

MASTER HUMPHREY'S CLOCK

It is quite indispensable to include a criticism of Master Humphrey's Clock in any survey of Dickens, although it is not one of the books of which his admirers would chiefly boast; although perhaps it is almost the only one of which he would not have boasted himself. As a triumph of Dickens, at least, it is not of great importance. But as a sample of Dickens it happens to be of quite remarkable importance. The very fact that it is for the most part somewhat more level and even monotonous than most of his creations, makes us realise, as it were, against what level and monotony those creations commonly stand out. This book is the background of his mind. It is the basis and minimum of him which was always there. Alone, of all written things, this shows how he felt when he was not writing. Dickens might have written it in his sleep. That is to say, it is written by a sluggish Dickens, a half automatic Dickens, a dreaming and drifting Dickens; but still by the enduring Dickens.

But this truth can only be made evident by beginning nearer to the root of the matter. Nicholas Nickleby had just completed, or, to speak more strictly, confirmed, the popularity of the young author; wonderful as Pickwick was it might have been a nine days' wonder; Oliver Twist had been powerful but painful; it was Nicholas Nickleby that proved the man to be a great productive force of which one could ask more, of which one could ask all things. His publishers, Chapman and Hall, seem to have taken at about this point that step which sooner or later most

publishers do take with regard to a half successful man who is becoming wholly successful. Instead of asking him for something, they asked him for anything. They made him, so to speak, the editor of his own works. And indeed it is literally as the editor of his own works that he next appears; for the next thing to which he proposes to put his name is not a novel, but for all practical purposes a magazine. Yet although it is a magazine, it is a magazine entirely written by himself; the publishers, in point of fact, wanted to create a kind of Dickens Miscellany, in a much more literal sense than that in which we speak of a Bentley Miscellany. Dickens was in no way disposed to dislike such a job; for the more miscellaneous he was the more he enjoyed himself. And indeed this early experiment of his bears a great deal of resemblance to those later experiences in which he was the editor of two popular periodicals. The editor of *Master Humphrey's Clock* was a kind of type or precursor of the editor of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. There was the same sense of absolute ease in an atmosphere of infinite gossip. There was the same great advantage gained by a man of genius who wrote best scrappily and by episodes. The omnipotence of the editor helped the eccentricities of the author. He could excuse himself for all his own shortcomings. He could begin a novel, get tired of it, and turn it into a short story. He could begin a short story, get fond of it, and turn it into a novel. Thus in the days of *Household Words* he could begin a big scheme of stories, such as *Somebody's Luggage*, or *Seven Poor Travellers*, and after writing a tale or two toss the rest to his colleagues. Thus, on the other hand, in the time of *Master Humphrey's Clock*, he could begin one small adventure of *Master Humphrey* and find

himself unable to stop it. It is quite clear I think (though only from moral evidence, which some call reading between the lines) that he originally meant to tell many separate tales of Master Humphrey's wanderings in London, only one of which, and that a short one, was to have been concerned with a little girl going home. Fortunately for us that little girl had a grandfather, and that grandfather had a curiosity shop and also a nephew, and that nephew had an entirely irrelevant friend whom men and angels called Richard Swiveller. Once having come into the society of Swiveller it is not unnatural that Dickens stayed there for a whole book. The essential point for us here, however, is that Master Humphrey's Clock was stopped by the size and energy of the thing that had come of it. It died in childbirth.

There is, however, another circumstance which, even in ordinary public opinion, makes this miscellany important, besides the great novel that came out of it. I mean that the ordinary reader can remember one great thing about Master Humphrey's Clock, besides the fact that it was the frame-work of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. He remembers that Mr. Pickwick and the Wellers rise again from the dead. Dickens makes Samuel Pickwick become a member of Master Humphrey's Clock Society; and he institutes a parallel society in the kitchen under the name of Mr. Weller's Watch.

Before we consider the question of whether Dickens was wise when he did this, it is worth remarking how really odd it is that this is the only place where he did it. Dickens, one would have thought, was the one man who might naturally have introduced old characters into new stories.

Dickens, as a matter of fact, was almost the one man who never did it. It would have seemed natural in him for a double reason; first, that his characters were very valuable to him, and second that they were not very valuable to his particular stories. They were dear to him, and they are dear to us; but they really might as well have turned up (within reason) in one environment as well as in another. We, I am sure, should be delighted to meet Mr. Mantalini in the story of *Dombey and Son*. And he certainly would not be much missed from the plot of *Nicholas Nickleby*. "I am an affectionate father," said Dickens, "to all the children of my fancy; but like many other parents I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child; and his name is David Copperfield." Yet although his heart must often have yearned backwards to the children of his fancy whose tale was already told, yet he never touched one of them again even with the point of his pen. The characters in *David Copperfield*, as in all the others, were dead for him after he had done the book; if he loved them as children, it was as dead and sanctified children. It is a curious test of the strength and even reticence that underlay the seeming exuberance of Dickens, that he never did yield at all to exactly that indiscretion or act of sentimentalism which would seem most natural to his emotions and his art. Or rather he never did yield to it except here in this one case; the case of *Master Humphrey's Clock*.

And it must be remembered that nearly everybody else did yield to it. Especially did those writers who are commonly counted Dickens's superiors in art and exactitude and closeness to connected reality. Thackeray wallowed in it; Anthony Trollope lived on it. Those modern

artists who pride themselves most on the separation and unity of a work of art have indulged in it often; thus, for instance, Stevenson gave a glimpse of Alan Breck in *The Master of Ballantrae*, and meant to give a glimpse of the Master of Ballantrae in another unwritten tale called *The Rising Sun*. The habit of revising old characters is so strong in Thackeray that *Vanity Fair*, *Pendennis*, *The Newcomes*, and *Philip* are in one sense all one novel. Certainly the reader sometimes forgets which one of them he is reading. Afterwards he cannot remember whether the best description of Lord Steyne's red whiskers or Mr. Wagg's rude jokes occurred in *Vanity Fair*, or *Pendennis*; he cannot remember whether his favourite dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Pendennis occurred in *The Newcomes*, or in *Philip*. Whenever two Thackeray characters in two Thackeray novels could by any possibility have been contemporary, Thackeray delights to connect them. He makes Major Pendennis nod to Dr. Firmin, and Colonel Newcome ask Major Dobbin to dinner. Whenever two characters could not possibly have been contemporary he goes out of his way to make one the remote ancestor of the other. Thus he created the great house of Warrington solely to connect a "blue-bearded" Bohemian journalist with the blood of Henry Esmond. It is quite impossible to conceive Dickens keeping up this elaborate connection between all his characters and all his books, especially across the ages. It would give us a kind of shock if we learnt from Dickens that Major Bagstock was the nephew of Mr. Chester. Still less can we imagine Dickens carrying on an almost systematic family chronicle as was in some sense done by Trollope. There must be some reason for such a paradox; for in itself it is a very curious one. The writers who wrote carefully were always

putting, as it were, after-words and appendices to their already finished portraits; the man who did splendid and flamboyant but faulty portraits never attempted to touch them up. Or rather (we may say again) he attempted it once, and then he failed.

The reason lay, I think, in the very genius of Dickens's creation. The child he bore of his soul quitted him when his term was passed like a veritable child born of the body. It was independent of him, as a child is of its parents. It had become dead to him even in becoming alive. When Thackeray studied Pendennis or Lord Steyne he was studying something outside himself, and therefore something that might come nearer and nearer. But when Dickens brought forth Sam Weller or Pickwick he was creating something that had once been inside himself and therefore when once created could only go further and further away. It may seem a strange thing to say of such laughable characters and of so lively an author, yet I say it quite seriously; I think it possible that there arose between Dickens and his characters that strange and almost supernatural shyness that arises often between parents and children; because they are too close to each other to be open with each other. Too much hot and high emotion had gone to the creation of one of his great figures for it to be possible for him without embarrassment ever to speak with it again. This is the thing which some fools call fickleness; but which is not the death of feeling, but rather its dreadful perpetuation; this shyness is the final seal of strong sentiment; this coldness is an eternal constancy.

This one case where Dickens broke through his rule was not such a success as to tempt him in any case to try the thing again.

There is weakness in the strict sense of the word in this particular reappearance of Samuel Pickwick and Samuel Weller. In the original *Pickwick Papers* Dickens had with quite remarkable delicacy and vividness contrived to suggest a certain fundamental sturdiness and spirit in that corpulent and complacent old gentleman. Mr. Pickwick was a mild man, a respectable man, a placid man; but he was very decidedly a man. He could denounce his enemies and fight for his nightcap. He was fat; but he had a backbone. In *Master Humphrey's Clock* the backbone seems somehow to be broken; his good nature seems limp instead of alert. He gushes out of his good heart; instead of taking a good heart for granted as a part of any decent gentleman's furniture as did the older and stronger Pickwick. The truth is, I think, that Mr. Pickwick in complete repose loses some part of the whole point of his existence. The quality which makes the *Pickwick Papers* one of the greatest of human fairy tales is a quality which all the great fairy tales possess, and which marks them out from most modern writing. A modern novelist generally endeavours to make his story interesting, by making his hero odd. The most typical modern books are those in which the central figure is himself or herself an exception, a cripple, a courtesan, a lunatic, a swindler, or a person of the most perverse temperament. Such stories, for instance, are *Sir Richard Calmady*, *Dodo*, *Quisante*, *La Bête Humaine*, even *the Egoist*. But in a fairy tale the boy sees all the wonders of fairyland because he is an ordinary boy. In the same way Mr.

Samuel Pickwick sees an extraordinary England because he is an ordinary old gentleman. He does not see things through the rosy spectacles of the modern optimist or the green-smoked spectacles of the pessimist; he sees it through the crystal glasses of his own innocence. One must see the world clearly even in order to see its wildest poetry. One must see it sanely even in order to see that it is insane.

Mr. Pickwick, then, relieved against a background of heavy kindness and quiet club life does not seem to be quite the same heroic figure as Mr. Pickwick relieved against a background of the fighting police constables at Ipswich or the roaring mobs of Eatanswill. Of the degeneration of the Wellers, though it has been commonly assumed by critics, I am not so sure. Some of the things said in the humorous assembly round Mr. Weller's Watch are really human and laughable and altogether in the old manner. Especially, I think, the vague and awful allusiveness of old Mr. Weller when he reminds his little grandson of his delinquencies under the trope or figure of their being those of another little boy, is really in the style both of the irony and the domesticity of the poorer classes. Sam also says one or two things really worthy of himself. We feel almost as if Sam were a living man, and could not appear for an instant without being amusing.

The other elements in the make-up of Master Humphrey's Clock come under the same paradox which I have applied to the whole work. Though not very important in literature they are somehow quite important in criticism. They show us better than anything else the whole unconscious

trend of Dickens, the stuff of which his very dreams were made. If he had made up tales to amuse himself when half-awake (as I have no doubt he did) they would be just such tales as these. They would have been ghostly legends of the nooks and holes of London, echoes of old love and laughter from the taverns or the Inns of Court. In a sense also one may say that these tales are the great might-have-beens of Dickens. They are chiefly designs which he fills up here slightly and unsatisfactorily, but which he might have filled up with his own brightest and most incredible colours. Nothing, for instance, could have been nearer to the heart of Dickens than his great Gargantuan conception of Gog and Magog telling London legends to each other all through the night. Those two giants might have stood on either side of some new great city of his invention, swarming with fanciful figures and noisy with new events. But as it is, the two giants stand alone in a wilderness, guarding either side of a gate that leads nowhere.