

chains did fall from Mr. Rouncewell the Iron-master. And when they fell from him he picked them up and put them upon the poor.

## LITTLE DORRIT

Little Dorrit stands in Dickens's life chiefly as a signal of how far he went down the road of realism, of sadness, and of what is called modernity. True, it was by no means the best of the books of his later period; some even think it the worst. *Great Expectations* is certainly the best of the later novels; some even think it the best of all the novels. Nor is it the novel most concerned with strictly recent problems; that title must be given to *Hard Times*. Nor again is it the most finely finished or well constructed of the later books; that claim can be probably made for *Edwin Drood*. By a queer verbal paradox the most carefully finished of his later tales is the tale that is not finished at all. In form, indeed, the book bears a superficial resemblance to those earlier works by which the young Dickens had set the whole world laughing long ago. Much of the story refers to a remote time early in the nineteenth century; much of it was actually recalled and copied from the life of Dickens's father in the old Marshalsea prison. Also the narrative has something of the form, or rather absence of form, which belonged to *Nicholas Nickleby* or *Martin Chuzzlewit*. It has something of the old air of being a string of disconnected adventures, like a boy's book about bears and Indians. The Dorrits go

wandering for no particular reason on the Continent of Europe, just as young Martin Chuzzlewit went wandering for no particular reason on the continent of America. The story of Little Dorrit stops and lingers at the doors of the Circumlocution Office much in the same way that the story of Samuel Pickwick stops and lingers in the political excitement of Eatanswill. The villain, Blandois, is a very stagey villain indeed; quite as stagey as Ralph Nickleby or the mysterious Monk. The secret of the dark house of Clennam is a very silly secret; quite as silly as the secret of Ralph Nickleby or the secret of Monk. Yet all these external similarities between Little Dorrit and the earliest books, all this loose, melodramatic quality, only serves to make more obvious and startling the fact that some change has come over the soul of Dickens. Hard Times is harsh; but then Hard Times is a social pamphlet; perhaps it is only harsh as a social pamphlet must be harsh. Bleak House is a little sombre; but then Bleak House is almost a detective story; perhaps it is only sombre in the sense that a detective story must be sombre. A Tale of Two Cities is a tragedy; but then A Tale of Two Cities is a tale of the French Revolution; perhaps it is only a tragedy because the French Revolution was a tragedy. The Mystery of Edwin Drood is dark; but then the mystery of anybody must be dark. In all these other cases of the later books an artistic reason can be given--a reason of theme or of construction for the slight sadness that seems to cling to them. But exactly because Little Dorrit is a mere Dickens novel, it shows that something must somehow have happened to Dickens himself. Even in resuming his old liberty, he cannot resume his old hilarity. He can re-create the anarchy, but not the revelry.

It so happens that this strange difference between the new and the old mode of Dickens can be symbolised and stated in one separate and simple contrast. Dickens's father had been a prisoner in a debtors' prison, and Dickens's works contain two pictures partly suggested by the personality of that prisoner. Mr. Micawber is one picture of him. Mr. Dorrit is another. This truth is almost incredible, but it is the truth. The joyful Micawber, whose very despair was exultant, and the desolate Dorrit, whose very pride was pitiful, were the same man. The valiant Micawber and the nervous, shaking Dorrit were the same man. The defiant Micawber and the snobbish, essentially obsequious Dorrit were the same man. I do not mean of course that either of the pictures was an exact copy of anybody. The whole Dickens genius consisted of taking hints and turning them into human beings. As he took twenty real persons and turned them into one fictitious person, so he took one real person and turned him into twenty fictitious persons. This quality would suggest one character, that quality would suggest another. But in this case, at any rate, he did take one real person and turn him into two. And what is more, he turned him into two persons who seem to be quite opposite persons. To ordinary readers of Dickens, to say that Micawber and Dorrit had in any sense the same original, will appear unexpected and wild. No conceivable connection between the two would ever have occurred to anybody who had read Dickens with simple and superficial enjoyment, as all good literature ought to be read. It will seem to them just as silly as saying that the Fat Boy and Mr. Alfred Jingle were both copied from the same character. It will seem as insane as saying that the

character of Smike and the character of Major Bagstock were both copied from Dickens's father. Yet it is an unquestionable historical fact that Micawber and Dorrit were both copied from Dickens's father, in the only sense that any figures in good literature are ever copied from anything or anybody. Dickens did get the main idea of Micawber from his father; and that idea is that a poor man is not conquered by the world. And Dickens did get the main idea of Dorrit from his father; and that idea is that a poor man may be conquered by the world. I shall take the opportunity of discussing, in a moment, which of these ideas is true. Doubtless old John Dickens included both the gay and the sad moral; most men do. My only purpose here is to point out that Dickens drew the gay moral in 1849, and the sad moral in 1857.

There must have been some real sadness at this time creeping like a cloud over Dickens himself. It is nothing that a man dwells on the darkness of dark things; all healthy men do that. It is when he dwells on the darkness of bright things that we have reason to fear some disease of the emotions. There must really have been some depression when a man can only see the sad side of flowers or the sad side of holidays or the sad side of wine. And there must be some depression of an uncommonly dark and genuine character when a man has reached such a point that he can see only the sad side of Mr. Wilkins Micawber.

Yet this is in reality what had happened to Dickens about this time. Staring at Wilkins Micawber he could see only the weakness and the tragedy that was made possible by his indifference, his indulgence, and

his bravado. He had already indeed been slightly moved towards this study of the feebleness and ruin of the old epicurean type with which he had once sympathised, the type of Bob Sawyer or Dick Swiveller. He had already attacked the evil of it in Bleak House in the character of Harold Skimpole, with its essentially cowardly carelessness and its highly selfish communism. Nevertheless, as I have said before, it must have been no small degree of actual melancholia which led Dickens to look for a lesson of disaster and slavery in the very same career from which he had once taught lessons of continual recuperation and a kind of fantastic freedom. There must have been at this time some melancholy behind the writings. There must have existed on this earth at the time that portent and paradox--a somewhat depressed Dickens.

Perhaps it was a reminiscence of that metaphorical proverb which tells us that "truth lies at the bottom of a well." Perhaps these people thought that the only way to find truth in the well was to drown oneself. But on whatever thin theoretic basis, the type and period of George Gissing did certainly consider that Dickens, so far as he went, was all the worse for the optimism of the story of Micawber; hence it is not unnatural that they should think him all the better for the comparative pessimism of the story of Little Dorrit. The very things in the tale that would naturally displease the ordinary admirers of Dickens, are the things which would naturally please a man like George Gissing. There are many of these things, but one of them emerges pre-eminent and unmistakable. This is the fact that when all is said and done the main business of the story of Little Dorrit is to describe

the victory of circumstances over a soul. The circumstances are the financial ruin and long imprisonment of Edward Dorrit; the soul is Edward Dorrit himself. Let it be granted that the circumstances are exceptional and oppressive, are denounced as exceptional and oppressive, are finally exploded and overthrown; still, they are circumstances. Let it be granted that the soul is that of a man perhaps weak in any case and retaining many merits to the last, still it is a soul. Let it be granted, above all, that the admission that such spiritual tragedies do occur does not decrease by so much as an iota our faith in the validity of any spiritual struggle. For example, Stevenson has made a study of the breakdown of a good man's character under a burden for which he is not to blame, in the tragedy of Henry Durie in *The Master of Ballantrae*. Yet he has added, in the mouth of Mackellar, the exact common sense and good theology of the matter, saying "It matters not a jot; for he that is to pass judgment upon the records of our life is the same that formed us in frailty." Let us concede then all this, and the fact remains that the study of the slow demoralisation of a man through mere misfortune was not a study congenial to Dickens, not in accordance with his original inspiration, not connected in any manner with the special thing that he had to say. In a word, the thing is not quite a part of himself; and he was not quite himself when he did it.

He was still quite a young man; his depression did not come from age. In fact, as far as I know, mere depression never does come from mere age. Age can pass into a beautiful reverie. Age can pass into a sort of beautiful idiocy. But I do not think that the actual decline and close

of our ordinary vitality brings with it any particular heaviness of the spirits. The spirits of the old do not as a rule seem to become more and more ponderous until they sink into the earth. Rather the spirits of the old seem to grow lighter and lighter until they float away like thistledown. Wherever there is the definite phenomenon called depression, it commonly means that something else has been closer to us than so normal a thing as death. There has been disease, bodily or mental, or there has been sin, or there has been some struggle or effort, breaking past the ordinary boundaries of human custom. In the case of Dickens there had been two things that are not of the routine of a wholesome human life; there had been the quarrel with his wife, and there had been the strain of incessant and exaggerated intellectual labour. He had not an easy time; and on top of that (or perhaps rather at the bottom of it) he had not an easy nature. Not only did his life necessitate work, but his character necessitated worry about work; and that combination is always one which is very dangerous to the temperament which is exposed to it. The only people who ought to be allowed to work are the people who are able to shirk. The only people who ought to be allowed to worry are the people who have nothing to worry about. When the two are combined, as they were in Dickens, you are very likely to have at least one collapse. Little Dorrit is a very interesting, sincere, and fascinating book. But for all that, I fancy it is the one collapse.

The complete proof of this depression may be difficult to advance; because it will be urged, and entirely with reason, that the actual

examples of it are artistic and appropriate. Dickens, the Gissing school will say, was here pointing out certain sad truths of psychology; can any one say that he ought not to point them out? That may be; in any case, to explain depression is not to remove it. But the instances of this more sombre quality of which I have spoken are not very hard to find. The thing can easily be seen by comparing a book like *Little Dorrit* with a book like *David Copperfield*. *David Copperfield* and *Arthur Clennam* have both been brought up in unhappy homes, under bitter guardians and a black, disheartening religion. It is the whole point of *David Copperfield* that he has broken out of a Calvinistic tyranny which he cannot forgive. But it is the whole point of *Arthur Clennam* that he has not broken out of the Calvinistic tyranny, but is still under its shadow. *Copperfield* has come from a gloomy childhood; *Clennam*, though forty years old, is still in a gloomy childhood. When *David* meets the *Murdstones* again it is to defy them with the health and hilarious anger that go with his happy delirium about *Dora*. But when *Clennam* re-enters his sepulchral house there is a weight upon his soul which makes it impossible for him to answer, with any spirit, the morbidities of his mother, or even the grotesque interferences of *Mr. Flintwinch*. This is only another example of the same quality which makes the Dickens of *Little Dorrit* insist on the degradation of the debtor, while the Dickens of *David Copperfield* insisted on his splendid irresponsibility, his essential emancipation. Imprisonments passed over *Micawber* like summer clouds. But the imprisonment in *Little Dorrit* is like a complete natural climate and environment; it has positively modified the shapes and functions of the animals that dwell in it. A



horrible thing has happened to Dickens; he has almost become an Evolutionist. Worse still, in studying the Calvinism of Mrs. Clennam's house, he has almost become a Calvinist. He half believes (as do some of the modern scientists) that there is really such a thing as "a child of wrath," that a man on whom such an early shadow had fallen could never shake it off. For ancient Calvinism and modern Evolutionism are essentially the same things. They are both ingenious logical blasphemies against the dignity and liberty of the human soul.

The workmanship of the book in detail is often extremely good. The one passage in the older and heartier Dickens manner (I mean the description of the Circumlocution Office) is beyond praise. It is a complete picture of the way England is actually governed at this moment. The very core of our politics is expressed in the light and easy young Barnacle who told Clennam with a kindly frankness that he, Clennam, would "never go on with it." Dickens hit the mark so that the bell rang when he made all the lower officials, who were cads, tell Clennam coldly that his claim was absurd, until the last official, who is a gentleman, tells him genially that the whole business is absurd. Even here, perhaps, there is something more than the old exuberant derision of Dickens; there is a touch of experience that verges on scepticism. Everywhere else, certainly, there is the note which I have called Calvinistic; especially in the predestined passion of Tattycoram or the incurable cruelty of Miss Wade. Even Little Dorrit herself had, we are told, one stain from her prison experience; and it is spoken of like a bodily stain; like something that cannot be washed away.

There is no denying that this is Dickens's dark moment. It adds enormously to the value of his general view of life that such a dark moment came. He did what all the heroes and all the really happy men have done; he descended into Hell. Nor is it irreverent to continue the quotation from the Creed, for in the next book he was to write he was to break out of all these dreams of fate and failure, and with his highest voice to speak of the triumph of the weak of this world. His next book was to leave us saying, as Sydney Carton mounted the scaffold, words which, splendid in themselves, have never been so splendidly quoted--"I am the Resurrection and the Life; whoso believeth in Me though he be dead yet he shall live." In Sydney Carton at least, Dickens shows none of that dreary submission to the environment of the irrevocable that had for an instant lain on him like a cloud. On this occasion he sees with the old heroic clearness that to be a failure may be one step to being a saint. On the third day he rose again from the dead.

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

As an example of Dickens's literary work, *A Tale of Two Cities* is not wrongly named. It is his most typical contact with the civic ideals of Europe. All his other tales have been tales of one city. He was in spirit a Cockney; though that title has been quite unreasonably twisted to mean a cad. By the old sound and proverbial test a Cockney was a man