

### **XIII. The Dickensian**

He was a quiet man, dressed in dark clothes, with a large limp straw hat; with something almost military in his moustache and whiskers, but with a quite unmilitary stoop and very dreamy eyes. He was gazing with a rather gloomy interest at the cluster, one might almost say the tangle, of small shipping which grew thicker as our little pleasure boat crawled up into Yarmouth Harbour. A boat entering this harbour, as every one knows, does not enter in front of the town like a foreigner, but creeps round at the back like a traitor taking the town in the rear. The passage of the river seems almost too narrow for traffic, and in consequence the bigger ships look colossal. As we passed under a timber ship from Norway, which seemed to block up the heavens like a cathedral, the man in a straw hat pointed to an odd wooden figurehead carved like a woman, and said, like one continuing a conversation, "Now, why have they left off having them. They didn't do any one any harm?"

I replied with some flippancy about the captain's wife being jealous; but I knew in my heart that the man had struck a deep note. There has been something in our most recent civilisation which is mysteriously hostile to such healthy and humane symbols.

"They hate anything like that, which is human and pretty," he continued, exactly echoing my thoughts. "I believe they broke up all the jolly old figureheads with hatchets and enjoyed doing it."

"Like Mr. Quilp," I answered, "when he battered the wooden Admiral with the poker."

His whole face suddenly became alive, and for the first time he stood erect and stared at me.

"Do you come to Yarmouth for that?" he asked.

"For what?"

"For Dickens," he answered, and drummed with his foot on the deck.

"No," I answered; "I come for fun, though that is much the same thing."

"I always come," he answered quietly, "to find Peggotty's boat. It isn't here."

And when he said that I understood him perfectly.

There are two Yarmouths; I daresay there are two hundred to the people who live there. I myself have never come to the end of the list of Batterseas. But there are two to the stranger and tourist; the poor part, which is dignified, and the prosperous part, which is savagely vulgar. My new friend haunted the first of these like a ghost; to the latter he would only distantly allude.

"The place is very much spoilt now... trippers, you know," he would say, not at all scornfully, but simply sadly. That was the nearest he would go to an admission of the monstrous watering place that lay along the front, outblazing the sun, and more deafening than the sea. But behind--out of earshot of this uproar--there are lanes so narrow that they seem like secret entrances to some hidden place of repose. There are squares so brimful of silence that to plunge into one of them is like plunging into a pool. In these places the man and I paced up and down talking about Dickens, or, rather, doing what all true Dickensians do, telling each other verbatim long passages which both of us knew quite well already. We were really in the atmosphere of the older England. Fishermen passed us who might well have been characters like Peggotty; we went into a musty curiosity shop and bought pipe-stoppers carved into figures from Pickwick. The evening was settling down between all the buildings with that slow gold that seems to soak everything when we went into the church.

In the growing darkness of the church, my eye caught the coloured windows which on that clear golden evening were flaming with all the passionate heraldry of the most fierce and ecstatic of Christian arts. At length I said to my companion:

"Do you see that angel over there? I think it must be meant for the angel at the sepulchre."

He saw that I was somewhat singularly moved, and he raised his eyebrows.

"I daresay," he said. "What is there odd about that?"

After a pause I said, "Do you remember what the angel at the sepulchre said?"

"Not particularly," he answered; "but where are you off to in such a hurry?"

I walked him rapidly out of the still square, past the fishermen's almshouses, towards the coast, he still inquiring indignantly where I was going.

"I am going," I said, "to put pennies in automatic machines on the beach. I am going to listen to the niggers. I am going to have my photograph taken. I am going

to drink ginger-beer out of its original bottle. I will buy some picture postcards. I do want a boat. I am ready to listen to a concertina, and but for the defects of my education should be ready to play it. I am willing to ride on a donkey; that is, if the donkey is willing. I am willing to be a donkey; for all this was commanded me by the angel in the stained-glass window."

"I really think," said the Dickensian, "that I had better put you in charge of your relations."

"Sir," I answered, "there are certain writers to whom humanity owes much, whose talent is yet of so shy or delicate or retrospective a type that we do well to link it with certain quaint places or certain perishing associations. It would not be unnatural to look for the spirit of Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill, or even for the shade of Thackeray in Old Kensington. But let us have no antiquarianism about Dickens, for Dickens is not an antiquity. Dickens looks not backward, but forward; he might look at our modern mobs with satire, or with fury, but he would love to look at them. He might lash our democracy, but it would be because, like a democrat, he asked much from it. We will not have all his books bound up under the title of 'The Old Curiosity Shop.' Rather we will have them all bound up under the title of 'Great Expectations.' Wherever humanity is he would have us face it and make something of it, swallow it with a holy cannibalism, and assimilate it with the digestion of a giant. We must take these trippers as he would have taken them, and tear out of them their tragedy and their farce. Do you remember now what the angel said at the sepulchre? 'Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here; he is risen.'"

With that we came out suddenly on the wide stretch of the sands, which were black with the knobs and masses of our laughing and quite desperate democracy. And the sunset, which was now in its final glory, flung far over all of them a red flush and glitter like the gigantic firelight of Dickens. In that strange evening light every figure looked at once grotesque and attractive, as if he had a story to tell. I heard a little girl (who was being throttled by another little girl) say by way of self-vindication, "My sister-in-law 'as got four rings aside her weddin' ring!"

I stood and listened for more, but my friend went away.