

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND

Our Mutual Friend marks a happy return to the earlier manner of Dickens at the end of Dickens's life. One might call it a sort of Indian summer of his farce. Those who most truly love Dickens love the earlier Dickens; and any return to his farce must be welcomed, like a young man come back from the dead. In this book indeed he does not merely return to his farce; he returns in a manner to his vulgarity. It is the old democratic and even uneducated Dickens who is writing here. The very title is illiterate. Any priggish pupil teacher could tell Dickens that there is no such phrase in English as "our mutual friend." Any one could tell Dickens that "our mutual friend" means "our reciprocal friend," and that "our reciprocal friend" means nothing. If he had only had all the solemn advantages of academic learning (the absence of which in him was lamented by the Quarterly Review), he would have known better. He would have known that the correct phrase for a man known to two people is "our common friend." But if one calls one's friend a common friend, even that phrase is open to misunderstanding.

I dwell with a gloomy pleasure on this mistake in the very title of the book because I, for one, am not pleased to see Dickens gradually absorbed by modern culture and good manners. Dickens, by class and genius, belonged to the kind of people who do talk about a "mutual friend"; and for that class there is a very great deal to be said. These two things can at least be said--that this class does understand the

meaning of the word "friend" and the meaning of the word "mutual." I know that for some long time before he had been slowly and subtly sucked into the whirlpool of the fashionable views of later England. I know that in Bleak House he treats the aristocracy far more tenderly than he treats them in David Copperfield. I know that in A Tale of Two Cities, having come under the influence of Carlyle, he treats revolution as strange and weird, whereas under the influence of Cobbett he would have treated it as obvious and reasonable. I know that in The Mystery of Edwin Drood he not only praised the Minor Canon of Cloisterham at the expense of the dissenting demagogue, Honeythunder; I know that he even took the last and most disastrous step in the modern English reaction. While blaming the old Cloisterham monks (who were democratic), he praised the old-world peace that they had left behind them--an old-world peace which is simply one of the last amusements of aristocracy. The modern rich feel quite at home with the dead monks. They would have felt anything but comfortable with the live ones. I know, in short, how the simple democracy of Dickens was gradually dimmed by the decay and reaction of the middle of the nineteenth century. I know that he fell into some of the bad habits of aristocratic sentimentalism. I know that he used the word "gentleman" as meaning good man. But all this only adds to the unholy joy with which I realise that the very title of one of his best books was a vulgarism. It is pleasant to contemplate this last unconscious knock in the eye for the gentility with which Dickens was half impressed. Dickens is the old self-made man; you may take him or leave him. He has its disadvantages and its merits. No university man would have written the title; no university man could

have written the book.

If it were a mere matter of the accident of a name it would not be worth while thus to dwell on it, even as a preface. But the title is in this respect typical of the tale. The novel called *Our Mutual Friend* is in many ways a real reaction towards the earlier Dickens manner. I have remarked that *Little Dorrit* was a reversion to the form of the first books, but not to their spirit; *Our Mutual Friend* is a reversion to the spirit as well as the form. Compare, for instance, the public figures that make a background in each book. Mr. Merdle is a commercial man having no great connection with the plot; similarly Mr. Podsnap is a commercial man having no great connection with the plot. This is altogether in the spirit of the earlier books; the whole point of an early Dickens novel was to have as many people as possible entirely unconnected with the plot. But exactly because both studies are irrelevant, the contrast between them can be more clearly perceived. Dickens goes out of his way to describe Merdle; and it is a gloomy description. But Dickens goes out of his way to describe Podsnap, and it is a happy and hilarious description. It recalls the days when he hunted great game; when he went out of his way to entrap such adorable monsters as Mr. Pecksniff or Mr. Vincent Crummles. With these wild beings we never bother about the cause of their coming. Such guests in a story may be uninvited, but they are never de trop. They earn their night's lodging in any tale by being so uproariously amusing; like little Tommy Tucker in the legend, they sing for their supper. This is really the marked truth about *Our Mutual Friend*, as a stage in the singular

latter career of Dickens. It is like the leaping up and flaming of a slowly dying fire. The best things in the book are in the old best manner of the author. They have that great Dickens quality of being something which is pure farce and yet which is not superficial; an unfathomable farce--a farce that goes down to the roots of the universe. The highest compliment that can ever be paid to the humour of Dickens is paid when some lady says, with the sudden sincerity of her sex, that it is "too silly." The phrase is really a perfectly sound and acute criticism. Humour does consist in being too silly, in passing the borderland, in breaking through the floor of sense and falling into some starry abyss of nonsense far below our ordinary human life. This "too silly" quality is really present in *Our Mutual Friend*. It is present in *Our Mutual Friend* just as it is present in *Pickwick*, or *Martin Chuzzlewit*; just as it is not present in *Little Dorrit* or in *Hard Times*. Many tests might be employed. One is the pleasure in purely physical jokes--jokes about the body. The general dislike which every one felt for Mr. Stiggins's nose is of the same kind as the ardent desire which Mr. Lamble felt for Mr. Fledgeby's nose. "Give me your nose, Sir," said Mr. Lamble. That sentence alone would be enough to show that the young Dickens had never died.

The opening of a book goes for a great deal. The opening of *Our Mutual Friend* is much more instinctively energetic and light-hearted than that of any of the other novels of his concluding period. Dickens had always enough optimism to make his stories end well. He had not, in his later years, always enough optimism to make them begin well. Even Great

Expectations, the saddest of his later books, ends well; it ends well in spite of himself, who had intended it to end badly. But if we leave the evident case of good endings and take the case of good beginnings, we see how much *Our Mutual Friend* stands out from among the other novels of the evening or the end of Dickens. The tale of *Little Dorrit* begins in a prison. One of the prisoners is a villain, and his villainy is as dreary as the prison; that might matter nothing. But the other prisoner is vivacious, and even his vivacity is dreary. The first note struck is sad. In the tale of *Edwin Drood* the first scene is in an opium den, suffocated with every sort of phantasy and falsehood. Nor is it true that these openings are merely accidental; they really cast their shadow over the tales. The people of *Little Dorrit* begin in prison; and it is the whole point of the book that people never get out of prison. The story of *Edwin Drood* begins amid the fumes of opium, and it never gets out of the fumes of opium. The darkness of that strange and horrible smoke is deliberately rolled over the whole story. Dickens, in his later years, permitted more and more his story to take the cue from its inception. All the more remarkable, therefore, is the real jerk and spurt of good spirits with which he opens *Our Mutual Friend*. It begins with a good piece of rowdy satire, wildly exaggerated and extremely true. It belongs to the same class as the first chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, with its preposterous pedigree of the Chuzzlewit family, or even the first chapter of *Pickwick*, with its immortal imbecilities about the Theory of Tittlebats and Mr. Blotton of Aldgate. Doubtless the early satiric chapter in *Our Mutual Friend* is of a more strategic and ingenious kind of satire than can be found in these early

and explosive parodies. Still, there is a quality common to both, and that quality is the whole of Dickens. It is a quality difficult to define--hence the whole difficulty of criticising Dickens. Perhaps it can be best stated in two separate statements or as two separate symptoms. The first is the mere fact that the reader rushes to read it. The second is the mere fact that the writer rushed to write it.

This beginning, which is like a burst of the old exuberant Dickens, is, of course, the Veneering dinner-party. In its own way it is as good as anything that Dickens ever did. There is the old faculty of managing a crowd, of making character clash with character, that had made Dickens not only the democrat but even the demagogue of fiction. For if it is hard to manage a mob, it is hardest of all to manage a swell mob. The particular kind of chaos that is created by the hospitality of a rich upstart has perhaps never been so accurately and outrageously described. Every touch about the thing is true; to this day any one can test it if he goes to a dinner of this particular kind. How admirable, for instance, is the description of the way in which all the guests ignored the host; how the host and hostess peered and gaped for some stray attention as if they had been a pair of poor relations. Again, how well, as a matter of social colour, the distinctions between the type and tone of the guests are made even in the matter of this unguestlike insolence. How well Dickens distinguishes the ill-bred indifference of Podsnap from the well-bred indifference of Mortimer Lightwood and Eugene Wrayburn. How well he distinguishes the bad manners of the merchant from the equally typical bad manners of the gentleman. Above all, how well he

catches the character of the creature who is really the master of all these: the impenetrable male servant. Nowhere in literature is the truth about servants better told. For that truth is simply this: that the secret of aristocracy is hidden even from aristocrats. Servants, butlers, footmen, are the high priests who have the real dispensation; and even gentlemen are afraid of them. Dickens was never more right than when he made the new people, the Veneerings, employ a butler who despised not only them but all their guests and acquaintances. The admirable person called the Analytical Chemist shows his perfection particularly in the fact that he regards all the sham gentlemen and all the real gentlemen with the same gloomy and incurable contempt. He offers wine to the offensive Podsnap or the shrieking Tippins with a melancholy sincerity and silence; but he offers his letter to the aristocratic and unconscious Mortimer with the same sincerity and with the same silence. It is a great pity that the Analytical Chemist only occurs in two or three scenes of this excellent story. As far as I know, he never really says a word from one end of the book to the other; but he is one of the best characters in Dickens.

Round the Veneering dinner-table are collected not indeed the best characters in Dickens, but certainly the best characters in *Our Mutual Friend*. Certainly one exception must be made. Fledgeby is unaccountably absent. There was really no reason why he should not have been present at a dinner-party given by the Veneerings and including the Lammles. His money was at least more genuine than theirs. If he had been present the party would really have included all that is important in *Our Mutual*

Friend. For indeed, outside Mr. Fledgeby and the people at the dinner-party, there is something a little heavy and careless about the story. Mr. Silas Wegg is really funny; and he serves the purpose of a necessary villain in the plot. But his humour and his villainy seem to have no particular connection with each other; when he is not scheming he seems the last man likely to scheme. He is rather like one of Dickens's agreeable Bohemians, a pleasant companion, a quoter of fine verses. His villainy seems an artificial thing attached to him, like his wooden leg. For while his villainy is supposed to be of a dull, mean, and bitter sort (quite unlike, for instance, the uproarious villainy of Quilp), his humour is of the sincere, flowing and lyric character, like that of Dick Swiveller or Mr. Micawber. He tells Mr. Boffin that he will drop into poetry in a friendly way. He does drop into it in a friendly way; in much too really a friendly way to make him convincing as a mere calculating knave. He and Mr. Venus are such natural and genuine companions that one does not see why if Venus repents Wegg should not repent too. In short, Wegg is a convenience for a plot and not a very good plot at that. But if he is one of the blots on the business, he is not the principal one. If the real degradation of Wegg is not very convincing, it is at least immeasurably more convincing than the pretended degradation of Boffin. The passage in which Boffin appears as a sort of miser, and then afterwards explains that he only assumed the character for reasons of his own, has something about it highly jerky and unsatisfactory. The truth of the whole matter I think, almost certainly, is that Dickens did not originally mean Boffin's lapse to be fictitious. He originally meant Boffin really to be corrupted by wealth,

slowly to degenerate and as slowly to repent. But the story went too quickly for this long, double, and difficult process; therefore Dickens at the last moment made a sudden recovery possible by representing that the whole business had been a trick. Consequently, this episode is not an error merely in the sense that we may find many errors in a great writer like Dickens; it is a mistake patched up with another mistake. It is a case of that ossification which occurs round the healing of an actual fracture; the story had broken down and been mended.

If Dickens had fulfilled what was probably his original design, and described the slow freezing of Boffin's soul in prosperity, I do not say that he would have done the thing well. He was not good at describing change in anybody, especially not good at describing a change for the worse. The tendency of all his characters is upwards, like bubbles, never downwards, like stones. But at least it would probably have been more credible than the story as it stands; for the story as it stands is actually less credible than any conceivable kind of moral ruin for Boffin. Such a character as his--rough, simple and lumberingly unconscious--might be more easily conceived as really sinking in self-respect and honour than as keeping up, month after month, so strained and inhuman a theatrical performance. To a good man (of that particular type) it would be easier to be bad than to pretend to be bad. It might have taken years to turn Noddy Boffin into a miser; but it would have taken centuries to turn him into an actor. This unreality in the later Boffin scenes makes the end of the story of John Harmon somewhat more unimpressive perhaps than it might otherwise have been.

Upon no hypothesis, however, can he be made one of the more impressive figures of Dickens. It is true that it is an unfair criticism to object, as some have done, that Dickens does not succeed in disguising the identity of John Harmon with John Rokesmith. Dickens never intended to disguise it; the whole story would be mainly unintelligible and largely uninteresting if it had been successfully disguised. But though John Harmon or Rokesmith was never intended to be merely a man of mystery, it is not quite so easy to say what he was intended to be. Bella is a possible and pretty sketch. Mrs. Wilfer, her mother, is an entirely impossible and entirely delightful one. Miss Podsnap is not only excellent, she is to a healthy taste positively attractive; there is a real suggestion in her of the fact that humility is akin to truth, even when humility takes its more comic form of shyness. There is not in all literature a more human *cri de coeur* than that with which Georgiana Podsnap receives the information that a young man has professed himself to be attracted by her--"Oh what a Fool he must be!"

Two other figures require praise, though they are in the more tragic manner which Dickens touched from time to time in his later period. Bradley Headstone is really a successful villain; so successful that he fully captures our sympathies. Also there is something original in the very conception. It was a new notion to add to the villains of fiction, whose thoughts go quickly, this villain whose thoughts go slow but sure; and it was a new notion to combine a deadly criminality not with high life or the slums (the usual haunts for villains) but with the laborious respectability of the lower, middle classes. The other good conception

is the boy, Bradley Headstone's pupil, with his dull, inexhaustible egoism, his pert, unconscious cruelty, and the strict decorum and incredible baseness of his views of life. It is singular that Dickens, who was not only a radical and a social reformer, but one who would have been particularly concerned to maintain the principle of modern popular education, should nevertheless have seen so clearly this potential evil in the mere educationalism of our time--the fact that merely educating the democracy may easily mean setting to work to despoil it of all the democratic virtues. It is better to be Lizzie Hexam and not know how to read and write than to be Charlie Hexam and not know how to appreciate Lizzie Hexam. It is not only necessary that the democracy should be taught; it is also necessary that the democracy should be taught democracy. Otherwise it will certainly fall a victim to that snobbishness and system of worldly standards which is the most natural and easy of all the forms of human corruption. This is one of the many dangers which Dickens saw before it existed. Dickens was really a prophet; far more of a prophet than Carlyle.

EDWIN DROOD

Pickwick was a work partly designed by others, but ultimately filled up by Dickens. Edwin Drood, the last book, was a book designed by