

## PICTURES FROM ITALY

The Pictures from Italy are excellent in themselves and excellent as a foil to the American Notes. Here we have none of that air of giving a decision like a judge or sending in a report like an inspector; here we have only glimpses, light and even fantastic glimpses, of a world that is really alien to Dickens. It is so alien that he can almost entirely enjoy it. For no man can entirely enjoy that which he loves; contentment is always unpatriotic. The difference can indeed be put with approximate perfection in one phrase. In Italy he was on a holiday; in America he was on a tour. But indeed Dickens himself has quite sufficiently conveyed the difference in the two phrases that he did actually use for the titles of the two books. Dickens often told unconscious truths, especially in small matters. The American Notes really are notes, like the notes of a student or a professional witness. The Pictures from Italy are only pictures from Italy, like the miscellaneous pictures that all tourists bring from Italy.

To take another and perhaps closer figure of speech, almost all Dickens's works such as these may best be regarded as private letters addressed to the public. His private correspondence was quite as brilliant as his public works; and many of his public works are almost as formless and casual as his private correspondence. If he had been struck insensible for a year, I really think that his friends and family could have brought out one of his best books by themselves if they had

happened to keep his letters. The homogeneity of his public and private work was indeed strange in many ways. On the one hand, there was little that was pompously and unmistakably public in the publications; on the other hand, there was very little that was private in the private letters. His hilarity had almost a kind of hardness about it; no man's letters, I should think, ever needed less expurgation on the ground of weakness or undue confession. The main part, and certainly the best part, of such a book as *Pictures from Italy* can certainly be criticised best as part of that perpetual torrent of entertaining autobiography which he flung at his children as if they were his readers and his readers as if they were his children. There are some brilliant patches of sense and nonsense in this book; but there is always something accidental in them; as if they might have occurred somewhere else. Perhaps the most attractive of them is the incomparable description of the Italian Marionette Theatre in which they acted a play about the death of Napoleon in St. Helena. The description is better than that of Codlin and Short's *Punch and Judy*, and almost as good as that of Mrs. Jarley's *Wax Works*. Indeed the humour is similar; for *Punch* is supposed to be funny, but Napoleon (as Mrs. Jarley said when asked if her show was funnier than *Punch*) was not funny at all. The idea of a really tragic scene being enacted between tiny wooden dolls with large heads is delightfully dealt with by Dickens. We can almost imagine the scene in which the wooden Napoleon haughtily rebukes his wooden jailor for calling him General Bonaparte--"Sir Hudson Low, call me not thus; I am Napoleon, Emperor of the French." There is also something singularly gratifying about the scene of Napoleon's death, in which he lay in bed

with his little wooden hands outside the counterpane and the doctor (who was hung on wires too short) "delivered medical opinions in the air." It may seem flippant to dwell on such flippancies in connection with a book which contains many romantic descriptions and many moral generalisations which Dickens probably valued highly. But it is not for such things that he is valued. In all his writings, from his most reasoned and sustained novel to his maddest private note, it is always this obstreperous instinct for farce which stands out as his in the highest sense. His wisdom is at the best talent, his foolishness is genius. Just that exuberant levity which we associate with a moment we associate in his case with immortality. It is said of certain old masonry that the mortar was so hard that it has survived the stones. So if Dickens could revisit the thing he built, he would be surprised to see all the work he thought solid and responsible wasted almost utterly away, but the shortest frivolities and the most momentary jokes remaining like colossal rocks for ever.