shop* to these early *Clock* numbers we can, as it were, watch him leisurely selecting the dominant colours from his palette, and sketching in the main patterns as a preliminary to the final composition.

But Dickens's readers, who had probably been expecting another novel immediately, were disappointed, even though he reintroduced those old favourites Pickwick and the Wellers. Although 60,000 copies of the first number were sold, subsequent sales soon began to fall. It was not until *The Old Curiosity Shop* was well under way that they rose again, and reached an unprecedented 100,000 copies. The idea for the story of Nell – never at first intended to be anything more than a 'little tale' – came to him during a visit to Walter Savage Landor at Bath in March 1840. Landor, who loved the novel, later said he regretted not having bought his Bath house so that he might have been able to burn it to the ground, 'to the end that no meaner association should ever desecrate the birth place of Nell'.

Dickens decided that the little tale should appear in the fourth number of the *Clock* (25 April), as one of the *Personal Adventures of Master Humphrey*; and for the next two months it is continued

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sporadically together with various *Clock* material. Then, by August *The Metropolitan Magazine*, relying on 'the best authority', was able to assure the reading public that 'the intense interest excited by the natural and sweetly pathetic story of the "Curiosity Shop", will be preserved unbroken by digression, until brought to a termination.'

The awkward results of this last-minute expansion of the little tale can be detected in the early part of the novel. As the story picks up its own momentum and involves some rapid changes of scene, Master Humphrey's presence as narrator becomes hampering, and he has to make a formal withdrawal at the end of Chapter 3. The malicious profligate Fred Trent is soon dropped as Dickens prefers to develop the far more spectacular malice of Quilp, and Dick Swiveller's engaging profligacy. The Sophie Wackles episode proves to be a hilarious irrelevancy. Kit, who is introduced as a harmless semi-idiot, occasioning some light relief in Chapter 1, by some twenty chapters later has become an earnest responsible young man.

But none of these modifications are as drastic as the one Forster recounts:

He had not thought of killing her, when, about half-way through, I asked him to consider whether it did not necessarily belong even to his own conception, after taking so mere a child through such a tragedy of sorrow, to lift her also out of the commonplace of ordinary happy endings, so that the gentle pure little figure and form should never change to the fancy.

The editors of the Pilgrim Letters offer some persuasive evidence for the decision having been taken around the time of the composition of those chapters that concentrate on the death of the school-master's favourite little scholar.

C. E. Lester's account of his visit to CD in July [1840] implies that Forster's suggestion had been made rather earlier than 'half-way through'. To Lester's hope that Nell would 'find a quiet and happy home' CD (who had probably just finished No. 19, containing Chs 23 and 24) replied: 'I hardly know what to do. But if you ever hear of her

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death in a future number of the *Clock*, you shall say that she died as she lived' (*The Glory and Shame of England*, II, 15).*

On the other hand Nell's troubles up to this point have not really amounted to 'a tragedy of sorrow'. The worst ordeals come later with the sudden reappearance of Quilp in the country town, her grandfather's relapse at the sight of a card game, and his subsequent nightmarish robbery of Nell. But, at whatever point the decision became effective, Dickens, said Forster, 'never turned aside from it again', and, as we shall see later, the result became the *locus classicus* of sentimental child-deaths in literature.

Dickens found the obligations of weekly publication exacting at first: 'I was obliged to cramp most dreadfully what I thought a pretty idea in the last chapter. I hadn't room to turn.' Once the novel was under way, he adopted a scheme of two chapters for every twelve-page weekly *Clock* number, which was to include, usually, two inset illustrations by 'Phiz' or George Cattermole; and at the end of each month the four or five numbers would be bound up to make a monthly part. Dickens exploited these opportunities for keeping his readers in suspense: for example at the close of *Clock* 30 Nell shrieks and faints at the sight of a figure ahead of them on the road leading out of the second industrial city. The reader had to restrain his impatience for a week – or a whole month, if he was relying only on the monthly parts – when the opening chapter of the next number would immediately identify the figure as ... Again, at the end of *Clock* 39, Dick Swiveller is suddenly 'seized with an alarming illness, and in twenty-four hours was stricken with a raging fever.' Another week or month intervenes before his fate is known. Another effect of this serial publication involves the abrupt changes of location, especially when Dickens moves the scene from London to Nell's country travels or *vice versa*. A novel that must be read over some nine months enables the reader to adjust in a more leisurely manner to such scene changes, whereas the movement often proves jerky and awkward in a close reading over a few days.

* *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. M. House and G. Storey (Penguin Edition, Oxford, 1965-), vol. II, p. 125n.

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By November 1840 those who had followed Nell on her travels were increasingly apprehensive about her future. 'I am inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy,' Dickens wrote to his publishers. At the close of the year he writes: 'I am breaking my heart over this story, and cannot bear to finish it.' He finished *The Old Curiosity Shop* around 4 o'clock on the morning of 17 January 1841, and told Forster, 'It makes me very melancholy to think that all these people are lost to me forever, and I feel as if I never could become attached to any new set of characters.' Four days later the feeling of anticlimax still incapacitated him.

I am at present in what Leigh Hunt would call a kind of impossible state – thinking what on earth Master Humphrey can think of through four mortal pages.

Part of the remaining space is filled by Master Humphrey's scarcely plausible revelation that he was, in fact, the single gentleman. Then follow some characteristic meditations on London, and, after the clock has been wound and the fire stirred, the club settles down to listen to the new story, *Barnaby Rudge*.

The Old Curiosity Shop is perhaps the most improvised of all Dickens's novels, and we may still feel that the impact of its powerful contrasts would have been far greater in the narrower but more concentrated form of a short story. At the same time, we would have lost its free-ranging comedy and unique gallery of grotesques. Nell's dream of 'rambling through light and sunny places, but with some vague object unattained which ran indistinctly through them all' reflects Dickens's own uncertainty of direction during the early stages of the novel; and it is not until she and her grandfather have escaped from London that he begins to gather clues to their unfolding story. The notion of a pilgrimage is one such clue, made explicit when, in Chapter 15, Nell compares their situation to that of Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*. But this approach is not sustained at any level comparable to Bunyan's allegory, even though the scene of Races Day may recall Christian's experience at Vanity Fair.