

## CHRISTMAS BOOKS

The mystery of Christmas is in a manner identical with the mystery of Dickens. If ever we adequately explain the one we may adequately explain the other. And indeed, in the treatment of the two, the chronological or historical order must in some degree be remembered. Before we come to the question of what Dickens did for Christmas we must consider the question of what Christmas did for Dickens. How did it happen that this bustling, nineteenth-century man, full of the almost cock-sure common-sense of the utilitarian and liberal epoch, came to associate his name chiefly in literary history with the perpetuation of a half pagan and half Catholic festival which he would certainly have called an antiquity and might easily have called a superstition? Christmas has indeed been celebrated before in English literature; but it had, in the most noticeable cases, been celebrated in connection with that kind of feudalism with which Dickens would have severed his connection with an ignorant and even excessive scorn. Sir Roger de Coverley kept Christmas; but it was a feudal Christmas. Sir Walter Scott sang in praise of Christmas; but it was a feudal Christmas. And Dickens was not only indifferent to the dignity of the old country gentleman or to the genial archæology of Scott; he was even harshly and insolently hostile to it. If Dickens had lived in the neighbourhood of Sir Roger de Coverley he would undoubtedly, like Tom Touchy, have been always "having the law of him." If Dickens had stumbled in among the old armour and quaint folios of Scott's study he would certainly have read his brother novelist a

lesson in no measured terms about the futility of thus fumbling in the dust-bins of old oppression and error. So far from Dickens being one of those who like a thing because it is old, he was one of those cruder kind of reformers, in theory at least, who actually dislike a thing because it is old. He was not merely the more righteous kind of Radical who tries to uproot abuses; he was partly also that more suicidal kind of Radical who tries to uproot himself. In theory at any rate, he had no adequate conception of the importance of human tradition; in his time it had been twisted and falsified into the form of an opposition to democracy. In truth, of course, tradition is the most democratic of all things, for tradition is merely a democracy of the dead as well as the living. But Dickens and his special group or generation had no grasp of this permanent position; they had been called to a special war for the righting of special wrongs. In so far as such an institution as Christmas was old, Dickens would even have tended to despise it. He could never have put the matter to himself in the correct way--that while there are some things whose antiquity does prove that they are dying, there are some other things whose antiquity only proves that they cannot die. If some Radical contemporary and friend of Dickens had happened to say to him that in defending the mince-pies and the mummeries of Christmas he was defending a piece of barbaric and brutal ritualism, doomed to disappear in the light of reason along with the Boy-Bishop and the Lord of Misrule, I am not sure that Dickens (though he was one of the readiest and most rapid masters of reply in history) would have found it very easy upon his own principles to answer. It was by a great ancestral instinct that he defended Christmas; by that sacred

sub-consciousness which is called tradition, which some have called a dead thing, but which is really a thing far more living than the intellect. There is a dark kinship and brotherhood of all mankind which is much too deep to be called heredity or to be in any way explained in scientific formulæ; blood is thicker than water and is especially very much thicker than water on the brain. But this unconscious and even automatic quality in Dickens's defence of the Christmas feast, this fact that his defence might almost be called animal rather than mental, though in proper language it should be called merely virile; all this brings us back to the fact that we must begin with the atmosphere of the subject itself. We must not ask Dickens what Christmas is, for with all his heat and eloquence he does not know. Rather we must ask Christmas what Dickens is--ask how this strange child of Christmas came to be born out of due time.

Dickens devoted his genius in a somewhat special sense to the description of happiness. No other literary man of his eminence has made this central human aim so specially his subject matter. Happiness is a mystery--generally a momentary mystery--which seldom stops long enough to submit itself to artistic observation, and which, even when it is habitual, has something about it which renders artistic description almost impossible. There are twenty tiny minor poets who can describe fairly impressively an eternity of agony; there are very few even of the eternal poets who can describe ten minutes of satisfaction.

Nevertheless, mankind being half divine is always in love with the impossible, and numberless attempts have been made from the beginning of

human literature to describe a real state of felicity. Upon the whole, I think, the most successful have been the most frankly physical and symbolic; the flowers of Eden or the jewels of the New Jerusalem. Many writers, for instance, have called the gold and chrysolite of the Holy City a vulgar lump of jewellery. But when these critics themselves attempt to describe their conceptions of future happiness, it is always some priggish nonsense about "planes," about "cycles of fulfilment," or "spirals of spiritual evolution." Now a cycle is just as much a physical metaphor as a flower of Eden; a spiral is just as much a physical metaphor as a precious stone. But, after all, a garden is a beautiful thing; whereas this is by no means necessarily true of a cycle, as can be seen in the case of a bicycle. A jewel, after all, is a beautiful thing; but this is not necessarily so of a spiral, as can be seen in the case of a corkscrew. Nothing is gained by dropping the old material metaphors, which did hint at heavenly beauty, and adopting other material metaphors which do not even give a hint of earthly beauty. This modern or spiral method of describing indescribable happiness may, I think, be dismissed. Then there has been another method which has been adopted by many men of a very real poetical genius. It was the method of the old pastoral poets like Theocritus. It was in another way that adopted by the elegance and piety of Spenser. It was certainly expressed in the pictures of Watteau; and it had a very sympathetic and even manly expression in modern England in the decorative poetry of William Morris. These men of genius, from Theocritus to Morris, occupied themselves in endeavouring to describe happiness as a state of certain human beings, the atmosphere of a commonwealth, the enduring climate of certain cities

or islands. They poured forth treasures of the truest kind of imagination upon describing the happy lives and landscapes of Utopia or Atlantis or the Earthly Paradise. They traced with the most tender accuracy the tracery of its fruit-trees or the glimmering garments of its women; they used every ingenuity of colour or intricate shape to suggest its infinite delight. And what they succeeded in suggesting was always its infinite melancholy. William Morris described the Earthly Paradise in such a way that the only strong emotional note left on the mind was the feeling of how homeless his travellers felt in that alien Elysium; and the reader sympathised with them, feeling that he would prefer not only Elizabethan England but even twentieth-century Camberwell to such a land of shining shadows. Thus literature has almost always failed in endeavouring to describe happiness as a state. Human tradition, human custom and folk-lore (though far more true and reliable than literature as a rule) have not often succeeded in giving quite the correct symbols for a real atmosphere of camaraderie and joy. But here and there the note has been struck with the sudden vibration of the vox humana. In human tradition it has been struck chiefly in the old celebrations of Christmas. In literature it has been struck chiefly in Dickens's Christmas tales.

In the historic celebration of Christmas as it remains from Catholic times in certain northern countries (and it is to be remembered that in Catholic times the northern countries were, if possible, more Catholic than anybody else), there are three qualities which explain, I think,

its hold upon the human sense of happiness, especially in such men as Dickens. There are three notes of Christmas, so to speak, which are also notes of happiness, and which the pagans and the Utopians forget. If we state what they are in the case of Christmas, it will be quite sufficiently obvious how important they are in the case of Dickens.

The first quality is what may be called the dramatic quality. The happiness is not a state; it is a crisis. All the old customs surrounding the celebration of the birth of Christ are made by human instinct so as to insist and re-insist upon this crucial quality. Everything is so arranged that the whole household may feel, if possible, as a household does when a child is actually being born in it. The thing is a vigil and a vigil with a definite limit. People sit up at night until they hear the bells ring. Or they try to sleep at night in order to see their presents the next morning. Everywhere there is a limitation, a restraint; at one moment the door is shut, at the moment after it is opened. The hour has come or it has not come; the parcels are undone or they are not undone; there is no evolution of Christmas presents. This sharp and theatrical quality in pleasure, which human instinct and the mother wit of the world has wisely put into the popular celebrations of Christmas, is also a quality which is essential in such romantic literature as Dickens wrote. In romantic literature the hero and heroine must indeed be happy, but they must also be unexpectedly happy. This is the first connecting link between literature and the old religious feast; this is the first connecting link between Dickens and Christmas.

The second element to be found in all such festivity and all such romance is the element which is represented as well as it could be represented by the mere fact that Christmas occurs in the winter. It is the element not merely of contrast, but actually of antagonism. It preserves everything that was best in the merely primitive or pagan view of such ceremonies or such banquets. If we are carousing, at least we are warriors carousing. We hang above us, as it were, the shields and battle-axes with which we must do battle with the giants of the snow and hail. All comfort must be based on discomfort. Man chooses when he wishes to be most joyful the very moment when the whole material universe is most sad. It is this contradiction and mystical defiance which gives a quality of manliness and reality to the old winter feasts which is not characteristic of the sunny felicities of the Earthly Paradise. And this curious element has been carried out even in all the trivial jokes and tasks that have always surrounded such occasions as these. The object of the jovial customs was not to make everything artificially easy: on the contrary, it was rather to make everything artificially difficult. Idealism is not only expressed by shooting an arrow at the stars; the fundamental principle of idealism is also expressed by putting a leg of mutton at the top of a greasy pole. There is in all such observances a quality which can be called only the quality of divine obstruction. For instance, in the game of snapdragon (that admirable occupation) the conception is that raisins taste much nicer if they are brands saved from the burning. About all Christmas things there is something a little nobler, if only nobler in form and

theory, than mere comfort; even holly is prickly. It is not hard to see the connection of this kind of historic instinct with a romantic writer like Dickens. The healthy novelist must always play snapdragon with his principal characters; he must always be snatching the hero and heroine like raisins out of the fire.

The third great Christmas element is the element of the grotesque. The grotesque is the natural expression of joy; and all the Utopias and new Edens of the poets fail to give a real impression of enjoyment, very largely because they leave out the grotesque. A man in most modern Utopias cannot really be happy; he is too dignified. A man in Morris's *Earthly Paradise* cannot really be enjoying himself; he is too decorative. When real human beings have real delights they tend to express them entirely in grotesques--I might almost say entirely in goblins. On Christmas Eve one may talk about ghosts so long as they are turnip ghosts. But one would not be allowed (I hope, in any decent family) to talk on Christmas Eve about astral bodies. The boar's head of old Yule-time was as grotesque as the donkey's head of Bottom the Weaver. But there is only one set of goblins quite wild enough to express the wild goodwill of Christmas. Those goblins are the characters of Dickens.

Arcadian poets and Arcadian painters have striven to express happiness by means of beautiful figures. Dickens understood that happiness is best expressed by ugly figures. In beauty, perhaps, there is something allied to sadness; certainly there is something akin to joy in the grotesque,



may, in the uncouth. There is something mysteriously associated with happiness not only in the corpulence of Falstaff and the corpulence of Tony Weller, but even in the red nose of Bardolph or the red nose of Mr. Stiggins. A thing of beauty is an inspiration for ever--a matter of meditation for ever. It is rather a thing of ugliness that is strictly a joy for ever.

All Dickens's books are Christmas books. But this is still truest of his two or three famous Yuletide tales--The Christmas Carol and The Chimes and The Cricket on the Hearth. Of these The Christmas Carol is beyond comparison the best as well as the most popular. Indeed, Dickens is in so profound and spiritual a sense a popular author that in his case, unlike most others, it can generally be said that the best work is the most popular. It is for Pickwick that he is best known; and upon the whole it is for Pickwick that he is best worth knowing. In any case this superiority of The Christmas Carol makes it convenient for us to take it as an example of the generalisations already made. If we study the very real atmosphere of rejoicing and of riotous charity in The Christmas Carol we shall find that all the three marks I have mentioned are unmistakably visible. The Christmas Carol is a happy story first, because it describes an abrupt and dramatic change. It is not only the story of a conversion, but of a sudden conversion; as sudden as the conversion of a man at a Salvation Army meeting. Popular religion is quite right in insisting on the fact of a crisis in most things. It is true that the man at the Salvation Army meeting would probably be converted from the punch bowl; whereas Scrooge was converted

to it. That only means that Scrooge and Dickens represented a higher and more historic Christianity.

Again, The Christmas Carol owes much of its hilarity to our second source--the fact of its being a tale of winter and of a very wintry winter. There is much about comfort in the story; yet the comfort is never enervating: it is saved from that by a tingle of something bitter and bracing in the weather. Lastly, the story exemplifies throughout the power of the third principle--the kinship between gaiety and the grotesque. Everybody is happy because nobody is dignified. We have a feeling somehow that Scrooge looked even uglier when he was kind than he had looked when he was cruel. The turkey that Scrooge bought was so fat, says Dickens, that it could never have stood upright. That top-heavy and monstrous bird is a good symbol of the top-heavy happiness of the stories.

It is less profitable to criticise the other two tales in detail because they represent variations on the theme in two directions; and variations that were not, upon the whole, improvements. The Chimes is a monument of Dickens's honourable quality of pugnacity. He could not admire anything, even peace, without wanting to be warlike about it. That was all as it should be.