

A New Martin Chuzzlewit

The aim of this book, if it has one, is to suggest this thesis; that the very worst way of helping Anglo-American friendship is to be an Anglo-American. There is only one thing lower, of course, which is being an Anglo-Saxon. It is lower, because at least Englishmen do exist and Americans do exist; and it may be possible, though repulsive, to imagine an American and an Englishman in some way blended together. But if Angles and Saxons ever did exist, they are all fortunately dead now; and the wildest imagination cannot form the weakest idea of what sort of monster would be made by mixing one with the other. But my thesis is that the whole hope, and the only hope, lies not in mixing two things together, but rather in cutting them very sharply asunder. That is the only way in which two things can succeed sufficiently in getting outside each other to appreciate and admire each other. So long as they are different and yet supposed to be the same, there can be nothing but a divided mind and a staggering balance. It may be that in the first twilight of time man and woman walked about as one quadruped. But if they did, I am sure it was a quadruped that reared and bucked and kicked up its heels. Then the flaming sword of some angel divided them, and they fell in love with each other.

Should the reader require an example a little more within historical range, or a little more subject to critical tests, than the above prehistoric anecdote (which I need not say was revealed to me in a vision) it would be easy enough to supply them both in a hypothetical and a historical form. It is obvious enough in a general way that if we begin to subject diverse countries to an identical test, there will not only be rivalry, but what is far more deadly and disastrous, superiority. If we institute a competition between Holland and Switzerland as to the relative grace and agility of their mountain guides, it will be clear that the decision is disproportionately easy; it will also be clear that certain facts about the configuration of Holland have escaped our international eye. If we establish a comparison between them in skill and industry in the art of building dykes against the sea, it will be equally clear that the injustice falls the other way; it will also be clear that the situation of Switzerland on the map has received insufficient study. In both cases there will not only be rivalry but very unbalanced and unjust rivalry; in both cases, therefore, there will not only be enmity but very bitter or insolent enmity. But so long as the two are sharply divided there can be no enmity because there can be no rivalry. Nobody can argue about whether the Swiss climb mountains better than the Dutch build dykes; just as nobody can argue about whether a triangle is more triangular than a circle is round.

This fancy example is alphabetically and indeed artificially simple; but, having

used it for convenience, I could easily give similar examples not of fancy but of fact. I had occasion recently to attend the Christmas festivity of a club in London for the exiles of one of the Scandinavian nations. When I entered the room the first thing that struck my eye, and greatly raised my spirits, was that the room was dotted with the colours of peasant costumes and the specimens of peasant craftsmanship. There were, of course, other costumes and other crafts in evidence; there were men dressed like myself (only better) in the garb of the modern middle classes; there was furniture like the furniture of any other room in London. Now, according to the ideal formula of the ordinary internationalist, these things that we had in common ought to have moved me to a sense of the kinship of all civilisation. I ought to have felt that as the Scandinavian gentleman wore a collar and tie, and I also wore a collar and tie, we were brothers and nothing could come between us. I ought to have felt that we were standing for the same principles of truth because we were wearing the same pair of trousers; or rather, to speak with more precision, similar pairs of trousers. Anyhow, the pair of trousers, that cloven pennon, ought to have floated in fancy over my head as the banner of Europe or the League of Nations. I am constrained to confess that no such rush of emotions overcame me; and the topic of trousers did not float across my mind at all. So far as those things were concerned, I might have remained in a mood of mortal enmity, and cheerfully shot or stabbed the best dressed gentleman in the room. Precisely what did warm my heart with an abrupt affection for that northern nation was the very thing that is utterly and indeed lamentably lacking in my own nation. It was something corresponding to the one great gap in English history, corresponding to the one great blot on English civilisation. It was the spiritual presence of a peasantry, dressed according to its own dignity, and expressing itself by its own creations.

The sketch of America left by Charles Dickens is generally regarded as something which is either to be used as a taunt or covered with an apology. Doubtless it was unduly critical, even of the America of that day; yet curiously enough it may well be the text for a true reconciliation at the present day. It is true that in this, as in other things, the Dickensian exaggeration is itself exaggerated. It is also true that, while it is over-emphasised, it is not allowed for. Dickens tended too much to describe the United States as a vast lunatic asylum; but partly because he had a natural inspiration and imagination suited to the description of lunatic asylums. As it was his finest poetic fancy that created a lunatic over the garden wall, so it was his fancy that created a lunatic over the western sea. To read some of the complaints, one would fancy that Dickens had deliberately invented a low and farcical America to be a contrast to his high and exalted England. It is suggested that he showed America as full of rowdy bullies like Hannibal Chollop, or ridiculous wind-bags like Elijah Pogram, while England was full of refined and sincere spirits like Jonas Chuzzlewit, Chevy Slime, Montague Tigg, and Mr. Pecksniff. If Martin Chuzzlewit makes America a lunatic asylum, what in the

world does it make England? We can only say a criminal lunatic asylum. The truth is, of course, that Dickens so described them because he had a genius for that sort of description; for the making of almost maniacal grotesques of the same type as Quilp or Fagin. He made these Americans absurd because he was an artist in absurdity; and no artist can help finding hints everywhere for his own peculiar art. In a word, he created a laughable Pogrom for the same reason that he created a laughable Pecksniff; and that was only because no other creature could have created them.

It is often said that we learn to love the characters in romances as if they were characters in real life. I wish we could sometimes love the characters in real life as we love the characters in romances. There are a great many human souls whom we should accept more kindly, and even appreciate more clearly, if we simply thought of them as people in a story. Martin Chuzzlewit is itself indeed an unsatisfactory and even unfortunate example; for it is, among its author's other works, a rather unusually harsh and hostile story. I do not suggest that we should feel towards an American friend that exact shade or tint of tenderness that we feel towards Mr. Hannibal Chollop. Our enjoyment of the foreigner should rather resemble our enjoyment of Pickwick than our enjoyment of Pecksniff. But there is this amount of appropriateness even in the particular example; that Dickens did show in both countries how men can be made amusing to each other. So far the point is not that he made fun of America, but that he got fun out of America. And, as I have already pointed out, he applied exactly the same method of selection and exaggeration to England. In the other English stories, written in a more amiable mood, he applied it in a more amiable manner; but he could apply it to an American too, when he was writing in that mood and manner. We can see it in the witty and withering criticism delivered by the Yankee traveller in the musty refreshment room of Mugby Junction; a genuine example of a genuinely American fun and freedom satirising a genuinely British stuffiness and snobbery. Nobody expects the American traveller to admire the refreshments at Mugby Junction; but he might admire the refreshment at one of the Pickwickian inns, especially if it contained Pickwick. Nobody expects Pickwick to like Pogrom; but he might like the American who made fun of Mugby Junction. But the point is that, while he supported him in making fun, he would also think him funny. The two comic characters could admire each other, but they would also be amused at each other. And the American would think the Englishman funny because he was English; and a very good reason too. The Englishman would think the American amusing because he was American; nor can I imagine a better ground for his amusement.

Now many will debate on the psychological possibility of such a friendship founded on reciprocal ridicule, or rather on a comedy of comparisons. But I will say of this harmony of humours what Mr. H. G. Wells says of his harmony of

states in the unity of his World State. If it be truly impossible to have such a peace, then there is nothing possible except war. If we cannot have friends in this fashion, then we shall sooner or later have enemies in some other fashion. There is no hope in the pompous impersonalities of internationalism.

And this brings us to the real and relevant mistake of Dickens. It was not in thinking his Americans funny, but in thinking them foolish because they were funny. In this sense it will be noticed that Dickens's American sketches are almost avowedly superficial; they are descriptions of public life and not private life. Mr. Jefferson Brick had no private life. But Mr. Jonas Chuzzlewit undoubtedly had a private life; and even kept some parts of it exceeding private. Mr. Pecksniff was also a domestic character; so was Mr. Quilp. Mr. Pecksniff and Mr. Quilp had slightly different ways of surprising their families; Mr. Pecksniff by playfully observing 'Boh!' when he came home; Mr. Quilp by coming home at all. But we can form no picture of how Mr. Hannibal Chollop playfully surprised his family; possibly by shooting at them; possibly by not shooting at them. We can only say that he would rather surprise us by having a family at all. We do not know how the Mother of the Modern Gracchi managed the Modern Gracchi; for her maternity was rather a public than a private office. We have no romantic moonlit scenes of the love-making of Elijah Pogram, to balance against the love story of Seth Pecksniff. These figures are all in a special sense theatrical; all facing one way and lit up by a public limelight. Their ridiculous characters are detachable from their real characters, if they have any real characters. And the author might perfectly well be right about what is ridiculous, and wrong about what is real. He might be as right in smiling at the Pograms and the Bricks as in smiling at the Pickwicks and the Boffins. And he might still be as wrong in seeing Mr. Pogram as a hypocrite as the great Buzfuz was wrong in seeing Mr. Pickwick as a monster of revolting heartlessness and systematic villainy. He might still be as wrong in thinking Jefferson Brick a charlatan and a cheat as was that great disciple of Lavater, Mrs. Wilfer, in tracing every wrinkle of evil cunning in the face of Mrs. Boffin. For Mr. Pickwick's spectacles and gaiters and Mrs. Boffin's bonnets and boudoir are after all superficial jokes; and might be equally well seen whatever we saw beneath them. A man may smile and smile and be a villain; but a man may also make us smile and not be a villain. He may make us smile and not even be a fool. He may make us roar with laughter and be an exceedingly wise man.

Now that is the paradox of America which Dickens never discovered. Elijah Pogram was far more fantastic than his satirist thought; and the most grotesque feature of Brick and Chollop was hidden from him. The really strange thing was that Pogram probably did say, 'Rough he may be. So air our bars. Wild he may be. So air our buffalors,' and yet was a perfectly intelligent and public-spirited citizen while he said it. The extraordinary thing is that Jefferson Brick may really

have said, 'The libation of freedom must sometimes be quaffed in blood,' and yet Jefferson Brick may have served freedom, resisting unto blood. There really has been a florid school of rhetoric in the United States which has made it quite possible for serious and sensible men to say such things. It is amusing simply as a difference of idiom or costume is always amusing; just as English idiom and English costume are amusing to Americans. But about this kind of difference there can be no kind of doubt. So sturdy not to say stuffy a materialist as Ingersoll could say of so shoddy not to say shady a financial politician as Blaine, 'Like an arméd warrior, like a pluméd knight, James G. Blaine strode down the hall of Congress, and flung his spear full and true at the shield of every enemy of his country and every traducer of his fair name.' Compared with that, the passage about bears and buffaloes, which Mr. Pogram delivered in defence of the defaulting post-master, is really a very reasonable and appropriate statement. For bears and buffaloes are wild and rough and in that sense free; while pluméd knights do not throw their lances about like the assegais of Zulus. And the defaulting post-master was at least as good a person to praise in such a fashion as James G. Blaine of the Little Rock Railway. But anybody who had treated Ingersoll or Blaine merely as a fool and a figure of fun would have very rapidly found out his mistake. But Dickens did not know Brick or Chollop long enough to find out his mistake. It need not be denied that, even after a full understanding, he might still have found things to smile at or to criticise. I do not insist on his admitting that Hannibal Chollop was as great a hero as Hannibal, or that Elijah Pogram was as true a prophet as Elijah. But I do say very seriously that they had something about their atmosphere and situation that made possible a sort of heroism and even a sort of prophecy that were really less natural at that period in that Merry England whose comedy and common sense we sum up under the name of Dickens. When we joke about the name of Hannibal Chollop, we might remember of what nation was the general who dismissed his defeated soldiers at Appomatox with words which the historian has justly declared to be worthy of Hannibal: 'We have fought through this war together. I have done my best for you.' It is not fair to forget Jefferson, or even Jefferson Davis, entirely in favour of Jefferson Brick.

For all these three things, good, bad, and indifferent, go together to form something that Dickens missed, merely because the England of his time most disastrously missed it. In this case, as in every case, the only way to measure justly the excess of a foreign country is to measure the defect of our own country. For in this matter the human mind is the victim of a curious little unconscious trick, the cause of nearly all international dislikes. A man treats his own faults as original sin and supposes them scattered everywhere with the seed of Adam. He supposes that men have then added their own foreign vices to the solid and simple foundation of his own private vices. It would astound him to realise that they have actually, by their strange erratic path, avoided his vices as well as his

virtues. His own faults are things with which he is so much at home that he at once forgets and assumes them abroad. He is so faintly conscious of them in himself that he is not even conscious of the absence of them in other people. He assumes that they are there so that he does not see that they are not there. The Englishman takes it for granted that a Frenchman will have all the English faults. Then he goes on to be seriously angry with the Frenchman for having dared to complicate them by the French faults. The notion that the Frenchman has the French faults and not the English faults is a paradox too wild to cross his mind.

He is like an old Chinaman who should laugh at Europeans for wearing ludicrous top-hats and curling up their pig-tails inside them; because obviously all men have pig-tails, as all monkeys have tails. Or he is like an old Chinese lady who should justly deride the high-heeled shoes of the West, considering them a needless addition to the sufficiently tight and secure bandaging of the foot; for, of course, all women bind up their feet, as all women bind up their hair. What these Celestial thinkers would not think of, or allow for, is the wild possibility that we do not have pig-tails although we do have top-hats, or that our ladies are not silly enough to have Chinese feet, though they are silly enough to have high-heeled shoes. Nor should we necessarily have come an inch nearer to the Chinese extravagances even if the chimney-pot hat rose higher than a factory chimney or the high heels had evolved into a sort of stilts. By the same fallacy the Englishman will not only curse the French peasant as a miser, but will also try to tip him as a beggar. That is, he will first complain of the man having the surliness of an independent man, and then accuse him of having the servility of a dependent one. Just as the hypothetical Chinaman cannot believe that we have top-hats but not pig-tails, so the Englishman cannot believe that peasants are not snobs even when they are savages. Or he sees that a Paris paper is violent and sensational; and then supposes that some millionaire owns twenty such papers and runs them as a newspaper trust. Surely the Yellow Press is present everywhere to paint the map yellow, as the British Empire to paint it red. It never occurs to such a critic that the French paper is violent because it is personal, and personal because it belongs to a real and responsible person, and not to a ring of nameless millionaires. It is a pamphlet, and not an anonymous pamphlet. In a hundred other cases the same truth could be illustrated; the situation in which the black man first assumes that all mankind is black, and then accuses the rest of the artificial vice of painting their faces red and yellow, or the hypocrisy of white-washing themselves after the fashion of whited sepulchres. The particular case of it now before us is that of the English misunderstanding of America; and it is based, as in all these cases, on the English misunderstanding of England.

For the truth is that England has suffered of late from not having enough of the free shooting of Hannibal Chollop; from not understanding enough that the libation of freedom must sometimes be quaffed in blood. The prosperous

Englishman will not admit this; but then the prosperous Englishman will not admit that he has suffered from anything. That is what he is suffering from. Until lately at least he refused to realise that many of his modern habits had been bad habits, the worst of them being contentment. For all the real virtue in contentment evaporates, when the contentment is only satisfaction and the satisfaction is only self-satisfaction. Now it is perfectly true that America and not England has seen the most obvious and outrageous official denials of liberty. But it is equally true that it has seen the most obvious flouting of such official nonsense, far more obvious than any similar evasions in England. And nobody who knows the subconscious violence of the American character would ever be surprised if the weapons of Chollop began to be used in that most lawful lawlessness. It is perfectly true that the libation of freedom must sometimes be drunk in blood, and never more (one would think) than when mad millionaires forbid it to be drunk in beer. But America, as compared with England, is the country where one can still fancy men obtaining the libation of beer by the libation of blood. Vulgar plutocracy is almost omnipotent in both countries; but I think there is now more kick of reaction against it in America than in England. The Americans may go mad when they make laws; but they recover their reason when they disobey them. I wish I could believe that there was as much of that destructive repentance in England; as indeed there certainly was when Cobbett wrote. It faded gradually like a dying fire through the Victorian era; and it was one of the very few realities that Dickens did not understand. But any one who does understand it will know that the days of Cobbett saw the last lost fight for English democracy; and that if he had stood at that turning of the historic road, he would have wished a better fate to the frame-breakers and the fury against the first machinery, and luck to the Luddite fires.

Anyhow, what is wanted is a new Martin Chuzzlewit, told by a wiser Mark Tapley. It is typical of something sombre and occasionally stale in the mood of Dickens when he wrote that book, that the comic servant is not really very comic. Mark Tapley is a very thin shadow of Sam Weller. But if Dickens had written it in a happier mood, there might have been a truer meaning in Mark Tapley's happiness. For it is true that this illogical good humour amid unreason and disorder is one of the real virtues of the English people. It is the real advantage they have in that adventure all over the world, which they were recently and reluctantly induced to call an Empire. That receptive ridicule remains with them as a secret pleasure when they are colonists--or convicts. Dickens might have written another version of the great romance, and one in which America was really seen gaily by Mark instead of gloomily by Martin. Mark Tapley might really have made the best of America. Then America would have lived and danced before us like Pickwick's England, a fairyland of happy lunatics and lovable monsters, and we might still have sympathised as much with the rhetoric of Lafayette Kettle as with the rhetoric of Wilkins Micawber, or with the violence of Chollop as with

the violence of Boythorn. That new Martin Chuzzlewit will never be written; and the loss of it is more tragic than the loss of Edwin Drood. But every man who has travelled in America has seen glimpses and episodes in that untold tale; and far away on the Red-Indian frontiers or in the hamlets in the hills of Pennsylvania, there are people whom I met for a few hours or for a few moments, whom I none the less sincerely like and respect because I cannot but smile as I think of them. But the converse is also true; they have probably forgotten me; but if they remember they laugh.