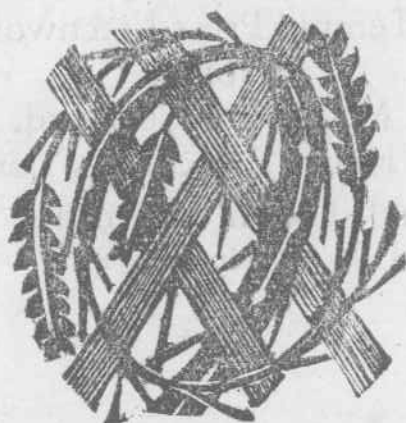


THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP



·CHARLES DICKENS

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INTRODUCTION

NOTHING is important except the fate of the soul ; and literature is only redeemed from an utter triviality, surpassing that of naughts and crosses, by the fact that it describes not the world around us or the things on the retina of the eye or the enormous irrelevancy of encyclopædias, but some condition to which the human spirit can come. All good writers express the state of their souls, even (as occurs in some cases of very good writers) if it is a state of damnation. The first thing that has to be realized about Dickens is this ultimate spiritual condition of the man, which lay behind all his creations. This Dickens state of mind is difficult to pick out in words as are all elementary states of mind ; they cannot be described, not because they are too subtle for words, but because they are too simple for words. Perhaps the nearest approach to a statement of it would be this : that Dickens expresses an eager anticipation of everything that will happen in the motley affairs of men ; he looks at the quiet crowd waiting for it to be picturesque and to play the fool ; he expects everything ; he is torn with a happy hunger. Thackeray is always looking back to yesterday ; Dickens is always looking forward to to-morrow. Both are profoundly humorous, for there is a humour of the morning and a humour of the evening ; but the first guesses at what it will get, at all the grotesqueness and variety which a day may bring forth ; the second looks back on what the day has been and sees even its solemnities as slightly ironical. Nothing can be too extravagant for the laughter that looks forward ; and nothing can be too dignified for the laughter that looks back.

It is an idle but obvious thing, which many must have noticed, that we often find in the title of one of an author's books what might very well stand for a general description of all of them. Thus all Spenser's works might be called "A Hymn to Heavenly Beauty ;" or all Mr. Bernard Shaw's bound books might be called "You Never Can Tell." In the same way the whole substance and spirit of Thackeray might be gathered under the general title "Vanity Fair." In the same way too the whole substance and spirit of Dickens might be gathered under the general title "Great Expectations."

In a recent criticism on this position I saw it remarked that all this is reading into Dickens something that he did not mean ; and

I have been told that it would have greatly surprised Dickens to be informed that he "went down the broad road of the Revolution." Of course it would. Criticism does not exist to say about authors the things that they knew themselves. It exists to say the things about them which they did not know themselves. If a critic says that the "Iliad" has a pagan rather than a Christian pity, or that it is full of pictures made by one epithet, of course he does not mean that Homer could have said that. If Homer could have said that the critic would leave Homer to say it. The function of criticism, if it has a legitimate function at all, can only be one function—that of dealing with the subconscious part of the author's mind which only the critic can express, and not with the conscious part of the author's mind, which the author himself can express. Either criticism is no good at all (a very defensible position) or else criticism means saying about an author the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots.

Doubtless the name in this case "Great Expectations" is an empty coincidence; and indeed it is not in the books of the later Dickens period (the period of "Great Expectations"), that we should look for the best examples of this sanguine and expectant spirit which is the essential of the man's genius. There are plenty of good examples of it especially in the earlier works. But even in the earlier works there is no example of it more striking or more satisfactory than "The Old Curiosity Shop." It is particularly noticeable in the fact that its opening and original framework express the idea of a random experience, a thing come across in the street; a single face in the crowd, followed until it tells its story. Master Humphrey the Hunchback, who was fond of wandering about London in the dead of night, is of course for practical purposes merely Dickens himself, who was fond of wandering about London in the dead of night. Little Nell is merely a poor child seen in the street and tracked to her tiny home, half in idleness and half in pity. Dickens is wandering with his note-book, or perhaps rather with his sketch-book. Though the thing ends in a novel it begins in a sketch; it begins as one of the "Sketches by Boz." There is something unconsciously artistic in the very clumsiness of this opening. Master Humphrey starts to keep a scrap-book of all his adventures, and he finds that he can fill the whole scrap-book with the sequels and developments of one adventure; he goes out to notice everybody and he finds himself busily and variedly occupied only in watching somebody. In this there is a very profound truth about the true excitement and inexhaustible poetry of life. The truth is not so much that

eternity is full of souls as that one soul can fill eternity. In strict art there is something quite lame and lumbering about the way in which the benevolent old story-teller starts to tell many stories and then drops away altogether, while one of his stories takes his place. But in a larger art, his collision with Little Nell and his complete eclipse by her personality and narrative have a real significance. They suggest the random richness of such meetings, and their uncalculated results. It makes the whole book a sort of splendid accident.

The controversial question of Little Nell is a very good example of a controversial question which is permanent and general in Dickens; and in connection with which, to tell the truth, very little justice is done to him, especially by those whose claim to mental clarity and refinement ought to make them know what intellectual justice is. It is not true, as is commonly said, that the Dickens pathos as pathos is bad. It is not true, as is still more commonly said, that the whole business about Little Nell is bad. The case is more complex than that. Yet complex as it is it admits of one sufficiently clear distinction. Those who have written about the death of Little Nell, have generally noticed the crudities of the character itself; the little girl's unnatural and staring innocence, her constrained and awkward piety. But they have nearly all of them entirely failed to notice that there is in the death of Little Nell one quite definite and really artistic idea. It is not an artistic idea that a little child should die rhetorically on the stage like Paul Dombey; and Little Nell does not die rhetorically upon the stage like Paul Dombey. But it is an artistic idea that all the good powers and personalities in the story should set out in pursuit of one insignificant child, to repair an injustice to her, should track her from town to town over England with all the resources of wealth, intelligence, and travel, and should all—arrive too late. All the good fairies and all the kind magicians, all the just kings and all the gallant princes, with chariots and flying dragons, and armies and navies go after one little child who had strayed into a wood, and find her dead. That is the conception which Dickens's artistic instinct was really aiming at when he finally condemned Little Nell to death, after keeping her, so to speak, so long with the rope round her neck. The death of Little Nell is open certainly to the particular denial which its enemies make about it. The death of Little Nell is not pathetic, it is perhaps tragic; it is in reality ironic. Here is a very good case of the injustice to Dickens on his purely literary side. It is not that I say that Dickens achieved what he designed; it is

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that the critics will not see what the design was. They go on talking of the death of Little Nell as if it were a mere example of maudlin description like the death of Little Paul. As a fact it is not described at all ; so it cannot be objectionable. It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to.

In this, in the actual picture of her personality, if you can call it a personality, Dickens did fall into some of his facile vices. The real objection to much of his pathos belongs really to another part of his character. It is connected with his vanity, his voracity for all kinds of praise, his restive experimentalism and even perhaps his envy. He strained himself to achieve pathos. His humour was inspiration ; but his pathos was ambition. His laughter was lonely ; he would have laughed on a desert island. But his grief was gregarious. He liked to move great masses of men, to melt them into tenderness, to play on the people as a great pianist plays on them ; to make them mad or sad. His pathos was to him a way of showing his power ; and for that reason it was really powerless. He could not help making people laugh ; but he tried to make them cry. We come in this novel, as we often do come in his novels, upon hard lumps of unreality, upon a phrase that suddenly sickens. That is always due to his conscious despotism over the delicate feelings ; that is always due to his love of fame as distinct from his love of fun. But it is not true that all Dickens's pathos is like this ; it is not even true that all the passages about Little Nell are like this ; there are two strands almost everywhere and they can be differentiated as the sincere and the deliberate. There is a great difference between Dickens thinking about the tears of his characters and Dickens thinking about the tears of his audience.

When all this is allowed, however, and the exaggerated contempt for the Dickens pathos is properly corrected, the broad fact remains : that to pass from the solemn characters in this book to the comic characters in this book, is to be like some Ulysses who should pass suddenly from the land of shadows to the mountain of the gods. Little Nell has her own position in careful and reasonable criticism : even that wobbling old ass, her grandfather, has his position in it ; perhaps even the dissipated Fred (whom long acquaintance with Mr. Dick Swiveller has not made any less dismal in his dissipation) has a place in it also. But when we come to Swiveller and Sampson Brass and Quilp and Mrs. Jarley, then Fred and Nell and the grandfather simply do not exist. There are no such people in the story. The real hero and heroine of "The Old Curiosity Shop" are of course Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness. It is significant in a sense that these two sane, strong, living and lovable human

beings are the only two, or almost the only two, people in the story who do not run after Little Nell. They have something better to do than to go on that shadowy chase after that cheerless phantom. They have to build up between them a true romance; perhaps the one true romance in the whole of Dickens. Dick Swiveller really has all the half heroic characteristics which make a man respected by a woman and which are the male contribution to virtue. He is brave, magnanimous, sincere about himself, amusing, absurdly hopeful; above all, he is both strong and weak. On the other hand the Marchioness really has all the characteristics, the entirely heroic characteristics which make a woman respected by a man. She is female: that is, she is at once incurably candid and incurably loyal, she is full of terrible common sense, she expects little pleasure for herself and yet she can enjoy bursts of it; above all, she is physically timid and yet she can face anything. All this solid rocky romanticism is really implied in the speech and action of these two characters and can be felt behind them all the time. Because they are the two most absurd people in the book they are also the most vivid, human and imaginable. There are two really fine love affairs in Dickens; and I almost think only two. One is the happy courtship of Swiveller and the Marchioness; the other is the tragic courtship of Toots and Florence Dombey. When Dick Swiveller wakes up in bed and sees the Marchioness playing cribbage he thinks that he and she are a prince and princess in a fairy tale. He thinks right.

I speak thus seriously of such characters with a deliberate purpose; for the frivolous characters of Dickens are taken much too frivolously. It has been quite insufficiently pointed out that all the serious moral ideas that Dickens did contrive to express he expressed altogether through this fantastic medium, in such figures as Swiveller and the little servant. The warmest upholder of Dickens would not go to the solemn or sentimental passages for anything fresh or suggestive in faith or philosophy. No one would pretend that the death of little Dombey (with its "What are the wild waves saying?") told us anything new or real about death. A good Christian dying, one would imagine, not only would not know what the wild waves were saying but would not care. No one would pretend that the repentance of old Paul Dombey throws any light on the psychology or philosophy of repentance. No doubt old Dombey, white-haired and amiable, was a great improvement on old Dombey black-haired and unpleasant. But in his case the softening of the heart seems to bear too close a resemblance to softening of the brain. Whether these serious

passages are as bad as the critical people or as good as the sentimental people find them, at least they do not convey anything in the way of an illuminating glimpse or a bold suggestion about men's moral nature. The serious figures do not tell one anything about the human soul. The comic figures do. Take anything almost at random out of these admirable speeches of Dick Swiveller. Notice, for instance, how exquisitely Dickens has caught a certain very deep and delicate quality at the bottom of this idle kind of man. I mean that odd impersonal sort of intellectual justice, by which the frivolous fellow sees things as they are and even himself as he is; and is above irritation. Mr. Swiveller, you remember, asks the Marchioness whether the Brass family ever talk about him; she nods her head with vivacity. "'Complimentary?' inquired Mr. Swiveller. The motion of the little servant's head altered . . . 'But she says,' continued the little servant, 'that you ain't to be trusted.' 'Well, do you know, Marchioness,' said Mr. Swiveller thoughtfully, 'many people, not exactly professional people, but tradesmen, have had the same idea. The excellent citizen from whom I ordered this beer inclines strongly to that opinion.'"

This philosophical freedom from all resentment, this strange love of truth which seems actually to come through carelessness, is a very real piece of spiritual observation. Even among liars there are two classes, one immeasurably better than another. The honest liar is the man who tells the truth about his old lies; who says on Wednesday, "I told a magnificent lie on Monday." He keeps the truth in circulation; no one version of things stagnates in him and becomes an evil secret. He does not have to live with old lies; a horrible domesticity. Mr. Swiveller may mislead the waiter about whether he has the money to pay; but he does not mislead his friend, and he does not mislead himself on the point. He is quite as well aware as any one can be of the accumulating falsity of the position of a gentleman who by his various debts has closed up all the streets into the Strand except one, and who is going to close that to-night with a pair of gloves. He shuts up the street with a pair of gloves, but he does not shut up his mind with a secret. The traffic of truth is still kept open through his soul.

It is exactly in these absurd characters, then, that we can find a mass of psychological and ethical suggestion. This cannot be found in the serious characters except indeed in some of the later experiments: there is a little of such psychological and ethical suggestion in figures like Gridley, like Jasper, like Bradley Headstone. But in these earlier books at least, such as the "Old

Curiosity Shop," the grave or moral figures throw no light upon morals. I should maintain this generalization even in the presence of that apparent exception "The Christmas Carol" with its trio of didactic ghosts. Charity is certainly splendid, at once a luxury and a necessity; but Dickens is not most effective when he is preaching charity seriously; he is most effective when he is preaching it uproariously; when he is preaching it by means of massive personalities and vivid scenes. One might say that he is best not when he is preaching his human love, but when he is practising it. In his grave pages he tells us to love men; but in his wild pages he creates men whom we can love. By his solemnity he commands us to love our neighbours. By his caricature he makes us love them.

There is an odd literary question which I wonder is not put more often in literature. How far can an author tell a truth without seeing it himself? Perhaps an actual example will express my meaning. I was once talking to a highly intelligent lady about Thackeray's "Newcomes." We were speaking of the character of Mrs. Mackenzie, the Campaigner, and in the middle of the conversation the lady leaned across to me and said in a low, hoarse but emphatic voice, "She drank. Thackeray didn't know it; but she drank." And it is really astonishing what a shaft of white light this sheds on the Campaigner, on her terrible temperament, on her agonized abusiveness and her almost more agonized urbanity, on her clamour which is nevertheless not open or explicable, on her temper which is not so much bad temper as insatiable, bloodthirsty, man-eating temper. How far can a writer thus indicate by accident a truth of which he is himself ignorant? If truth is a plan or pattern of things that really are, or in other words, if truth truly exists outside ourselves, or in other words, if truth exists at all, it must be often possible for a writer to uncover a corner of it which he happens not to understand, but which his reader does happen to understand. The author sees only two lines; the reader sees where they meet and what is the angle. The author sees only an arc or fragment of a curve; the reader sees the size of the circle. The last thing to say about Dickens, and especially about books like "The Old Curiosity Shop," is that they are full of these unconscious truths. The careless reader may miss them. The careless author almost certainly did miss them. But from them can be gathered an impression of real truth to life which is for almost the grave critics of Dickens an unknown benefit, buried treasure. Here for instance is one of them out of "The Old Curiosity Shop," the book now before us. I mean the passage in

which (by a blazing stroke of genius) the dashing Mr. Chuckster, one of the Glorious Apollos of whom Mr. Swiveller was the Perpetual Grand, is made to entertain a hatred bordering upon frenzy for the stolid, patient, respectful and laborious Kit. Now in the formal plan of the story Mr. Chuckster is a fool, and Kit is almost a hero; at least he is a noble boy. Yet unconsciously Dickens made the idiot Chuckster say something profoundly suggestive on the subject. In speaking of Kit Mr. Chuckster makes use of these two remarkable phrases; that Kit is "meek" and that he is "a snob." Now Kit is really a very fresh and manly picture of a boy, firm, sane, chivalrous, reasonable, full of those three great Roman virtues which Mr. Belloc has so often celebrated, *virtus* and *verecundia* and *pietas*. He is a sympathetic but still a straightforward study of the best type of that most respectable of all human classes, the respectable poor. All this is true; all that Dickens utters in praise of Kit is true; nevertheless the awful words of Chuckster remain written on the eternal skies. Kit is meek and Kit is a snob. His natural dignity does include and is partly marred by that instinctive subservience to the employing class which has been the comfortable weakness of the whole English democracy, which has prevented their making any revolution for the last two hundred years. Kit would not serve any wicked man for money, but he would serve any moderately good man and the money would give a certain dignity and decisiveness to the goodness. All this is the English popular evil which goes along with the English popular virtues of geniality, of homeliness, tolerance and strong humour, hope and an enormous appetite for a hand-to-mouth happiness. The scene in which Kit takes his family to the theatre is a monument of the massive qualities of old English enjoyment. If what we want is Merrie England, our antiquarians ought not to revive the Maypole or the Morris Dancers; they ought to revive Astley's and Sadler's Wells and the old solemn Circus and the old stupid Pantomime, and all the sawdust and all the oranges. Of all this strength and joy in the poor, Kit is a splendid and final symbol. But amid all his masculine and English virtue, he has this weak touch of meekness, or acceptance of the powers that be. It is a sound touch; it is a real truth about Kit. But Dickens did not know it. Mr. Chuckster did.

Dickens's stories taken as a whole have more artistic unity than appears at the first glance. It is the immediate impulse of a modern critic to dismiss them as mere disorderly scrap-books with very brilliant scraps. But this is not quite so true as it looks. In one of Dickens's novels there is generally no particular unity of con-

struction ; but there is often a considerable unity of sentiment and atmosphere. Things are irrelevant, but not somehow inappropriate. The whole book is written carelessly ; but the whole book is generally written in one mood. To take a rude parallel from the other arts, we may say that there is not much unity of form, but there is much unity of colour. In most of the novels this can be seen. "Nicholas Nickleby," as I have remarked, is full of a certain freshness, a certain light and open-air curiosity, which irradiates from the image of the young man swinging along the Yorkshire roads in the sun. Hence the comic characters with whom he falls in are comic characters in the same key ; they are a band of strolling players, charlatans and poseurs, but too humane to be called humbugs. In the same way, the central story of "Oliver Twist" is sombre ; and hence even its comic character is almost sombre ; at least he is too ugly to be merely amusing. Mr. Bumble is in some ways a terrible grotesque ; his apoplectic visage recalls the "fire-red Cherubim's face," which added such horror to the height and stature of Chaucer's Sompnour. In both these cases even the riotous and absurd characters are a little touched with the tint of the whole story. But this neglected merit of Dickens can certainly be seen best in the book with which we are now concerned, in "The Old Curiosity Shop."

The curiosity shop itself was a lumber of grotesque and sinister things, outlandish weapons, twisted and diabolic decorations. The comic characters in the book are all like images bought in an old curiosity shop. Quilp might be a gargoyle. He might be some sort of devilish door-knocker, dropped down and crawling about the pavement. The same applies to the sinister and really terrifying stiffness of Sally Brass. She is like some old staring figure cut out of wood. Sampson Brass, her brother, again is a grotesque in the same rather inhuman manner ; he is especially himself when he comes in with the green shade over his eye. About all this group of bad figures in "The Old Curiosity Shop" there is a sort of *diablerie*. There is also within this atmosphere an extraordinary energy of irony and laughter. The scene in which Sampson Brass draws up the description of Quilp, supposing him to be dead, reaches a point of fiendish fun. "We will not say very bandy, Mrs. Jiniwin," he says of his friend's legs, "we will confine ourselves to bandy. He is gone, my friends, where his legs would never be called in question." They go on to the discussion of his nose, and Mrs. Jiniwin inclines to the view that it is flat. "Aquiline, you hag ! Aquiline," cries Mr. Quilp, pushing in his head and striking his nose with his fist. There is nothing better

in the whole brutal exuberance of the character than that gesture with which Quilp punches his own face with his own fist. It is, indeed, a perfect symbol; for Quilp is always fighting himself for want of anybody else. He is energy, and energy by itself is always suicidal; he is that primordial energy which tears and which destroys itself.

G. K. C.

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 Village Coquettes*, comic opera, 1836; *The Strange Gentleman*, comic burletta, 1837; *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 & Son*, etc., monthly numbers, 1846-8; *The Haunted Man, and the Ghost's Bargain*, 1848; *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, monthly numbers, 1849-50; 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*); *Hard Times for these Times*, 1854 (from *Household Words*); *Little Dorrit*, monthly numbers, 1855-7; *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859 (from *All the Year Round*); *Great Expectations*, 1861 (from *All the Year Round*); *Our Mutual Friend*, monthly numbers, 1864-5; *Religious Opinions of the late Rev. Chauncey Hare Townshend*, 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*. First Collective Ed., 1847-74; Library Ed., 1857, etc.; "Charles Dickens" Ed., 1868-70.

Letters, ed. Georgina Hogarth and Mamie Dickens, 1882, 1893; ed. W. Dexter, 3 vols., 1938.

LIFE. J. Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols., 1872-4 (new edition, ed. J. W. T. Ley, 1928); G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, 1906; Sir W. Robertson Nicoll, *Dickens' Own Story*, 1927; R. Straus, *Dickens, a Portrait in Pencil*, 1928; Sir H. F. Dickens, *Memories of my Father*, 1928; E. Wagenknecht, *The Man Charles Dickens*, 1929; Osbert Sitwell, *Dickens*, 1932; Una Pope-Hennessy, *Charles Dickens*, 1945.

See also George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: a Critical Study*, 1898; Sir J. A. Hammerton, *The Dickens Companion*, 1910; G. K. Chesterton, *Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens*, 1911; W. G. Wilkins (ed.), *Dickens in America*, 1911; J. W. T. Ley, *The Dickens Circle: The Novelist's Friendships*, 1919.

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PREFACE

[TO THE FIRST CHEAP EDITION]

IN April, 1840, I issued the first number of a new weekly publication, price threepence, called MASTER HUMPHREY'S CLOCK. It was intended to consist, for the most part, of detached papers, but was to include one continuous story, to be resumed from time to time, with such indefinite intervals between each period of resumption as might best accord with the exigencies and capabilities of the proposed Miscellany.

The first chapter of this tale appeared in the fourth number of MASTER HUMPHREY'S CLOCK, when I had already been made uneasy by the desultory character of that work, and when, I believe, my readers had thoroughly participated in the feeling. The commencement of a story was a great satisfaction to me, and I had reason to believe that my readers participated in this feeling too. Hence, being pledged to some interruptions and some pursuit of the original design, I cheerfully set about disentangling myself from those impediments as fast as I could; and, that done, from that time until its completion THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP was written and published from week to week, in weekly parts.

When the story was finished, that it might be freed from the incumbrance of associations and interruptions with which it had no kind of concern, I caused the few sheets of MASTER HUMPHREY'S CLOCK, which had been printed in connexion with it, to be cancelled; and, like the unfinished tale of the windy night and the notary in The Sentimental Journey, they became the property of the trunk-maker and buttermilk. I was especially unwilling, I confess, to enrich those respectable trades with the paper of the abandoned design, in which MASTER HUMPHREY described himself and his manner of life. Though I now affect to make the confession philosophically, as referring to a by-gone emotion, I am conscious that my pen winces a little even while I write these words. But it was done, and wisely done, and MASTER HUMPHREY'S CLOCK, as originally constructed, became one of the lost books of the earth—which, we all know, are far more precious than any that can be read for love or money.

In reference to the tale itself, I desire to say very little here.

The many friends it has won me, and the many hearts it has turned to me when they were full of private sorrow, invest it with an interest, in my mind, which is not a public one, and the rightful place of which appears to be "a more removed ground."

I will merely observe, therefore, that, in writing the book, I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first fore-shadowed.

MASTER HUMPHREY (before his devotion to the trunk and butter business) was originally supposed to be the narrator of the story. As it was constructed from the beginning, however, with a view to separate publication when completed, his demise has not involved the necessity of any alteration.

I have a mournful pride in one recollection associated with "little Nell." While she was yet upon her wanderings, not then concluded, there appeared in a literary journal, an essay of which she was the principal theme, so earnestly, so eloquently, and tenderly appreciative of her, and of all her shadowy kith and kin, that it would have been insensibility in me, if I could have read it without an unusual glow of pleasure and encouragement. Long afterwards, and when I had come to know him well, and to see him, stout of heart, going slowly down into his grave, I knew the writer of that essay to be THOMAS HOOD.

LONDON, *September*, 1848.

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

CHAPTER I

NIGHT is generally my time for walking. In the summer I often leave home early in the morning, and roam about fields and lanes all day, or even escape for days or weeks together, but saving in the country I seldom go out until after dark, though, Heaven be thanked, I love its light and feel the cheerfulness it sheds upon the earth, as much as any creature living.

I have fallen insensibly into this habit, both because it favours my infirmity and because it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets. The glare and hurry of broad noon are not adapted to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the daylight, and, if I must add the truth, night is kinder in this respect than day, which too often destroys an air-built castle at the moment of its completion, without the smallest ceremony or remorse.

That constant pacing to and fro, that never-ending restlessness, that incessant tread of feet wearing the rough stones smooth and glossy—is it not a wonder how the dwellers in narrow ways can bear to hear it! Think of a sick man in such a place as Saint Martin's Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child's step from the man's, the slipshod beggar from the booted exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick tread of an expectant pleasure-seeker—think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come.

Then the crowds for ever passing and repassing on the

bridges (on those which are free of toll at least) where many stop on fine evenings looking listlessly down upon the water with some vague idea that by-and-by it runs between green banks which grow wider and wider until at last it joins the broad vast sea—where some halt to rest from heavy loads and think as they look over the parapet that to smoke and lounge away one's life, and lie sleeping in the sun upon a hot tarpaulin, in a dull slow sluggish barge, must be happiness unalloyed—and where some, and a very different class, pause with heavier loads than they, remembering to have heard or read in some old time that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and best.

Covent Garden Market at sunrise too, in the spring or summer, when the fragrance of sweet flowers is in the air, overpowering even the unwholesome streams of last night's debauchery, and driving the dusky thrush, whose cage has hung outside a garret window all night long, half mad with joy! Poor bird! the only neighbouring thing at all akin to the other little captives, some of whom, shrinking from the hot hands of drunken purchasers, lie drooping on the path already, while others, soddened by close contact, await the time when they shall be watered and freshened up to please more sober company, and make old clerks who pass them on their road to business, wonder what has filled their breasts with visions of the country.

But my present purpose is not to expatiate upon my walks. An adventure which I am about to relate, and to which I shall recur at intervals, arose out of one of these rambles, and thus I have been led to speak of them by way of preface.

One night I had roamed into the City, and was walking slowly on in my usual way, musing upon a great many things, when I was arrested by an inquiry, the purport of which did not reach me, but which seemed to be addressed to myself, and was preferred in a soft sweet voice that struck me very pleasantly. I turned hastily round and found at my elbow a pretty little girl, who begged to be directed to a certain street at a considerable distance, and indeed in quite another quarter of the town.

"It is a very long way from here," said I, "my child."

"I know that, sir," she replied timidly. "I am afraid it is a very long way, for I came from there to-night."

"Alone?" said I, in some surprise.

"Oh yes, I don't mind that, but I am a little frightened now, for I have lost my road."

"And what made you ask it of me? Suppose I should tell you wrong."

"I am sure you will not do that," said the little creature, "you are such a very old gentleman, and walk so slow yourself."

I cannot describe how much I was impressed by this appeal and the energy with which it was made, which brought a tear into the child's clear eye, and made her slight figure tremble as she looked up into my face.

"Come," said I, "I'll take you there."

She put her hand in mine as confidently as if she had known me from her cradle, and we trudged away together: the little creature accommodating her pace to mine, and rather seeming to lead and take care of me than I to be protecting her. I observed that every now and then she stole a curious look at my face as if to make quite sure that I was not deceiving her, and that these glances (very sharp and keen they were too) seemed to increase her confidence at every repetition.

For my part, my curiosity and interest were at least equal to the child's, for child she certainly was, although I thought it probable from what I could make out, that her very small and delicate frame imparted a peculiar youthfulness to her appearance. Though more scantily attired than she might have been she was dressed with perfect neatness, and betrayed no marks of poverty or neglect.

"Who has sent you so far by yourself?" said I.

"Somebody who is very kind to me, sir."

"And what have you been doing?"

"That, I must not tell," said the child firmly.

There was something in the manner of this reply which caused me to look at the little creature with an involuntary expression of surprise; for I wondered what kind of errand it might be that occasioned her to be prepared for questioning. Her quick eye seemed to read my thoughts, for as it met mine she added that there was no harm in what she had been doing, but it was a great secret—a secret which she did not even know herself.

This was said with no appearance of cunning or deceit, but with an unsuspecting frankness that bore the impress of truth. She walked on as before, growing more familiar with me as we proceeded and talking cheerfully by the