

THE UNCOMMERCIAL TRAVELLER

The Uncommercial Traveller is a collection of Dickens's memories rather than of his literary purposes; but it is due to him to say that memory is often more startling in him than prophecy in anybody else. They have the character which belongs to all his vivid incidental writing: that they attach themselves always to some text which is a fact rather than an idea. He was one of those sons of Eve who are fonder of the Tree of Life than of the Tree of Knowledge--even of the knowledge of good and of evil. He was in this profoundest sense a realist. Critics have talked of an artist with his eye on the object. Dickens as an essayist always had his eye on an object before he had the faintest notion of a subject. All these works of his can best be considered as letters; they are notes of personal travel, scribbles in a diary about this or that that really happened. But Dickens was one of the few men who have the two talents that are the whole of literature--and have them both together. First, he could make a thing happen over again; and second, he could make it happen better. He can be called exaggerative; but mere exaggeration conveys nothing of his typical talent. Mere whirlwinds of words, mere melodramas of earth and heaven do not affect us as Dickens affects us, because they are exaggerations of nothing. If asked for an exaggeration of something, their inventors would be entirely dumb. They would not know how to exaggerate a broom-stick; for the life of them they could not exaggerate a tenpenny nail. Dickens always began with the nail or the broom-stick. He always began with a fact even when he was most fanciful; and even when he drew the long bow

he was careful to hit the white.

This riotous realism of Dickens has its disadvantage--a disadvantage that comes out more clearly in these casual sketches than in his constructed romances. One grave defect in his greatness is that he was altogether too indifferent to theories. On large matters he went right by the very largeness of his mind; but in small matters he suffered from the lack of any logical test and ready reckoner. Hence his comment upon the details of civilisation or reform are sometimes apt to be jerky and jarring, and even grossly inconsistent. So long as a thing was heroic enough to admire, Dickens admired it; whenever it was absurd enough to laugh at he laughed at it: so far he was on sure ground. But about all the small human projects that lie between the extremes of the sublime and the ridiculous, his criticism was apt to have an accidental quality. As Matthew Arnold said of the remarks of the Young Man from the Country about the perambulator, they are felt not to be at the heart of the situation. On a great many occasions the Uncommercial Traveller seems, like other hasty travellers, to be criticising elements and institutions which he has quite inadequately understood; and once or twice the Uncommercial Traveller might almost as well be a Commercial Traveller for all he knows of the countryside.

An instance of what I mean may be found in the amusing article about the nightmares of the nursery. Superficially read it might almost be taken to mean that Dickens disapproved of ghost stories--disapproved of that old and genial horror which nurses can hardly supply fast enough for the

children who want it. Dickens, one would have thought, should have been the last man in the world to object to horrible stories, having himself written some of the most horrible that exist in the world. The author of the Madman's Manuscript, of the disease of Monk and the death of Krook, cannot be considered fastidious in the matter of revolting realism or of revolting mysticism. If artistic horror is to be kept from the young, it is at least as necessary to keep little boys from reading Pickwick or Bleak House as to refrain from telling them the story of Captain Murderer or the terrible tale of Chips. If there was something appalling in the rhyme of Chips and pips and ships, it was nothing compared to that infernal refrain of "Mudstains, bloodstains" which Dickens himself, in one of his highest moments of hellish art, put into Oliver Twist.

I take this one instance of the excellent article called "Nurse's Stories" because it is quite typical of all the rest. Dickens (accused of superficiality by those who cannot grasp that there is foam upon deep seas) was really deep about human beings; that is, he was original and creative about them. But about ideas he did tend to be a little superficial. He judged them by whether they hit him, and not by what they were trying to hit. Thus in this book the great wizard of the Christmas ghosts seems almost the enemy of ghost stories; thus the almost melodramatic moralist who created Ralph Nickleby and Jonas Chuzzlewit cannot see the point in original sin; thus the great denouncer of official oppression in England may be found far too indulgent to the basest aspects of the modern police. His theories were less important than his creations, because he was a man of genius. But

he himself thought his theories the more important, because he was a man.