



## THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP



CHARLES DICKENS  
1812-1870

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CHARLES DICKENS



*With an Introduction by*

R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON



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## CHARLES DICKENS

CHARLES JOHN HUFFAM DICKENS was born at Portsea on February 7th, 1812, the second child of John Dickens, a minor clerk in the Navy Pay Office (then at Portsmouth) and of his wife Elizabeth, nee Barrow.

Owing to his father's congenial incapacity to manage his financial affairs, Charles Dickens' childhood was spent under the shadow of economic insecurity, a shadow that grew darker year by year as the family moved, first to London, then to Chatham and from there back to London, and which at one time (early in 1842) threatened to blot out for ever all prospects the boy might have had of a successful career. At that time the steadily declining family fortunes had reached their nadir with the arrest of John Dickens and his removal to the debtors' prison of the Marshalsea. Mrs. Dickens with four of her children went to join her husband in prison, and young Charles was sent to work at a blacking factory, where for six shillings a week he had to stick labels on pots of paste-blackening. Those few months were for Dickens a time of utter misery, humiliation and despair, the memory of which, as he later confessed, he could never quite shake off. However, a timely legacy came to the rescue. It enabled John Dickens to leave prison and to send his son to a school at Hampstead—he had had some previous schooling at Chatham—where he remained for two or three years.

In 1827, at the age of fifteen, he entered a solicitor's office as a junior clerk. This position, though by no means well paid, enabled him to establish a certain independence for himself, to make his own friends and to indulge his taste for the theatre which he was to retain all his life.

Having taught himself shorthand, he became (in 1829) a reporter in one of the offices of 'Doctors' Commons,' advancing a year later to the position of a parliamentary reporter, and further still to that of a newspaper reporter on the *Morning Chronicle* at the respectable salary of five guineas a week.

In 1833 he wrote his first sketch for the *Old Monthly Magazine*; other sketches followed quickly, and a year later the name of 'Boz' was attached to them. In 1836 the first series of *Sketches by Boz* appeared in volume form. Their success was immediate. The same year Dickens married Catherine Hogarth. The same

year also Chapman & Hall commissioned him to write the letter-press for a projected series of Cockney sporting plates by the caricature artist Seymour. Dickens 'thought of Pickwick' and this was the origin of the *Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* by which Dickens established his fame for all time. They appeared first in twenty monthly instalments, beginning in April, 1836, and were subsequently published in book form in 1837.

Dickens' rise from obscurity and relative poverty to a position of unique eminence and of wealth was spectacular and dramatic in its suddenness. Within a very few years of the appearance of *Pickwick* he had become the most popular novelist this country had yet known; more than that, he had become a public institution. Book followed book, and his literary activity was henceforth not to cease until the very eve of his death some thirty years later.

*Oliver Twist* came out in 1838; *Nicholas Nickleby* followed a year later. *Master Humphrey's Clock*, in three volumes containing *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* appeared in 1841.

In 1842 Dickens, accompanied by his wife, made his first tour to the United States and Canada. After his return in 1842 he published *American Notes* and in 1843 *Martin Chuzzlewit*, both works reflecting in a not very complimentary manner some of the author's impressions of America. 1843 also saw the appearance of *A Christmas Carol*, the first of Dickens' Christmas books which he continued later with *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, etc.

Dickens lived with his ever growing family—in all ten children were born to him during his married life which ended in 1858 by separation from his wife—at successive residences in London, and finally at Gad's Hill near Gravesend which had been the dream place of his childhood.

He travelled a good deal abroad, staying at—among other places—Genoa (1844-45), Lausanne, Paris (1846) and Boulogne (during the summers of 1853-56).

He reached the height of his literary fame with *David Copperfield* in which he drew his father's caricatured portrait as Mr. Micawber. Shortly after its publication in 1849 Dickens re-entered journalism with the founding of the weekly magazine *Household Words* of which he was chief owner, editor and contributor. In 1859 he replaced the magazine by another almost identical one called *All the Year Round* which he continued to edit until his death.

His next main works after *David Copperfield* were *Bleak House* (1853), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *The*

*Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) and *Great Expectations* (1861).

In later years, under the relentless pressure of work and of the many activities which his restless nature imposed on him, his health began to suffer. In 1858 he had instituted public readings of his own works on a professional basis, a venture which proved an immediate and outstanding success but which perhaps more than anything else undermined his constitution. His second American tour as reader of his own works was one long triumphal—and exhausting—march. His health broke down completely in 1869, and he died from a cerebral stroke at Gad's Hill Place on June 9th, 1870, leaving behind unfinished his last work *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. He was buried in Westminster Abbey.

H. d. R.





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## INTRODUCTION

WE have most of us, I believe, an uneasy conviction that, after all, the judgments of the gallery are often right. Yet we continue to feel ashamed should any one find us "among the gods."

Now Dickens was never ashamed of playing to the gallery; and if this was to some extent due to his personal vanity and greediness for applause, it was far more fundamentally due to his great love for all mankind. No doubt he was a snob—as we all are at heart; but no man ever revealed so genuine and profound a spontaneous affection for the underdog.

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, his love of the stage is illustrated from the primitive drama-forms of Punch and Judy, "Grinder's lot," and the immortal wax-works of Mrs. Jarley; the whole story, in structure and sideplay, has all the quality and atmosphere of an old-fashioned pantomime, such as still delight children and the simpler portions of humanity.

Dickens has here taken even less trouble than usual to put his characters in their place, or to restrain the characters themselves. Quilp was never meant for a man. His delightful habits of tossing off raw spirit on the boil, and hiding himself in the clouds of smoke from his own pipe, are transparently stage tricks. He darts in and out of the tale like some hideous merry devil, often dashing, or peeping, into a conversation for no other purpose than to exercise his passion for laughing at virtue on the rack. It would be absurd to mistake him for a human being; and to despair of our common nature on his account.

Certainly "naughty Whisker" learned to "run off at a sharp angle to inspect lamp-posts" on the sawdust; as Sally Brass picked up her hats and her manners in the green-room. Mr. Garland's nosegays were first handed across the footlights; so were the single gentleman's miraculous trunk, and his mysterious cooker. It would be impossible for so many good people to have passed their lives losing Little Nell; had not the actor-manager provided them with a special supply of "doors, right and left."

Now, such flagrant disregard of real life or human nature; such perpetual scene-shifting; so much putting on of false noses and false beards; such constant interruption of the narrative; such

mingling of laughter and tears; have always been a riot of joy to the crowd.

Dickens knew his business. Dare we say he was not a master of the art that alone can draw big houses? They are quick enough to hoot down failures, but they never "damned" anything from him.

Yet there is more in *The Old Curiosity Shop* than this. Our first impressions of Kit Nubbles, spiritual son of Samuel Smiles, would place him beside Jo, Smirk, and other human Dog Trusties. But he is saved from that somewhat wearisome type of humble fidelity by his healthy independence and manly wooing of pretty Barbara. Because he could dream of Nell and marry another lady, he achieves humanity—and our applause. Finally, it is towards the real hero and heroine, towards Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness, that superior persons and the mob are driven, for once, to look up with equal, if not similar, admiration. There were never, surely, two more perfect human absurdities, well on the down-grade to farce, created for any gallery's delight. They eat and drink like young savages, sing foolish songs and throw "any old things" about the stage, they weep and kiss, in the approved manner of conventional comics. Yet the most highbrow of critics has accepted them as creations of the subtlest art.

I have sometimes myself felt rather uneasy about the part assigned to volatile Dick in the opening chapters. I do not like to think of him as playing the spy, toadying to that inexpressible cad, Nell's degenerate twin, selling his soul—as it were—for a drink. Yet, after all, this is true to life and to human nature. These genial, kind-hearted irresponsibles never stop to think. They seldom realise the consequences, or even the meaning, of what they do. Too often they are driven, without either intention or knowledge, to acts of meanness and even cruelty, utterly foreign to what remains of honour and manhood in their tattered composition.

Dick Swiveller, moreover, is never overtaken by remorse: he is not converted from his evil ways. His unexpectedly good deeds, his real kindness and gratitude towards the "little servant," his sense of honour and fair play towards Kit, only reveal the fact that no human being was ever born without some fundamental virtue, which the occasion will prove chivalrous and heroic.

Dickens so well loved this genial reprobate, that he understood him, and so far held on to the art of creation that he gave him virtue without the slightest detraction from his inherent comedy. He is as natural and as charming a rogue when virtuous as in his wildest, wickedest mood.

But what can we say of Little Nell? We must accept, and

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endeavour to understand, the fact, that she was beloved and wept over as a queen of pathos. Those terrible child-saints (with their simple tears, merry laughter, and precocious worldly wisdom), whom Dickens delighted to portray, were actually, to those first captured by his vivid humanity, one of the chief props of his success.

The public that can still hiss villains, and shout with joy at a noble speech from the manly hero, will probably believe in Little Nell even to-day. We recall the sweet, persecuted, young golden-hair of the melodrama singing her simple ditty amidst the foul-mouthed, murdering ruffians of the West, beside the bar in some evil-smelling shack. Her voice breaks over the last verse; and, as she sinks fainting to the floor, that handsome fellow, whose rough and tattered exterior would not deceive a babe in arms, quickly steps "up centre," lifts the poor little figure—so gently—in his strong arms, flinging these hoarse words across the footlights, "She, too, once had a Home!"

To us, inevitably, the atmosphere reeks of the artificial: the false sentimentality and hysterical tears, that seem so hopelessly banal.

But, after all, a large portion of the human race are themselves, I often fancy, no more complex beings than those we dismiss as theatrical. Dickens, himself, lived emotionally, to a large extent on the stage. Take Little Nell's soft hand in yours, listen awhile to her simple prattle, look down into her blue eyes; and, if I mistake not, you will feel instinctively that she is, after all, a real child. You may resent the tears you are bidden weep for her; you may scoff at her "real friend" and turn your back on the simple school-master; you will certainly be seized with a strong desire to fling off and trample under your foot that tiresome old gambling grandfather, whom the "little woman" is wearing herself out to guide and protect. But forget yourself; and remember that the silliest of clowns who ever tumbled for your diversion may have a sick wife and a doctor's bill for his undoing; that the loveliest child-fairy who ever danced into your heart at pantomime-time may *really* not have enough to eat.

In other words, go and live "in the wings" for an hour or two, without a thought of how it is all made up; and you will realise that Dickens, even in his merriest moments, has a tragic heart beneath the powder and paint.

Dickens thus conquers his own worst art, and justifies his most obvious cheap effects, by investing them with that unformed, sharp yet primitive humanity, which is at once real life and a "trick of the trade," to those who play small parts on the stage—

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and in the world. The mingling of pure pantomime with the subtlest truth to human nature has surely gone to the making of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and made it truly great.

R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON.

**ALTHOUGH** I am an old man, night is generally my time for walking. In the summer I often leave home early in the morning, and roam about the 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 least 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 St. 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 steams 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. The story I am about to relate 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