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CHARLES DICKENS

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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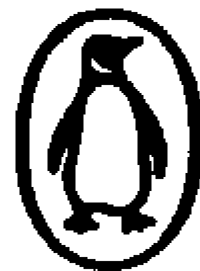

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CONTENTS

Charles Dickens 7

Introduction 9

Note on the Text 26

A TALE OF TWO CITIES 27

Notes 405

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

CHARLES DICKENS

George Woodcock is the author of *Anarchism*, and has edited *The Egoist*, *Typee* and *Rural Rides* for the Penguin English Library

CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES DICKENS was born at Portsmouth in 1812. His father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the Naval Pay Office. Though hard-working, he was rarely able to live within his income, and his large family lived in the shadow of menacing social insecurity.

Charles spent his childhood in Portsmouth, London, and was happiest at Chatham, where he attended a school run by a young Baptist minister, who appreciated his abilities. In 1823 the family moved to London, faced with financial ruin, and a relative of Mrs Dickens offered Charles work in a blacking factory. Just before his twelfth birthday the boy began work 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. These experiences transformed Charles and haunted him till his death. In later years he told only his closest friend, John Forster, of them. After three months in prison, John Dickens was released by process of having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor, and Charles was withdrawn from work and sent to school, where he did well. At fifteen he began work in the office of a firm of Gray's Inn attorneys, but, sensing a vocation elsewhere, he taught himself shorthand and started as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons. He then took up reporting parliamentary debates, and won a high reputation for speed and accuracy.

His first *Sketches by Boz* appeared in magazines before he was twenty-one, and in 1834 he joined the reporting staff of the *Morning Chronicle*. On the strength of his growing reputation, Chapman & Hall asked him to provide the text to appear in monthly instalments beside sporting plates by a popular artist, Seymour. Dickens then 'thought of Mr. Pickwick', and married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of a fellow-journalist, on the prospect. Although early sales were disappointing, *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) soon became a publishing phenomenon. Part of the secret

was the form of cheap serial publication, which Dickens used for all his subsequent novels.

While *Pickwick* was still running, Dickens began *Oliver Twist* (1837). *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) was a third success, and sales of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) reached 100,000.

After finishing *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), he set off with his wife for the United States full of enthusiasm, but he returned disillusioned, in spite of a splendid reception, to record his experiences in *American Notes* (1842).

Martin Chuzzlewit (1843–4), was less successful, but Dickens promptly began his triumphant series of *Christmas Books* with *A Christmas Carol* (1843). During the next three years he travelled in Europe. A paper, the *Daily News*, appeared in 1846, but Dickens resigned after only seventeen days as editor.

In the 1850s 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 his bitter denunciation of the form of government and administration which had mismanaged the Crimean War.

In 1858 he separated from his wife. A shadowy, slow person, she had given him ten children, but had never suited his exuberant temperament. He befriended a young actress, Ellen Ternan, who may have become his mistress. He was now living mainly in Kent, at Gad's Hill.

A Tale of Two Cities (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860–61) and *Our Mutual Friend* completed his life's main work of fourteen major novels. His health was failing, partly under the strain of exhausting public readings which began in 1858. An immensely profitable but physically shattering series of readings in America sped his decline, and he collapsed during a 'farewell' series in England. His last novel, *Edwin Drood*, was never finished; he suffered a stroke after a full day's work at Gad's Hill on 8 June 1870 and died the following day. Amidst universal lamentation he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminister Abbey.

INTRODUCTION

'IT has greatly moved and excited me in the doing, and Heaven knows I have done my best and believed in it,' said Dickens to Wilkie Collins after he had completed the last pages of *A Tale of Two Cities*. It is a remark to be remembered, for superficially this is the least Dickensian of all the novels Dickens wrote. Tense in construction and sombre in mood, it is among the shortest of his major works, moving forward with a sharpness of tempo and a directness of intent that make it an absorbing story. The unadorned prose gives little room for the proliferation of unnecessary detail which George Orwell once identified as the distinguishing characteristic of the Dickensian style, and the grotesque, instead of rioting like tropical vegetation as in so many of the other novels, is here applied most economically to serve the serious purpose of the book. It is the purpose that is most in question, for the exceptionally controlled technique is used to tell a story which at times appears to have as its theme the storms of collective life and yet in the end seems to express in a tone of high romance a personal and religious intent. And this central ambiguity, suggested in the very title of the book, is the clue to the passion with which Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*. To him it was not merely a historical novel, or a fictional tract on the evils of revolution, or even a symbolic romance on the theme of renunciation, though all these were contained within it. It was a novel, written at a point of crisis in his life, that was closely linked with matters of deep personal importance to him in the present and in the past.

The 'main idea' of *A Tale of Two Cities* came originally to Dickens in 1857, while, with his children and his friends, he was acting and producing for charity Wilkie Collins's play, *The Frozen Deep*. Since Dickens particularly emphasizes this fact in the preface to the first edition of *A Tale of Two Cities* in November 1859, it is clear that he intends us to see a connexion between the two works, and the connexion is there, for Collins's play, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, is a drama of resurrection and renunciation.

In one way the play was actually Dickensian in origin; it arose

out of the passionate interest which Dickens took during 1856 in the Franklin expedition to the Arctic. Shortly beforehand, Dr John Rae had reported his discovery of the relics of the expedition and of evidence that the last survivors had indulged in cannibalism as a means of prolonging their lives. Rae's opinion is now accepted as substantially true, but it aroused much indignation in the Victorian world, and Dickens was especially angered at what he regarded as a slur on the gallantry of Franklin and his companions. As he delved into the question in the hope of rebutting Rae's conclusions, Dickens investigated many accounts of privation and death through shipwreck. The horror and pathos of these stories haunted him, and he shared his feelings and his information with Collins, who saw in the material the substance of a drama. In constant consultation with Dickens, he wrote it. How much of *The Frozen Deep* may have been Dickens's words we cannot know, but it is certain that, at every stage from planning to acting, he was deeply and emotionally involved.

The core of the play is the story of Clara Burnham and her two suitors, Frank Aldersley whom she has accepted, and Richard Wardour whom she has rejected. Wardour has vowed to kill his rival, but does not yet even know his name, and is therefore unaware that he is actually a companion on the Polar expedition which is the subject of the play. There is a first act in which Clara and three of her friends, all betrothed to members of the expedition, are gathered in a house in Devon, where a Scottish nurse gifted with second sight terrifies them by recounting a gruesome vision of disaster in the far and frozen North. The second act shifts to these Arctic wastes, where the members of the expedition are nearing starvation; it is decided that Aldersley shall go in search of relief, and that Wardour shall be his companion. At the end of the act Wardour discovers that Aldersley is the man he has so long hated without knowing his identity, and the curtain falls on dire expectations.

It rises again on a cavern in Newfoundland which the young ladies with their Scottish nurse have valiantly reached in time to meet some of the members of the expedition who have equally improbably found their way to this point from the Arctic. Neither Aldersley nor Wardour is among them, but shortly a delirious spectre rushes in, crying for food and drink. He is Wardour, who

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has just escaped from an ice-floe that happened to be drifting by; Clara recognizes him and believes he has murdered Aldersley. Mortified by this suspicion, Wardour goes out and returns with his rival in his arms. He has supported Aldersley 'through snow drifts and on ice-floes' and has resisted the temptation to let him die in a frozen sleep; indeed, he has put so much effort into preserving Aldersley's life that he has worn out his own, and now, blessing the betrothed couple and kissing his lost Clara, he edifyingly expires.

The part of this self-sacrificing lover was played with gusto and passion – before Queen Victoria and many other distinguished spectators – by Dickens himself, and thus he dramatized in action the climactic situation of *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which, once again, one of two young men sacrifices himself so that the other may enjoy happiness with the girl whom both of them love. With his deeply histrionic personality, Dickens was able to transfer the involvement he had experienced in the acting of *The Frozen Deep* to the writing of *A Tale of Two Cities*, of which he speaks almost as if he were an actor who had identified himself absolutely with his part. 'Throughout its execution', he tells us in his preface, '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.'

The transfer of the triangular situation and its theme of renunciation from the Arctic wastes to the Europe of the French Revolutionary age did not involve so great a shift, at least thematically, as might first appear. *The Frozen Deep* was a melodrama concerned with the behaviour of men who are placed in a situation of extreme danger and hardship. Will the virtues of human brotherhood survive such strains? is the question, and the answer is triumphantly, Yes! But Dickens was an urban man who in his novels wisely kept to the cities of Europe and their rural environs, and only at the end, in *Edwin Drood*, attempted to recreate the exotic atmosphere of distant lands. In an urban society the only situations equivalent to those that explorers or mariners encountered were likely to be those created by wars or revolutions, and for Dickens the human passions aroused in the populace of Paris by the events of 1789 played a similar role to the natural elements involved in *The Frozen Deep*.

The decision to choose revolutionary France as his setting was undoubtedly the fulfilment of an intent which Dickens had long harboured. Almost twenty years before, in 1840, he had first met Thomas Carlyle, and had fallen immediately under the spell of that powerful writer and bizarre personality. The reading of Carlyle's *Chartism* and *The French Revolution* had already influenced Dickens in writing *Barnaby Rudge* (1840–41), and now it was the apocalyptic Carlylean vision of insurgent Paris that Dickens allowed to shape the setting and influence the tone of the novel he planned. He had read *The French Revolution* repeatedly since its appearance in 1839, and he found no book that was to be of greater use to him.

Chesterton once said of Dickens that 'he was an ignorant man, ill-read in the past, and often confused about the present', and there is much justice in this view, but in the case of *A Tale of Two Cities* he did a great deal of determined reading during 1858 before he actually started to write the book. We know that he read Rousseau, that he consulted Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, that he dipped into the tax tables, and it is unlikely that he missed the English novels which had already used the French Revolution as a background, such as *Zanoni*, by his friend Bulwer-Lytton, and Anthony Trollope's *La Vendée*.

There were also at his disposal the memories of his several visits to Paris during the preceding decade and a half. In 1845 he had talked there with the French historian of the Revolution, Jules Michelet; he met Victor Hugo on several occasions, and knew the poet Lamartine and the socialist Louis Blanc, leading figures in the revolution of 1848, while in the winter of 1855–6 he saw a good deal of the newspaper editor, Émile de Girardin, who in 1848 had been locked in the Conciergerie, a prison noted in the annals of the earlier and greater revolution. Apart from what he learnt from these friends in France, Dickens could draw on popular memories of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that lingered in England into the 1850s; when he began to write *A Tale of Two Cities*, the Terror was nearer in time than the Boer War is today and Waterloo was a mere forty-three years in the past. Yet he kept returning to Carlyle because Carlyle's ornate rhetoric suited his own cast of mind, and it was *The French Revolution* that remained his principal source, next to his own past.

The memories of that past were stirred by the series of dramatic personal events through which he lived as *A Tale of Two Cities* matured in his mind. For, while he prepared to write on a public revolution, Dickens experienced a private revolution in which all the circumstances of his life were changed. At last, in 1858, his marriage was fissured by an incompatability between this mercurial and melodramatic artist and his phlegmatic and unimaginative wife Catherine. At no time since their wedding in 1836 had Catherine been enough to fill Dickens's emotional demands; as soon as they married, her young sister Mary Hogarth went to live with them, and Mary's sudden death in 1837 filled Dickens with a grief that echoed through his novels to the end of his life. Her place was taken by her sister Georgina, another young and vivacious girl who appealed to his romantic persona until in the 1850s, when she too was leaving her youth, her place in his feelings was taken by the young actress Ellen Ternan who had acted with him in *The Frozen Deep*. There is no need to continue the controversy that has raged among Dickensians regarding the actual relations that existed between Dickens and Ellen Ternan; the important facts are, first, that once again Dickens fell under the emotional spell of a young girl, as he had fallen under those of Mary and Georgina Hogarth (and before them of Maria Beadnell), and, secondly, that the infatuation with a girl outside the Hogarth sisterhood was the immediate cause of his separation from his wife. Henceforward – whether or not he kept Ellen Ternan in a suburban cottage – his household was dominated by his sister-in-law Georgina, who remained loyal to him when her sister departed, and in this new atmosphere the tempo of his life increased until the last compulsive days of exhausting public readings precipitated his premature death.

At the same time as Dickens brought his marriage to an end, the restlessness that stirred him led to a break in his long-standing association with his publishers, Bradbury & Evans; not only did he take his books away from them and resume relations with Chapman & Hall, but he also killed the magazine, *Household Words*, which he had been editing for them since 1850. These changes in his personal life have an appearance of abruptness, but they represent the eruption into his life of long-building forces of inner change that had

been evident in his novels since the publication of *Bleak House* in 1853, and which drove him to a far more sombre view of life and of his aims as a novelist than had been possible in the years between *Pickwick Papers* and *David Copperfield*. The revolution that engulfed the characters of *A Tale of Two Cities* gave symbolic form to the revolution that had engulfed Dickens as a man and as an artist. At this point his vision was tragic, and no matter how he might apply the salve of humourous relief, thinly in *A Tale of Two Cities* or thickly in *Great Expectations*, the mood of his work was to remain so into the deepening shadows of *Edwin Drood*.

As soon as he had killed *Household Words*, Dickens started a new weekly magazine, *All the Year Round*. The need for something fresh and striking to start off the periodical led him to speed the writing of his novel, and when the first number of *All the Year Round* appeared on 30 April 1859, it contained the opening instalment of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The title had been chosen after many others had passed through the writer's mind, and after they had been rejected for their inadequacy in conveying the whole spirit of the novel. *Buried Alive* drew too much attention to Dr Manette's imprisonment in the Bastille; *The Golden Thread* to the fortunate marriage of Lucie Manette and Charles Darnay; *Memory Carton* to the self-sacrifice that brought the novel to an end. But *A Tale of Two Cities* contains within its many connotations the whole sweep of the author's vision. For the balancing of London and Paris, and their different ways of life and of politics, is not all the title suggests. It suggests the basic dichotomy on which the novel rests: the choice between changing society and changing ourselves; the gulf between revolutionary ideals and revolutionary methods. It suggests also the dualities within the human heart, externalized in the key relationship between Darnay and Carton.

The last instalment of *A Tale of Two Cities* appeared in *All the Year Round* on 26 November 1859, to be followed by Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, and it was immediately published in book form. The rapid writing in brief weekly instalments had helped to keep the prose tight and economical; Dickens pruned as he had never done before, and the novel, considered as a story, is generally and justly thought to be the best he wrote (though by almost any other criterion it falls well behind *Bleak House*,

Great Expectations, and several of the earlier books). It was destined to be – apart from *Pickwick Papers* – the most consistently successful of his books, and it was the only one among his novels that fulfilled its creator's dramatic inclinations by a lasting triumph on the stage, as *The Only Way*, in which for a generation Sir John Martin-Harvey interpreted Sidney Carton to the later Victorians. This theatrical success was due to the fact that Dickens rigidly disciplined his dialogue, with the intent – unprecedented in his career – of producing characters 'whom the story shall express, more than they should express themselves by dialogue'. For the first time the people he created acted as emphatically as they talked, and in this search for drama through action lay the book's uniqueness. The action was even given a stark emphasis, like that of a play on a bare stage, by the unaccustomed thinness of background; less than in any other of Dickens's novels do we get the sense of a living society *within* which the characters move. Rather, they stand *apart* from a scene painted in bold and sketchy lines, and what really surrounds them is an atmosphere rather than a world, an atmosphere of fear and foreboding, of secrecy and suspicion, filled with premonitory echoes like those which mysteriously break upon the Manette house in Soho. It is this magnifying atmosphere, against a stark setting, that has the true quality of drama and enlarges the actors and their deeds, so that within the little circle of the Defarges and their few companions the revolution is portrayed in all its intensity.

As a historical novel in any literal sense, *A Tale of Two Cities* has obvious limitations. It attempts no really panoramic view of either the English or the French political world of those critical years; *Barnaby Rudge*, its precursor in the use of popular uprisings, was much more thorough in that respect. A single State Trial suffices to give us the tone of English public life under George III; as for the revolution in France, only two actual episodes are taken out of history and re-enacted in the novel, the fall of the Bastille and the lynching of 'old Foulon', and in both Dickens follows Carlyle very closely. None of the great personalities of the revolution comes on the scene, and only the executioner Samson is mentioned among them.

Where Dickens did take hints from life in shaping his characters,

they were derived from personalities who played extremely minor roles in history. The first spark of the revolutionary wine merchant Defarge seems to be found in the scanty reference Carlyle makes to a real wine merchant, Chôlat, who led the amateur *canonniers* at the Bastille and took charge of the escort which failed to save De Launay, governor of the fortress, from the rage of the populace. The germ of Dr Manette was undoubtedly contained in the prisoner, Queret-Demery, whose letter, begging the man who has imprisoned him for news of his wife, provides the pathetic note on which Carlyle ends his account of the fall of the Bastille. And it has been said that Stryver, the bullying, bombastic lawyer who thrives by picking Carton's misused brain, was based on Edwin James, Q.C., a mid-Victorian barrister whose courtroom style Dickens had witnessed on a single occasion. But Defarge, Stryver, and even Dr Manette, are secondary characters; the figures in the centre stage, Darnay, Carton and Lucie, have their sources within Dickens; they are the products of self-projection, of transmuting memory, and in part of a half-reasoning, half-intuitive conception of the moral destiny of man.

Dickens can be seen, in an image no more fanciful than his own, as a kind of Mahomet suspended between a dreaded but unforgettable past and a bright but unlikely future, and the material he selects from life is determined largely by these preoccupations. He is a didactic writer, with lessons to teach as to how men may live more decent and more Christian lives. But he is also a man who has not outlived the traumas of youth, which recur from novel to novel. One can see this double pattern in the way Dickens chooses to portray France and its revolution. Just as we realize that the Paris he creates is like no historical Paris, and quite unlike the Paris he knew on his own visits there during the 1840s and 1850s, so we learn quickly that the revolution which occurs in this fantasy city is dark with the shadows of his own past, and dominated by preoccupations inherited from his childhood.

The first is with imprisonment. Dr Manette is immured in the Bastille under the Bourbon regime; Darnay first appears as a prisoner in the dock at the Old Bailey, and later, under the new dispensation in France, he is shut up in La Force and the Conciergerie; Carton becomes a voluntary prisoner. The novel begins

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