

BLEAK HOUSE

Bleak House is not certainly Dickens's best book; but perhaps it is his best novel. Such a distinction is not a mere verbal trick; it has to be remembered rather constantly in connection with his work. This particular story represents the highest point of his intellectual maturity. Maturity does not necessarily mean perfection. It is idle to say that a mature potato is perfect; some people like new potatoes. A mature potato is not perfect, but it is a mature potato; the mind of an intelligent epicure may find it less adapted to his particular purpose; but the mind of an intelligent potato would at once admit it as being, beyond all doubt, a genuine, fully developed specimen of his own particular species. The same is in some degree true even of literature. We can say more or less when a human being has come to his full mental growth, even if we go so far as to wish that he had never come to it. Children are very much nicer than grown-up people; but there is such a thing as growing up. When Dickens wrote Bleak House he had grown up.

Like Napoleon, he had made his army on the march. He had walked in front of his mob of aggressive characters as Napoleon did in front of the half-baked battalions of the Revolution. And, like Napoleon, he won battle after battle before he knew his own plan of campaign; like Napoleon, he put the enemies' forces to rout before he had put his own force into order. Like Napoleon, he had a victorious army almost before he had an army. After his decisive victories Napoleon began to put his

house in order; after his decisive victories Dickens also began to put his house in order. The house, when he had put it in order, was Bleak House.

There was one thing common to nearly all the other Dickens tales, with the possible exception of *Dombey and Son*. They were all rambling tales; and they all had a perfect right to be. They were all rambling tales for the very simple reason that they were all about rambling people. They were novels of adventure; they were even diaries of travel. Since the hero strayed from place to place, it did not seem unreasonable that the story should stray from subject to subject. This is true of the bulk of the novels up to and including *David Copperfield*, up to the very brink or threshold of *Bleak House*. Mr. Pickwick wanders about on the white English roads, always looking for antiquities and always finding novelties. Poor *Oliver Twist* wanders along the same white roads to seek his fortune and to find his misfortune. *Nicholas Nickleby* goes walking across England because he is young and hopeful; Little Nell's grandfather does the same thing because he is old and silly. There is not much in common between Samuel Pickwick and *Oliver Twist*; there is not much in common between *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*; there is not much in common (let us hope) between Little Nell's grandfather and any other human being. But they all have this in common, that they may actually all have trodden in each other's footprints. They were all wanderers on the face of the same fair English land. *Martin Chuzzlewit* was only made popular by the travels of the hero in America. When we come to *Dombey and Son* we find, as I have said, an exception; but even

here it is odd to note the fact that it was an exception almost by accident. In Dickens's original scheme of the story, much greater prominence was to have been given to the travels and trials of Walter Gay; in fact, the young man was to have had a deterioration of character which could only have been adequately detailed in him in his character of a vagabond and a wastrel. The most important point, however, is that when we come to David Copperfield, in some sense the summit of his serious literature, we find the thing still there. The hero still wanders from place to place, his genius is still gipsy. The adventures in the book are less violent and less improbable than those which wait for Pickwick and Nicholas Nickleby; but they are still adventures and not merely events; they are still things met on a road. The facts of the story fall away from David as such facts do fall away from a traveller walking fast. We are more likely perhaps, to pass by Mr. Creakle's school than to pass by Mrs. Jarley's wax-works. The only point is that we should pass by both of them. Up to this point in Dickens's development, his novel, however true, is still picaresque; his hero never really rests anywhere in the story. No one seems really to know where Mr. Pickwick lived. Here he has no abiding city.

When we come to Bleak House, we come to a change in artistic structure. The thing is no longer a string of incidents; it is a cycle of incidents. It returns upon itself; it has recurrent melody and poetic justice; it has artistic constancy and artistic revenge. It preserves the unities; even to some extent it preserves the unities of time and place. The story circles round two or three symbolic places; it

does not go straggling irregularly all over England like one of Mr. Pickwick's coaches. People go from one place to another place; but not from one place to another place on the road to everywhere else. Mr. Jarndyce goes from Bleak House to visit Mr. Boythorn; but he comes back to Bleak House. Miss Clare and Miss Summerson go from Bleak House to visit Mr. and Mrs. Bayham Badger; but they come back to Bleak House. The whole story strays from Bleak House and plunges into the foul fogs of Chancery and the autumn mists of Chesney Wold; but the whole story comes back to Bleak House. The domestic title is appropriate; it is a permanent address.

Dickens's openings are almost always good; but the opening of Bleak House is good in a quite new and striking sense. Nothing could be better, for instance, than the first foolish chapter about the genealogy of the Chuzzlewits; but it has nothing to do with the Chuzzlewits. Nothing could be better than the first chapter of David Copperfield; the breezy entrance and banging exit of Miss Betsy Trotwood. But if there is ultimately any crisis or serious subject-matter of David Copperfield, it is the marred marriage with Dora, the final return to Agnes; and all this is in no way involved in the highly-amusing fact that his aunt expected him to be a girl. We may repeat that the matter is picaresque. The story begins in one place and ends in another place, and there is no real connection between the beginning and the end except a biographical connection.

A picaresque novel is only a very eventful biography; but the opening of

Bleak House is quite another business altogether. It is admirable in quite another way. The description of the fog in the first chapter of Bleak House is good in itself; but it is not merely good in itself, like the description of the wind in the opening of Martin Chuzzlewit; it is also good in the sense that Maeterlinck is good; it is what the modern people call an atmosphere. Dickens begins in the Chancery fog because he means to end in the Chancery fog. He did not begin in the Chuzzlewit wind because he meant to end in it; he began in it because it was a good beginning. This is perhaps the best short way of stating the peculiarity of the position of Bleak House. In this Bleak House beginning we have the feeling that it is not only a beginning; we have the feeling that the author sees the conclusion and the whole. The beginning is alpha and omega: the beginning and the end. He means that all the characters and all the events shall be read through the smoky colours of that sinister and unnatural vapour.

The same is true throughout the whole tale; the whole tale is symbolic and crowded with symbols. Miss Flite is a funny character, like Miss La Creevy, but Miss La Creevy means only Miss La Creevy. Miss Flite means Chancery. The rag-and-bone man, Krook, is a powerful grotesque; so is Quilp; but in the story Quilp only means Quilp; Krook means Chancery. Rick Carstone is a kind and tragic figure, like Sidney Carton; but Sidney Carton only means the tragedy of human nature; Rick Carstone means the tragedy of Chancery. Little Jo dies pathetically like Little Paul; but for the death of Little Paul we can only blame Dickens; for the death of Little Jo we blame Chancery. Thus the artistic unity of the

book, compared to all the author's earlier novels, is satisfying, almost suffocating. There is the motif, and again the motif. Almost everything is calculated to assert and re-assert the savage morality of Dickens's protest against a particular social evil. The whole theme is that which another Englishman as jovial as Dickens defined shortly and finally as the law's delay. The fog of the first chapter never lifts.

In this twilight he traced wonderful shapes. Those people who fancy that Dickens was a mere clown; that he could not describe anything delicate or deadly in the human character,--those who fancy this are mostly people whose position is explicable in many easy ways. The vast majority of the fastidious critics have, in the quite strict and solid sense of the words, never read Dickens at all; hence their opposition is due to and inspired by a hearty innocence which will certainly make them enthusiastic Dickensians if they ever, by some accident, happen to read him. In other cases it is due to a certain habit of reading books under the eye of a conventional critic, admiring what we expect to admire, regretting what we are told to regret, waiting for Mr. Bumble to admire him, waiting for Little Nell to despise her. Yet again, of course, it is sometimes due to that basest of all artistic indulgences (certainly far baser than the pleasure of absinthe or the pleasure of opium), the pleasure of appreciating works of art which ordinary men cannot appreciate. Surely the vilest point of human vanity is exactly that; to ask to be admired for admiring what your admirers do not admire. But whatever be the reason, whether rude or subtle, which has prevented any particular man from personally admiring Dickens, there is in connection

with a book like Bleak House something that may be called a solid and impressive challenge. Let anyone who thinks that Dickens could not describe the semi-tones and the abrupt instincts of real human nature simply take the trouble to read the stretch of chapters which detail the way in which Carstone's mind grew gradually morbid about his chances in Chancery. Let him note the manner in which the mere masculinity of Carstone is caught; how as he grows more mad he grows more logical, nay, more rational. Good women who love him come to him, and point out the fact that Jarndyce is a good man, a fact to them solid like an object of the senses. In answer he asks them to understand his position. He does not say this; he does not say that. He only urges that Jarndyce may have become cynical in the affair in the same sense that he himself may have become cynical in the affair. He is always a man; that is to say, he is always unanswerable, always wrong. The passionate certainty of the woman beats itself like battering waves against the thin smooth wall of his insane consistency. I repeat: let any one who thinks that Dickens was a gross and indelicate artist read that part of the book. If Dickens had been the clumsy journalist that such people represent, he never could have written such an episode at all. A clumsy journalist would have made Rick Carstone in his mad career cast off Esther and Ada and the others. The great artist knew better. He knew that even if all the good in a man is dying, the last sense that dies is the sense that knows a good woman from a bad; it is like the scent of a noble hound.

The clumsy journalist would have made Rick Carstone turn on John Jarndyce with an explosion of hatred, as of one who had made an

exposure--who had found out what low people call "a false friend" in what they call "his true colours." The great artist knew better; he knew that a good man going wrong tries to salve his soul to the last with the sense of generosity and intellectual justice. He will try to love his enemy if only out of mere love of himself. As the wolf dies fighting, the good man gone wrong dies arguing. This is what constitutes the true and real tragedy of Richard Carstone. It is strictly the one and only great tragedy that Dickens wrote. It is like the tragedy of Hamlet. The others are not tragedies because they deal almost with dead men. The tragedy of old Dorrit is merely the sad spectacle of a dotard dragged about Europe in his last childhood. The tragedy of Steerforth is only that of one who dies suddenly; the tragedy of old Dombey only that of one who was dead all the time. But Rick is a real tragedy, for he is still alive when the quicksand sucks him down.

It is impossible to avoid putting in the first place this pall of smoke which Dickens has deliberately spread over the story. It is quite true that the country underneath is clear enough to contain any number of unconscious comedians or of merry monsters such as he was in the custom of introducing into the carnival of his tales. But he meant us to take the smoky atmosphere seriously. Charles Dickens, who was, like all men who are really funny about funny things, horribly serious about serious things, certainly meant us to read this story in terms of his protest and his insurrection against the emptiness and arrogance of law, against the folly and the pride of judges. Everything else that there is in this story entered into it through the unconscious or accidental energy of

his genius, which broke in at every gap. But it was the tragedy of Richard Carstone that he meant, not the comedy of Harold Skimpole. He could not help being amusing; but he meant to be depressing.

Another case might be taken as testing the greater seriousness of this tale. The passages about Mrs. Jellyby and her philanthropic schemes show Dickens at his best in his old and more familiar satiric manner. But in the midst of the Jellyby pandemonium, which is in itself described with the same abandon and irrelevance as the boarding-house of Mrs. Todgers or the travelling theatre of Mr. Crummles, the elder Dickens introduced another piece of pure truth and even tenderness. I mean the account of Caddy Jellyby. If Carstone is a truly masculine study of how a man goes wrong, Caddy is a perfectly feminine study of how a girl goes right. Nowhere else perhaps in fiction, and certainly nowhere else in Dickens, is the mere female paradox so well epitomised, the unjust use of words covering so much capacity for a justice of ultimate estimate; the seeming irresponsibility in language concealing such a fixed and pitiless sense of responsibility about things; the air of being always at daggers-drawn with her own kindred, yet the confession of incurable kinship implied in pride and shame; and, above all, that thirst for order and beauty as for something physical; that strange female power of hating ugliness and waste as good men can only hate sin and bad men virtue. Every touch in her is true, from her first bewildering outbursts of hating people because she likes them, down to the sudden quietude and good sense which announces that she has slipped into her natural place as a woman. Miss Clare is a figure-head, Miss Summerson in some ways a

failure; but Miss Caddy Jellyby is by far the greatest, the most human, and the most really dignified of all the heroines of Dickens.

With one or two exceptions, all the effects in this story are of this somewhat quieter kind, though none of them are so subtly successful as Rick Carstone and Caddy. Harold Skimpole begins as a sketch drawn with a pencil almost as airy and fanciful as his own. The humour of the earlier scenes is delightful--the scenes in which Skimpole looks on at other people paying his debts with the air of a kindly outsider, and suggests in formless legal phraseology that they might "sign something" or "make over something," or the scene in which he tries to explain the advantages of accepting everything to the apoplectic Mr. Boythorn. But it was one of the defects of Dickens as a novelist that his characters always became coarser and clumsier as they passed through the practical events of a story, and this would necessarily be so with Skimpole, whose position was conceivable even to himself only on the assumption that he was a mere spectator of life. Poor Skimpole only asked to be kept out of the business of this world, and Dickens ought to have kept him out of the business of Bleak House. By the end of the tale he has brought Skimpole to doing acts of mere low villainy. This altogether spoils the ironical daintiness of the original notion. Skimpole was meant to end with a note of interrogation. As it is, he ends with a big, black, unmistakable blot. Speaking purely artistically, we may say that this is as great a collapse or vulgarisation as if Richard Carstone had turned into a common blackguard and wife-beater, or Caddy Jellyby into a comic and illiterate landlady. Upon the whole it may, I think, be said that

the character of Skimpole is rather a piece of brilliant moralising than of pure observation or creation. Dickens had a singularly just mind. He was wild in his caricatures, but very sane in his impressions. Many of his books were devoted, and this book is partly devoted, to a denunciation of aristocracy--of the idle class that lives easily upon the toil of nations. But he was fairer than many modern revolutionists, and he insisted on satirising also those who prey on society not in the name of rank or law, but in the name of intellect and beauty. Sir Leicester Dedlock and Mr. Harold Skimpole are alike in accepting with a royal unconsciousness the anomaly and evil of their position. But the idleness and insolence of the aristocrat is human and humble compared to the idleness and insolence of the artist.

With the exception of a few fine freaks, such as Turveydrop and Chadband, all the figures in this book are touched more delicately, even more faintly, than is common with Dickens. But if the figures are touched more faintly, it is partly because they are figures in a fog--the fog of Chancery. Dickens meant that twilight to be oppressive; for it was the symbol of oppression. Deliberately he did not dispel the darkness at the end of this book, as he does dispel it at the end of most of his books. Pickwick gets out of the Fleet Prison; Carstone never gets out of Chancery but by death. This tyranny, Dickens said, shall not be lifted by the light subterfuge of a fiction. This tyranny shall never be lifted till all Englishmen lift it together.