

EX LIBRIS

128



128
149
179

CHARLES DICKENS
SOCIAL REFORMER





THE AUTHOR.

A portrait bust study by Francis Doyle-Jones.

CHARLES DICKENS

SOCIAL REFORMER

THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF ENGLAND'S
GREAT NOVELIST

BY

W. WALTER CROTCH

AUTHOR OF "THE COTTAGE HOMES OF ENGLAND," ETC., ETC.

Manning

18.
1888

LONDON
CHAPMAN & HALL, LTD.

1913

955 d
C951

70 WIND
APPROX 100

PIR 4592
S6 E7
1913
M.M.

DEDICATED

TO THE
HANDFUL OF EARNEST MEN

WHO ASSISTED IN FOUNDING THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP
WHOSE HIGH PURPOSE, GENIAL GOOD-FELLOWSHIP
AND KEEN SENSE OF HUMOUR, MADE THEM
INDEED WORTHY OF THE PROUD TITLE OF DICKENSIANS, AND
WHO DURING MORE THAN TEN YEARS
HAVE NEVER FALTERED IN THE FAITH AND BELIEF
THAT THE
IMMORTAL MEMORY OF CHARLES DICKENS
IS BEST HONOURED BY
APPLYING HIS SOCIAL TEACHINGS TO THE
PROBLEMS OF OUR OWN AGE
AND GENERATION

PREFACE

I AM too old a journalist to pretend to be unconscious of the fact that this book will prove a temptation to those into whose hands it will fall for review. Ten years ago I should have gloried in the opportunities it affords for mordant satire and biting criticism. I should myself have described it as a notable example of the art of book-making by excerpts, and I should have riddled the length and frequency of the quotations. It is only fair, then, to my erstwhile confrères of the Press to say quite frankly that the number and voluminous nature of the quotations herein are part of my mature and studied plan. I started out not to interpret Dickens, but to present him as his own interpreter. Buried in his multitude of novels, drifting through his ephemeral articles for daily and weekly newspapers are teachings political and social which I found possessed an appropriateness and a significance for even present times. I have sought not to make a book by collecting the teachings indiscriminately, but rather by gathering together in orderly array the arguments direct from Dickens, which should illustrate my theory and prove his case.

Furthermore, it seems to me important to emphasize the fact that Charles Dickens was in a very special sense a social reformer. It was not simply that he

PREFACE

loathed shams. With him it was not merely a case of creating characters at which the whole world laughed, humbugs who excited its wrath and impostors who provoked its derision. He was at heart and by conviction a reformer. He looked out upon his age and found corruption in public places and cynicism displayed towards the vital things in national life and character. He found the poor neglected in primary things, such as education, housing, and sanitation, and drilled, dragooned and disciplined out of all reason in non-essentials. Stupendous neglect of child-life went side by side with a grotesquely organized hypocrisy for its welfare. And he set himself to remedy these things, not merely by creating Squeers, Bumble, Jarndyce, Gradgrind, Bounderby, and the rest, but by a constant endeavour in other directions to awaken the social consciousness to clamant evils and imperious needs.

More than in his novels, the deep and passionate reforming zeal of the man is disclosed in those many anonymous articles and sketches which he contributed to quite a variety of journals. In these the enthusiasm, the scorn, the hatred, and sometimes, I am bound to confess, even the plaintive acrimony of the real Charles Dickens is to be found. One arises from a perusal of these comparatively unknown examples of his work as a publicist, with a renewed assurance that the views of his characters in his novels were not interpolated merely for the purpose of creating a literary or emotional effect : they were the burning conviction of the creator of the character himself. Upon these, to this generation, almost unknown and certainly almost untapped sources of educational supply, I have specially drawn for my

viii

PREFACE

estimate alike of the depth and extent of Dickens's ardour for making straight the crooked places of our social life.

Allegories, parables, whimsical sketches, under the quaintest and most fantastic titles, which no one would have suspected were from his pen, all contain either some protest against a social abuse or some plea for larger life for the poor whom he loved. In the following pages I trust I have made it clear, however, that it was no narrow parochialism that evoked these views. Dickens saw and said in his day that the greatest asset to the Empire is the people of the Empire, and he believed that the truest and highest patriotism consists in destroying slums and improving the conditions of the people morally, physically, and intellectually. He held that the first burden of Empire is to raise a truly Imperial race, of well-housed, well-nurtured, and well-equipped men. Party government, as he knew it, was mostly an uneasy compromise between rival stupidities. In his view the nation's leaders should be men of wide outlook and larger vision, not of authority merely. Like Whitman, he had a supreme contempt for "the never-ending audacity of elected persons." It was a cardinal article of his political faith that the people themselves should rule; the duty of statesmen was to keep unceasing vigil over all their interests whilst they were doing it. He saw the cretinous stupefaction into which the people lapse when alike the responsibility and dignity of actual government and the control of their affairs is removed from them and how easily what time the political mountebank succeeds by mere fearlessly perseverant self-assertion. And he was not afraid of

PREFACE

change. The free circulation of ideas and opinions which invariably precede change had no terrors for him. I think it was Tucker who once said very wisely that if there were more extremists in evolutionary times there would be no revolutionary times at all. That represented Dickens's attitude, as the selections which I have quoted from his little-known journalistic work will make abundantly clear.

The richest mine in which I have dug, and from which I have gathered an embarrassment of ore, has been the comparatively little-known *Miscellaneous Papers*. These, it will be recalled, were first included in Dickens's collected works in the national edition, with a special introduction by Mr. B. W. Matz, whose infinite pains and research had traced practically every item to its source and represented these articles and papers with the date of their publication and the journal in which they appeared. In so doing I think Mr. Matz has rendered not only an invaluable, but an incalculable service to the history of literature, and one indeed which is worthy of widespread recognition, for until he had discovered and reprinted them in this edition, the majority of the articles had been unknown or unidentified with the novelist. Subsequently they were included in the centenary and other editions.

So that in the several references which I make to *Household Words* ; *All the Year Round* ; *The Examiner* ; *The Morning Chronicle*, and the *Daily News* it should be borne in mind that I am quoting those which can be found in the volume of *Miscellaneous Papers* and verified there.

For the rest this prefatory note gives me an

PREFACE

opportunity I needed, of adding to my private thanks, a public acknowledgment of the help and encouragement I have received in the preparation of this book at the hands of my two friends Mr. B. W. Matz and Mr. C. Sheridan Jones. They have read the proofs, verified the quotations, supplied me with helpful hints and suggestions, and rendered me service in a variety of ways. Two more enthusiastic Dickensian scholars it has never been my lot to meet. The very real advantage which has accrued to me by reason of their co-operation will be manifest to those who month by month peruse *The Dickensian*, which the former edits with such conspicuous ability, and alike the brilliant and forcible contributions from the pen of the latter, which adorn the pages of many of the weekly and monthly periodicals.

W. WALTER CROTCH.

LONDON, *October*, 1912.

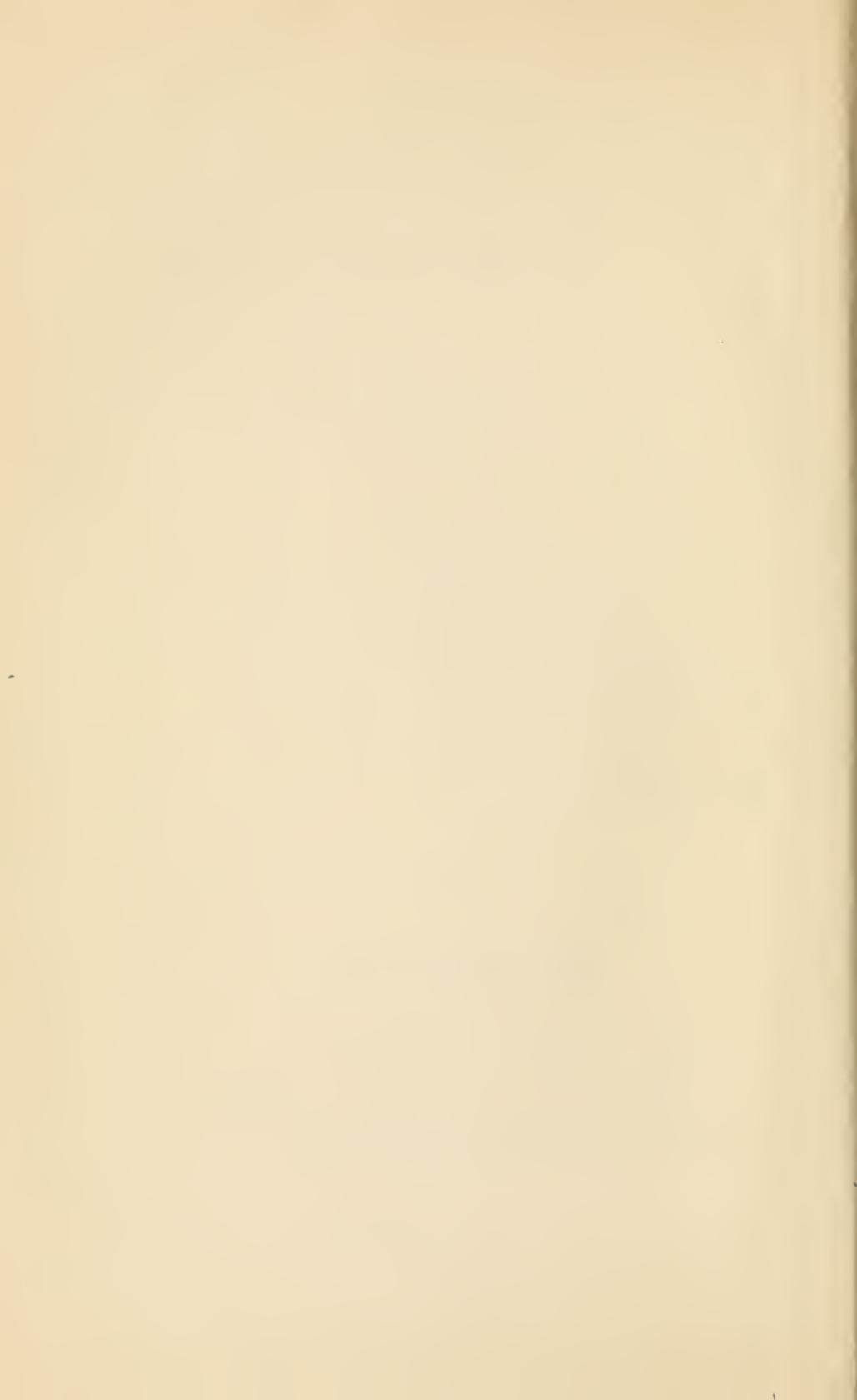
*Not only we, the latest seed of Time,
New men, that in the flying of a wheel
Cry down the past, not only we, that prate
Of rights and wrongs, have loved the people well.*

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
PREFACE	vii
I. FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE	1
II. THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM	22
III. THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD	38
IV. REAL EDUCATION	65
V. HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM	97
→ VI. HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR	121
VII. THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES	145
VIII. PARLIAMENTARY REFORM	181
IX. POOR LAW REFORM	219
X. SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS	248
XI. THE CURSE OF USURY	268
XII. A SANE PATRIOTISM	288

ILLUSTRATIONS

THE AUTHOR	<i>Frontispiece</i>
<i>A portrait bust study by Francis Doyle-Jones.</i>	
CHARLES DICKENS	<i>Facing Page 160</i>
<i>Relief portrait by Francis Doyle-Jones, Chelsea, 1912.</i>	



CHARLES DICKENS

SOCIAL REFORMER

CHAPTER I

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

“To leave one’s hand . . . lastingly upon the time, with one tender touch for the mass of toiling people that nothing can obliterate, would be to lift oneself above the dust of all the Doges in their graves and stand upon a giant’s staircase that Samson could not overthrow.”

IN those words Charles Dickens, the premier novelist of our age, crystallized the master-passion of his life. The sentiment was no transient one; it was no fleeting aspiration evoked by one of his many moments of deep sympathy with the poor; it was rather the careful asseveration of a profound and long-cherished conviction. He had returned from Venice, overflowing with the exhilaration which new scenes and fresh sensations of beauty invariably create in the mind of man.

“Lofty emotions rise within me when I see the sun set on the Mediterranean,” he had written during his stay at the little villa which he rented outside Genoa; and all that was majestic and all that was resplendent under the undying glory of Italian skies had excited his warmest admiration. But the spectacle of natural glories and the joy which comes of the contemplation

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

of hitherto unseen richness in art and architecture were as nothing to him beside the pursuit of what might have been regarded as the humble, but abiding, purpose of his life. "To strike a blow for the poor"—this was his heart's desire ; "to leave one tender touch for the mass of the toiling people"—this was alike the permanent hope and the constant purpose of all his work. In this was his destiny fulfilled. Circumstance, that heedless arbiter of men's lives, had willed it so. Into the very fibre of his being was woven his love of the poor ; upon the tablets of his experience was enshrined the record of their miseries, their sufferings, their endurance, their weaknesses, their needs, and their follies. All the emotions of his childhood stirred his manhood to a keen appreciation of social injustice ; all the bitterness of poverty which, as a lad, he endured warmed the heart of his age to active compassion for misfortune ; like Robert Louis Stevenson, "the sights and sounds of his youth pursued him always."

The early, if not the earliest, associations of Charles Dickens were with debt and poverty. The impressions which first stamped themselves upon his young mind were of financial difficulties, of worries which grew to miseries, of embarrassments which became slow agonies as his family sank, gradually but surely, into the pit of penury and want. At nine or ten years of age his home was in a mean tenement in a squalid Camden Town slum, and from "the little back garret in Bayham Street" he derived his first knowledge of the struggles which the poor daily wage against poverty. That he understood it all then, he in after life affirmed again and again, and it was this intimate knowledge which produced

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

his passionate zeal for social reform, and made him, to the day of his death, the unflinching champion of the weak and oppressed.

Dickens, however, was doomed not only to be a spectator of the miseries of the poor, but to feel the poignant pain of hunger himself. When we laugh at the foibles and smile at the pecuniary embarrassments from which Mr. Micawber was scarcely ever free, we are likely to forget the tragedy which those same difficulties involved for his counterpart in real life. As the elder Dickens fell into deeper and deeper straits, the family were compelled to endure greater and greater privations. A removal to Gower Street North, where the boy's mother set up a school in the hope of stemming the inrushing tide of debt and of restoring the lost prosperity of the family, proved quite unavailing. "We got on very badly with the butcher and the baker," says Dickens himself, referring to those stressful days, and "very often we had not too much for dinner, and at last my father was arrested." Then, by degrees, almost everything in the little home was sold or pawned to buy bread, and the boy went through those experiences which he ascribes to David Copperfield, and which he touches lightly in his description of Master Peter Cratchit, who "might have known, and very likely did, the inside of a pawnbroker's." Eventually the house was denuded of everything save a few chairs, a kitchen table, and some beds, and there, in the two parlours of the emptied house, the family encamped night and day.

Even worse was to follow, for a little later we find the boy "a child of singular abilities, quick, eager,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

delicate, and soon hurt, bodily and mentally," as he described himself in a fragment of autobiography, working as a poor little drudge in a blacking factory at Hungerford Stairs for a wage of six shillings per week. Never came bird of paradise into more dismal region. The memory of that time and place seared itself on his brain. He described it as "a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats." "Its wainscotted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place rise up visibly before me as if I were there again. The counting-house was on the first floor, looking over the coal-barges and the river. There was a recess in it, in which I was to sit and work. My work was to cover the pots of paste blacking ; first with a piece of oil-paper and then with a piece of blue paper ; to tie them round with a string, and then to clip the paper close and neat all round until it looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary's shop. When a certain number of grosses of pots had attained this pitch of perfection, I was to paste on each a printed label and then go on again with more pots."

His companions were two or three ragged urchins—children of the slums—and no words, he later avowed, could express the secret agony of his soul as he sank into these circumstances. "The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless, of the shame I felt in my position, of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned and thought and delighted in, and raised

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me never to be brought back any more, cannot be written." He little dreamed then of the influence which these things were exerting upon him, or how, out of all the tragic squalor of his life, there were being born the elements, by means of which, he was afterwards to render yeoman aid to the race of men.

It has been said again and again that he never forgot that time ; that to the end of the chapter he remained in many things a dreary boy-drudge. The first contention is undoubtedly true. After a silence of a quarter of a century he wrote : " Until old Hungerford Market was pulled down, until old Hungerford Stairs were destroyed and the very nature of the ground changed, I never had the courage to go back to the place where my servitude began. I never saw it. I could not endure to go near it. For many years, when I came near to Robert Warren's in the Strand, I crossed over to the opposite side of the way to avoid a certain smell of the cement they put upon the blacking corks, which reminded me of what I was once."

Robert Buchanan used to prefer to think and write of Dickens as a great, grown-up, dreamy, impulsive child, who had learnt the things which made some of his characters immortal, not by poring over books within college walls, but by brooding life in stirring streets. Others of our modern men of letters have emphasized the same view, declaring that he never escaped the fog of the dingy warehouse in which he was a drudge ; that though naturally of a light and cheerful temperament, his early experiences so loaded his soul with sorrow that he could never grow any older or

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

rightly shake off, by a spark of volatile spirits, the weight of a world full of suffering. That view I certainly do not share. His faithful historian, Forster, has left an indelible record of the almost inexhaustible fund of natural good spirits upon which he was able to draw quite to the last ; of the intense delight which he evinced in contrasts or anything that savoured of game or sport. Then again, there is the positive evidence that in his own business affairs, and in his outlook on politics and social reform, he was intensely practical, shrewd, painstaking and wide awake. His capacity for romance was but in the nature of things which decrees that every man's mental disposition is a paradox. Even his undoubted humour did not preserve him from occasional excesses of sentiment. Despite his practicality, there was nothing he loved more than to play the part of a child, looking out on to life with bewildered eyes. Mark that half-poetic touch which occurs again and again in his books in characters who, like little Paul Dombey, delight in sitting by the sea of life and wondering what, after all, the incoming waves are saying, or of others who see pictures and faces in the fire or who review snatches of their childhood in the quietude and serenity of the night ! It is undoubtedly true that in his romantic moments, whenever Dickens is vitalizing characteristics or selecting an abstract emotion and radiating his creation outward from that centre, there is an irresistible suggestion and a far-away echo of those troublous times of his boyhood, a faint tremulous fluttering of distant miseries.

Take one instance and see how aptly it reveals the heart of the author himself. He is describing Arthur

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

Clennam, who, when he got back to his lodgings, "sat down before the dying fire, as he had stood at the window of his old room looking out upon the blackened forest of chimneys and turned his gaze back upon the gloomy vista by which he had come to that stage in his existence." That is a typical setting to the scene. Now see how the mood develops.

"He was a dreamer in such wise, because he was a man who had deep-rooted in his nature a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without. Bred in meanness and hard dealing, this had rescued him to be a man of honourable mind and open hand. Bred in coldness and severity, this had rescued him to have a warm and sympathetic heart. Bred in a creed too darkly audacious to pursue, through its process of reversing the making of man in the image of his Creator to the making of his Creator in the image of erring man, this had rescued him to judge not, and, in humility, to be merciful and have hope and charity." That was just the position. From his own experience, Dickens found what kind teachers even the bitternesses and the sorrows of life may be.

In spite of his wage of six shillings per week—nay, rather because of it—Dickens knew what it was to have an appetite unappeased. His mother and the children being in the end forced to share quarters with his father in the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison, the boy obtained still another of those invaluable glimpses into the life of the poor in the lodgings he had to seek, and in the efforts to maintain himself out of his scanty earnings. The details of his struggle, as he has set them down, make pitiful reading. A penny cottage loaf and a

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

pennyworth of milk made up his breakfast, and bread and cheese were the only luxuries he enjoyed for his supper. And day after day, at the blacking factory, he had to economize over his midday meal, comprising two pennyworth of hot pudding, in order to "make his money last through the week." "I know," he says, "I do not exaggerate, unconsciously and unintentionally, the scantiness of my resources and the difficulties of my life. I know that if a shilling or so were given me by any one I spent it in a dinner or a tea. I know that I worked from morning to night with common men and boys, a shabby child. I know that I tried, but ineffectually, not to anticipate my money, and to make it last the week through by putting it away in a drawer I had in the counting-house, wrapped into six little parcels, each parcel containing the same amount and labelled with a different day. I know that I have lounged about the streets insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond." Small wonder, is it not, that in after life he could enter into the spirit and describe in vivid, living prose, the schemings of a mother to keep her children with bread? Small wonder that, throughout the many mutations of his literary life, his zeal for the poor should have remained as constant as it was passionate! Lord Morley years ago declared that hardship in youth creates an interest in men real, and not merely literary. In no case has this been demonstrated more completely than in that of Dickens.

What momentous issues hung upon so mundane an act as a change of lodgings! The boy shifted his

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

quarters to Lant Street, so as to be near his people now living in the debtors' prison, and to the Marshalsea he used to go daily for breakfast and supper. It needs no stretch of the imagination to conceive who sat for that moving picture of the old forbidding Marshalsea in the cold grey of the early dawn, and of a small slight figure dressed in worn clothing waiting for admittance! Amy Dorrit was a child whom the boy met, and he invested her with splendid qualities and gentle attributes, but it is obvious, nevertheless, that he transferred to her story his own actual experiences of the inside and the outside of the debtors' prison. It was an imperishable memory. When, in after years, Time's relentless ravages had razed the foul institution to the ground, the vision of it in his mind was so clear that he could describe its aspect with the minutest accuracy. Writing in May, 1857, he relates how he visited the scene of the one-time prison; how he found the outer front courtyard metamorphosed into a butter shop; how he went to Marshalsea place, "the house in which I recognized not only as the great block of the former prison, but as preserving the rooms that arise in my mind's eye when I become little Dorrit's biographer. The smallest boy I ever conversed with, carrying the largest baby I ever saw, offered a supernaturally intelligent explanation of the locality in its old uses and was very nearly correct . . . A little further on I found the older and smaller wall which used to enclose the pent-up in a prison, where nobody was put except for ceremony. But whoever goes into Marshalsea place . . . will find his feet on the very paving stones of the extinct Marshalsea Gaol; will see its narrow yard to the right and the left,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

very little altered . . . will look upon the rooms in which the debtors lived ; and will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years." Verily for him it was crowded with miserable associations. Modern buildings and the operation of excellent sanitary laws have made it impossible for us to visit this ghost-land of buried hopes and man's despair, but it is of importance, in tracing the effects of his childhood's environment on his after social teachings, to look at the old prison as he saw it out of those wondering, dreaming, boyish eyes of his.

"It was an oblong pile of barrack buildings partitioned into squalid houses standing back to back, so that there were no back rooms environed by a narrow paved yard, hemmed in by high walls duly spiked at top. Itself a close and confined prison for debtors, it contained within a much closer and more confined gaol for smugglers ; offenders against the Revenue Laws and defaulters to Excise or Customs who had incurred fines which they were unable to pay were supposed to be incarcerated behind an iron plated door closing up a second prison consisting of a strong cell or two, and a blind alley some yard and a half wide, which formed the mysterious termination of a very limited skittle ground in which the Marshalsea debtors bowled down their troubles."

"Supposed to be incarcerated there because the time would rather outgrow the strong cells and the blind alley ; in practice they had become to be considered a little too bad, though in theory they were quite as good as ever, which may be observed to be the case at the present day with other cells that are not at all strong

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

and with blind alleys that are stone blind. Hence the smugglers habitually consorted with the debtors (who received them with open arms), except the certain constitutional moments when somebody came from some office to go through some form of overlooking something which neither he nor anybody else knew anything about. On these truly British occasions the smugglers, if any, made a feint of walking into the strong cells and the blind alley while this somebody pretended to do his something and made a reality of walking out again as soon as he hadn't done it—neatly epitomizing the administration of most of the public affairs in our right little tight little island.”

In another place he describes some of the people who haunted this social pest-spot. It was an early morning scene ; the large gates had been opened by the turnkey, “ there was a string of people already struggling in, whom it was not difficult to identify as the non-descript messengers, go-betweens, and errand-bearers of the place. Some of them had been lounging in the rain until the gate should open ; others who had timed their arrival with greater nicety were coming up now and passing in with damp whitey-brown paper bags from the grocers, loaves of bread, lumps of butter, eggs, milk, and the like. The shabbiness of these attendants upon shabbiness, the poverty of these insolvent waiters upon insolvency was a sight to see. Such threadbare coats and trousers, such fusty gowns and shawls, such squashed hats and bonnets, such boots and shoes, such umbrellas and walking-sticks were never seen in Rag Fair. All of them were the cast-off clothes of other men and women—were made of patches and pieces of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

other people's individuality and had no sartorial existence of their own proper. Their walk was the walk of a race apart. They had a peculiar way of doggedly slinking round the corner as if they were eternally going to the pawnbrokers ; when they coughed, they coughed like people accustomed to be forgotten on doorsteps and in draughty passages, waiting for answers to letters in faded ink which gave the recipients of those manuscripts great mental disturbance and no satisfaction. As they eyed the stranger in passing, they eyed him with borrowing eyes—hungry, sharp, speculative as to his softness, if they were accredited to him and the likelihood of his standing something handsome. Mendicity on commission stooped in their high shoulders, shambled in their unsteady legs, buttoned and pinned and darned and dragged their clothes, frayed their button-holes, leaked out their fingers in dirty little ends of tape, and issued from their mouths in alcoholic breathings." That is a wonderful photograph, the negative of which he developed, in his boyish wanderings in and out and about the prison.

But besides the external view of the prison, it was the life inside which arrested the observation and impressed the brain of the boy ; and this we have presented in a series of word-pictures of moving realism. All the Marshalsea scenes in *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit* are obviously straight out of actual experience, and it is impossible to overrate their value as an influence upon the wider question of prison reform with which Dickens in after life became associated. Take as example the well-known scene in *David Copperfield*, where a petition is drawn up praying for the abolition of imprisonment.

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

As a matter of fact, Dickens, whilst his parents languished in gaol, did witness the preparation of such a petition, although it differs slightly from the *Copperfield* scene, and his description of that incident is worth recording because he says, "It illustrates to me my early interest in observing people." This is how his narrative runs: "When I went to the Marshalsea of a night I was always delighted to hear from my mother that she knew about the histories of the different debtors in the prison; and when I heard of this approaching ceremony (the signing of the petition) I was so anxious to see them all come in . . . that I got leave of absence on purpose, and established myself in a corner, near the petition. It was stretched out, I recollect, on a great ironing-board, under the window, which in another part of the room made a bedstead at night. The internal regulations of the place—for cleanliness and order, and for the government of a common room in the ale-house, where hot water and some means of cooking and a good fire were provided for all who paid a very small subscription—were excellently administered by a governing committee of debtors, of which my father was chairman for the time being. As many of the principal officers of this body as could be got into the small room without filling it up supported him in front of the petition; and my old friend, Captain Porter (who had washed himself to do honour to so solemn an occasion), stationed himself close to it to read it to all who were unacquainted with its contents. The door was then thrown open, and they began to come in, in a long file; several waiting on the landing outside, while one entered, affixed his signature and went out.

"To everybody in succession Captain Porter said,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

‘ Would you like to hear it read ? ’ If he weakly showed the least disposition to hear it, Captain Porter, in a loud, sonorous voice, gave him every word of it. I remember a certain luscious roll to such words as ‘ Majesty,’ ‘ gracious Majesty,’ ‘ your gracious Majesty’s unfortunate subjects,’ ‘ your Majesty’s well-known munificence ’ —as if the words were something real in his mouth and delicious to taste ; my poor father meanwhile listening with a little of an author’s vanity and contemplating (not severely) the spikes on the opposite wall. Whatever was comical in this scene, and whatever was pathetic, I sincerely believed I perceived in my corner, whether I demonstrated or not, quite as well as I should perceive it now. I made out my little character and story for every man who put his name to the sheet of paper. I might be able to do that now more truly ; not more earnestly, or with a closer interest. Their different peculiarities of dress, of face, of gait, of manner, were written indelibly upon my memory. I would rather have seen it than the best play ever played ; and I thought about it afterwards over the pots of paste-blackening often and often. When I looked with my mind’s eye into the Fleet prison during Mr. Pickwick’s incarceration, I wonder whether half a dozen men were wanting from the Marshalsea crowd that came filing in again to the sound of Captain Porter’s voice ! ”

Similarly, it says something for the clear mental balance of the novelist that in the years that followed he could look back at that grim and squalid institution, recall all the agony of soul which his association and that of his family, with it, meant for him, and yet think kindly of it in its human aspects. “ Nor am I so much

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

ashamed of the place as might be supposed. People are not bad because they come here. I have known numbers of good, persevering, honest people come there through misfortune. They are almost all kind-hearted to one another, and it would be ungrateful indeed in me to forget that I have had many quite comfortable hours there . . . that I have been taught there, and have worked there, and have slept soundly there. I think it would be almost cowardly and cruel not to have some little attachment for it after all this." So speaks Amy Dorrit, and so thought Charles Dickens. It did at least teach him the one great truth he so insistently expounded: that it is the poor who are most generous and helpful to the poor; and that they who have experienced the pain of poverty, alone can justly comprehend its pangs.

Happily the time arrived when this veritable Odyssey of indigence and misfortune could be brought to a close. As a result of a change of fortune, the Dickens family were able to leave the Marshalsea, and by and by the boy was taken from the blacking warehouse and sent again to school. The lark that had been beating its little self against the relentless bars of its cage was released, and soared away to a rarer and purer air.

But those days of sorrow and misery for "a certain ill-clad, ill-fed child" were not in vain. It was not, in the case of Dickens, merely that he learnt in suffering what he afterwards taught in prose. The influence was deeper than that. In his narratives he does not describe poverty and pain as a thing apart: he lays bare himself. It is his own broken child-heart which one sees—the picture of his own childish tragedy.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Forster realized that quite clearly, for he says, “. . . with the very poor and the unprosperous, out of whose sufferings and strugglings and the virtues, as well as the vices born of them, his not the least splendid successes were wrought, his childish experiences had made him actually one. They were not his clients whose cause he pleaded with such pathos and humour, and on whose side he got the laughter and the tears of all the world, but in some sort his very self.” And they remained “his very self” until the end. In Russell Lowell’s fine lines—

“He to his heart, with large embrace, had taken
The universal sorrow of mankind.”

He had the supreme gift of fruitful sympathy, but his work was more than the outcome of it. From story after story there issued brilliant flashes of lurid realism; vivid pictures of the poverty he himself had known and the misery he had himself endured. And because of those early experiences of bitterness he was able to render luminous large tracts of human existence, which to the mass of the middle and upper classes of his time lay hidden under the very weight and ugliness of their collective evils. As George Gissing observed, he loved to play the advocate and the friend to those with whom nature and man have dealt most cruelly. Upon a Smeke (*Nicholas Nickleby*) or a Maggy (*Little Dorrit*), and, he might have added, Poor Jo (*Bleak House*), he lavished his tenderness, simply because they were hapless creatures from whom even ordinarily kind people would turn with involuntary dislike. “Maggy is a starved and diseased idiot, a very child of the London gutter, moping and mowing to signify her pleasures or her pains. Dickens gives her, for protector, the brave and large-hearted

16

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

child of the Marshalsea, whose own sufferings have taught her to be compassionate to those who suffer still more. Maggy is to be rescued from filth and cold and hunger; is to be made as happy as her nature will allow. It is nobly done, and undoubtedly an example of more value to the world than any glorification of triumphant intellect." Precisely, and it is so because Dickens, having suffered even as Little Dorrit suffered, felt the glow of ineradicable compassion for all who were weak and oppressed. Little Dorrit and Maggy are creatures who come straight out of the days of his own boyish tragedy.

What a contrast was this childhood of his to that of his great admirer and contemporary, John Ruskin! The one—the latter—was, we are told, encompassed in boyhood by all the luxuries of a middle-class home, where wealth was visibly swelling, enjoying the best books, the choicest art, the most interesting travels, picked teachers, and the constant care of devoted parents. The other—ah, what a record it was!—a delicate child buffeted about in the hurly-burly of sternest facts and realities, down in the very morass of industry; a child-slave neglected and forlorn; craving for sympathy and understanding which never came, snatching his recreation from arduous labour by playing on cinder-heaps or coal-barges with little waifs from the slums, or wandering, solitary and friendless, about the great busy streets, stinting and scheming to make ends meet; unprovided with literature save the books he could surreptitiously borrow; stealing off to Covent Garden to compare it with the description in a book he had read; his earliest years filled

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

with the sense of neglect and dominated by the sordid conflict with debt and hunger and want.

Ruskin declares that in his home life, with its pervading attributes of peace, obedience, faith, truth, honesty, and perfect exactitude of conduct, there was nothing to love and nothing to endure. In Dickens's case there was, in very truth, little to love, but much to endure, and yet out of it there arose complete felicity and illimitable affection. There was no "enervating calm" about the early home life of Dickens; and yet perhaps there is no writer of the English language who has more persistently and continuously and effectively taught the gospel of the sacredness of home life and the divinity which hedges itself about domestic affection and peace. Scene after scene of happy firesides of homes where love dwells, where the humblest and most prosaic acts are exalted to virtues, where there is instinctive sympathy and electric affection, where the father is honoured, the mother revered, where common daily service is the consecration of humble lives; all these things flood the memory. Take, for instance, the Cratchit family in *A Christmas Carol*, or Dot and John Peerybingle and Bertha and Caleb Plummer in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, or the doctor's family in the *Battle of Life*, or Joe and Pip in *Great Expectations*, or Barnaby and his mother in *Barnaby Rudge*, or Mr. Jarndyce, Ada, and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*. In every one of these cases we see how much Dickens loved the homely fireside, how intense was his affection for the domestic circle.

But it was the home life of the poor which Dickens most adored. In every humble family he depicts, there

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

were virtues of unselfishness and love which stir the blood. Read that scene where the boy Kit, having come to the end of his first quarter in employment, resolves to give his mother "a whirl of entertainments," and note with what real glee and downright enjoyment the author enters into the humble delights of these poor folk. "Let me linger in this place," he says (the scene is from the *Old Curiosity Shop*), "to remark that if ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor. The ties that bind the wealthy and the proud to home may be forged on earth, but those which link the poor man to his humble hearth are of the truer metal, and bear the stamp of Heaven. The man of high descent may love the halls and lands of his inheritance as a part of himself—as trophies of his birth and power; his associations with them are associations of pride and wealth and triumph; the poor man's attachment to the tenement he holds which strangers have held before and may to-morrow occupy again has a worthier root, stuck deep in a purer soil. His household gods are of flesh and blood with no alloy of silver, gold, or precious stone; he has no property but in the affections of his own heart; and when they endear bare floors and walls, despite of rags and toil and scanty fare, that man has his love of home from God, and his rude hut becomes solemn place."

Here we have the germs of his passion for housing reform, to which we shall later refer.

It is easy, however, to see that this piece of moralizing is no mere sop thrown to appease popular sentiment, but the real conviction of his life. As a child he knew what "bare floors and walls" were; he experienced

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

in his own career "rags and toil and scanty fare," and yet he knew the love of home. It was not "class feeling" that betrayed him into that outburst, as some of the critics would have us believe; it was stern economic circumstance and bitter personal experience. In this matter of laughing firesides, as in so many other things, Dickens was the exponent of homely emotions. All that we in our drab lives look forward to with glistening eyes he embodied in his characters. He made concrete figures of our ideals and clothed the astral spirits of our dreams with the flesh and frailties of our common humanity.

And this was part of his unconscious reform work. His teachings were always more ethical than political. The very need of the poor was the excuse for their ignorance; their lack of opportunities in life, and the fact that they were incapable of knowing better, in itself demanded consideration for them at the hands of the educated and informed. His reform work was the outcome of emotion; he gave it an emotional character, awakening through his stories just the spirit which makes plain and easy the way to reform, and, as Herbert Spencer has told us, it is only by repeatedly awakening the appropriate emotions that character can be changed. "Mere ideas received by the intellect, meeting no response from within, are quite inoperative upon conduct." Dickens saw this. He very rarely appealed or sought to appeal to the highly specialized intellect, which deals in precise refinements; his mission was rather to touch the heart and stimulate a robust common sense. He believed, in quite other than the old narrow theological sense, that the heart would prompt the

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES OF EARLY LIFE

mind to right ideas of social relationship between man and man. Let it not be thought, however, that Dickens was one merely to promulgate views. He did not stop there, as we shall presently see. He believed that ideas should be converted into acts, and he enunciated those ideas in the plainest and most practicable terms possible. He held, with Carlyle, that "conviction, were it ever so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into conduct," and the conduct he sought to inspire, whilst addressed to the reason of man, never omitted the very tangible element of conscience or soul. All this, I think, was directly traceable to his intuitive sympathies and instincts. He believed in the Spencerian philosophy that each man in whom dissatisfaction is aroused by institutions which have survived from a less civilized past, or whose sympathies make certain evils repugnant to him, must regard those feelings as units in the aggregate of forces by which progress is brought about. It may have been insufficient, but he held it to be a desirable thing to help to create an *atmosphere* in which progress could flourish; he regarded his feelings of love for the poor as units in this army for human freedom, and he *did* expend those feelings in appropriate deeds. For the moment it is enough for us to know that those feelings which prompted the demands that social sores should be healed, were the direct and obvious outcome of his early environment and experience.

CHAPTER II

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

THERE are people to-day who hold that it is a misuse of terms to describe Dickens as a Social Reformer. That he concerned himself with social questions they freely admit ; they deny that he was a democrat or that he ever attained to a theory of reform. George Gissing was, probably more than any one, responsible for the promulgation of this view, inasmuch as from the high vantage ground of his generous appreciation of the novelist, he subjected Dickens's political philosophy to the searching criticism of Collectivist economy.

Not infrequently it is possible to hear men, whose admiration of Dickens as a storyteller is entirely genuine, declaim against his attitude to social problems ; avow that he retarded the permanent alleviation of social evils by reconciling the middle classes to the idea of temporary reform ; that his scheme of life took no account of economic truths ; that he believed all would be well if workmen were honest, sober, industrious, and employers sympathetic, just and benevolent. The Cheeryble Brothers are alleged to be the embodiment of his views as to the proper relationships between Capital and Labour ; the self-made man and his worldly success are said to represent the ideal which Dickens

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

heartily approved. The whole of these charges concentrated, usually resolve themselves into the assertion that Dickens was a middle-class Radical whose attitude to the poor was one of pity rather than of understanding.

This is a much mistaken view. It is based upon a fundamental error which has vitiated all conclusions. The assumption is that the term "social reform" is inelastic and arbitrary; that to merit the description of "social reformer" a person must have an objective system of economics to propound, must have made a precise science of the remedies for social ills, and be possessed of an exact grasp of industrial physiology. A doctrine at once so narrow and dogmatic as that would exclude from the category of reformers some of the greatest and most illustrious names in humanitarian literature. Shelley, Byron, Hugo, Coleridge, Browning, Wordsworth, Whitman, Swinburne, all those valiant soldiers in the Army of Freedom, would be ruled out with one stroke of the pen. For none of these understood the precise economic defects which made miseries possible, nor did they understand by what means society would evolve from the chaos in which it was weltering, the cosmic order under which alone it is possible for the liberty and happiness of all to be preserved. These men, on the contrary, were inspired only by indignation against oppression, by impulsive pity for human suffering, by a belief in "a stream of tendency, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness," by aspirations towards a happy and serene ordering of human affairs of which the mass of men scarce dream, "by the fire of greater passions whose speech and deeds seem madness to the steady world."

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

It was their instinctive sympathy for the fundamental principles of justice out of which reform grows, rather than their actual schemes of social melioration, which made them reformers. If this is true of the poetic band, it is singularly true of Dickens. His, like theirs, was the faith which did not argue, it was all-sufficient to have profound belief and unswerving convictions. He saw that all men were equal in their relations to the common feelings and duties of the race ; that in suffering, in love, in the visions and longings of youth and age, there was an eternal equality, and like all the great poets, his work in this realm has drawn men and women of every class and rank into closer sympathy with each other, and placed them hand in hand on a common ground of humanity. To him, mere distinctions of class were simply abhorrent. He had a supreme contempt for pride of birth or station. A titled nobility carried with it not a title to privilege, but an obligation of service, and in book after book we have the same stinging reproof of class insolence and pride, when, as he mostly put it, and, it must be added, mostly found, it was unaccompanied by personal worth. It was the melodious enunciation of such views as these which gave the great poets their claim to the distinctive titles of " pioneers " and " reformers " and on these grounds neither the one nor the other can be denied to Dickens.

Moreover, as Mr. J. A. Hobson very pertinently points out, if we use the term " social reform " in the broad sense to describe those larger changes in the working of society which aim directly at some general improvement of human life as distinguished from such work of reform as attacks narrower and more specific

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

defects, we shall find that men come to this work by widely different paths. Often it is the personal experience of some concrete evil that first awakens a sense of social wrong and a desire for redress: reform energy once generated is fed by a natural flow from various neighbouring channels of activity, the stream broadening as it goes, until the man whose early activity was stimulated by the desire to break down some little barrier which dams the stream in his back garden, finds himself breasting the tide of some oceanic movement. On the other hand, there are men who come to social reform work out of simple impulse and emotion arising out of a detailed knowledge of the facts of life as a thing apart from economics or a science of government. And that was so in the case of Dickens. All his work was the outcome of accurate analytic observation and close scrutiny; his excursions into the regions of social problems were due to the fact that he found his heart aflame for social justice, and the passion of revolt against tyranny and oppression stirred within him.

It is true that Dickens had but the most elementary knowledge of political economy as such. Indeed, he appears to have shared the old and not too accurate idea that political economy was a dry-as-dust hobby, in which sociologists and other uninviting people constantly speculate. What is, however, equally certain is, that in the reference he did make to it, he vowed emphatically that he shared Ruskin's view that no scheme of life, no political organization of industry, was or would be complete which did not provide that all labour should only be pursued under conditions which would allow human qualities full play and which would

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

promote the whole round of human happiness. Ruskin's full, final conception of political economy as a science of human welfare, we are told, included within its scope not merely the processes by which men gain a livelihood, but all human efforts and satisfactions. It was, in short, the famous Spencerian dogma, that the essential question to all of us is how to live, not in the material sense merely, but in the widest sense, or as the philosopher put it himself, "the general problem which comprehends every special problem is the right ruling of conduct in all directions, under all circumstances." And that, consciously or unconsciously, is the general moral to be drawn from all the theories of human relationship which Dickens scattered throughout his books.

His emotions and impulses led him to insist that industry ought not to be regarded as the whole of life, nor a thing apart from life. The organization of labour must neither involve the suppression of the personal human qualities of either employer or employed, nor must any commercial concern be conducted on such a basis, that the man, as a worker, was considered quite apart from his position as man, the human. Dickens's criticism of the teachings of the economists was sentimental rather than scientific, although regarded by himself as practical, but he poured out the vials of his wrath none the less effectively upon the school who have their representatives in Mr. Gradgrind: "It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything or render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished,

26

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

and the virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind from birth to death was to be a bargain across the counter. And if we didn't get to heaven it was not a politico-economical place, and we had no business there." Here in inimitable satire is his repudiation of the theory of the mercantile economists that "the whole social system is a matter of self-interests," and that "man as an industrious animal, a getter and spender of money, is a separate thing from man as a friend, a lover, a father, a citizen."

This, it seems to me, is the most effective reply to the critics who urge that the relationships of the Cheeryble Brothers to Tim Linkinwater and Nicholas Nickleby, represented Dickens's ideal of masters and men. It is true that the Cheeryble Brothers stood for a moral theory with the novelist. It is not that the labour problem could be disposed of by benevolence or unselfishness on the part of employers so much as the recognition that the best labour is only performed by men when they are happiest. Examine story after story, and there emerges the same idea. Master and man prospered where the relationship between them was such as to bring the affection of both into full play. Gratitude, forbearance, kindness, sympathy, on the part of the master, has its counterpart in the devotion and increased fidelity of the workman to his work. That was Dickens's theory; that is the theory which the critics affect to despise, because it leaves untouched the larger question of such an organization of society as shall give these very desirable virtues full play, and shall render unemployment and poverty impossible. Yet, if it is examined minutely, it will be seen that in this very

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

theory the soundest, and indeed the only true political economy had expression. Men may grope blindly in the dark, and yet stumble across truth, if they do but follow courageously the promptings of the human heart towards fraternity. In our day we are sifting the inhumanities from political economy. We are realizing that it is an unnatural divorce—that of separating the highest attributes of our humanity from the science of human well-being. And Dickens, with nothing but his intuitive sympathies, stumbled across the very fact which Ruskin made the basis of his scheme of industrial physiology, namely, that the motive power of man's labour is man's soul.

“The largest quantity of work will not be done for pay or under pressure. It will be done only when the motive force, that is to say, the will or spirit of the creature, is brought up to its greatest strength by its own proper fuel, namely, by the affections.” In short, the whole lesson of the Cheeryble Brothers is a splendid pleading for the abolition of merely personal profit as the object, end, or motive of industry. Profit is only justified for the social service it can render ; the wealth which the Cheerybles derived was devoted to the ends which made for happiness. That, surely, is sound social reform teaching ; at least it is that advocacy of social order which Ruskin crystallized in one pregnant phrase when he said, “The final outcome and consummation of all wealth is in the producing, as many as possible, full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human beings.”

It was Dickens's general humanitarian revolt against the aristocratic tyranny of his time which induced the

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

critics to speak of him as merely the advocate of the poor, who pleaded with the middle classes to bestow some charity on the less fortunate. Of course he was more than that. He possessed the democratic instinct for popular equality, and held firmly his faith in the people. "My moral creed—which is a very wide and comprehensive one, and includes all sects and parties—is very easily summed up," he said in a speech in 1842. "I have faith, and I wish to diffuse faith in the existence—yes, of beautiful things, even in those conditions of society who are so degenerate, degraded, and forlorn, that at first sight it would seem as though they could not be described, but by a strange and terrible reversal of Scripture, 'God said, let there be light, and there was none.' I take it that we are born, and that we hold our sympathies, hopes, and energies *in trust for the many and not for the few*. That we cannot hold in too strong a light of disgust and contempt before the view of others, all meanness, falsehood, cruelty, and oppression of every grade and kind. Above that, nothing is high because it is in a high place; and that nothing is low because it is in a low one." Here the note struck is obviously one of the most intensely democratic. Only when our energies and our strength, our gifts and our abilities, are used for "the many," are we faithful custodians. The treasures of life are only justified when they are shared by the mass and not by a privileged class.

Later, in the same speech indeed, he emphasized the sin of selfishness, and the futility, as well as the wickedness, of imagining that it is possible for men to have happiness in isolation from their fellows. We are

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

members one of another, and individual progress is impossible apart from some measure of general progress; at least without some earnest interest in the promotion of such general progress, we lack the essential element in our own individual culture. What William Morris so often tried to teach us, namely, that class art must necessarily be base and vulgar, and that only that art which arises naturally out of the free and joyous life of "the many" can be true and beautiful, all else wearing the chain and stamp of the commercialism upon which it rests, Dickens himself held to be sovereign truth. There is neither life, nor joy, nor art possible in selfish isolation; these can only come as the product of the common life of the nation. They must not be denied the many and given to the few; they can only come as a reward for a faithful share in the common round. When Dickens taught that he foreshadowed the idea which is coming so largely to dominate our social thinking to-day, and one which is based upon the soundest and most incontrovertibly democratic principles. Nor was this proclamation of the rights of "the many" an isolated one. Again and again one comes across references to the same thought differently expressed.

At one time Dickens urges that our primary duty is to help in the uplifting of "the community at large"; at another is bespeaking "your enlightened care for the happiness of the many"; at another quoting favourite strophes from Tennyson's *Palace of Art* and *Lady Clara Vere de Vere*, in which the same lesson is taught. Always the message is the same—the inalienable right of all men to equality of opportunity for social service and self-development. It cannot be said, either, that this view

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

of his democratic leanings is weakened by that confession of political faith which he made at a great gathering in Birmingham in 1869: "I will now discharge my conscience of my political creed, which is contained in two articles, and has no reference to any party or persons. My faith in the people governing is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in the people governed is, on the whole, illimitable." George Gissing, it is true, used to affect to believe that this phrase, which had bewildered many newspapers, was a further proof that Dickens "was never a democrat; in his heart of hearts he always held that to be governed was the people's good." This seems to be strangely inconsequent finding, for Dickens himself pointed out a few months later that the charge of ambiguity was not justified, and certainly on that occasion he used expressions which prove the precise antithesis of Gissing's contention. His faith in those who were governing the people was small; his faith in the great mass of the people who were governed was boundless. The declaration was not that it was "good to be governed" in the narrow sense in which the word is used, but that he had the profoundest belief that in spite of the yoke of class government, the people, the great mass of toiling, sinning, erring people, would yet work out their own salvation.

This is no mere sympathetic interpretation of Dickens's views, for in order to make his meaning quite clear and free from all other dispute he uses Buckle's words: "They may talk as they will about reforms which Government has introduced, and improvements to be expected from legislation, but whoever will take a wider and more commanding view of human affairs will

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

soon discover that such hopes are chimerical. They will learn that law-givers are nearly always the obstructers of society instead of its helpers, and that in the extremely few cases where their measures have turned out well their success has been owing to the fact that, contrary to their usual custom, they have implicitly obeyed the spirit of their time, and have been—as they always should be—the mere servants of the people, to whose wishes they are bound to give a public and legal sanction.” Dickens approved these words specifically (Birmingham, January 6th, 1870). He believed not as Gissing would have us to think he did, that “the vast majority of men are unfit to form sound views on what is best for them,” and that “though the voice of the people must be heard, it cannot always be allowed to rule,” but that the people should be represented by themselves; that Parliament should give expression to the views of the many, should exist to redress their grievances, promote their well-being and happiness, and make laws for their greater prosperity.

And here Dickens disagreed with Ruskin, as many of us think, rightly so, for whereas the latter believed that social progress would come through an hereditary aristocracy, the other, out of large observation and actual experience of the poor, believed that the patronage which it would inflict would cripple and enslave, and that the only hope of social conditions being made healthy rested with the people themselves.

The only ground the critics have for their contempt of Dickens's middle-class leanings is that he was largely a mediator in our social life. Whilst he was the unflinching champion of the poor, whilst he exposed evils

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

with an undaunted courage and suffered continually abuse for his pains, he yet believed that progress would be won more by general concensus of faith and desire, than by class uprising; he advocated nothing merely for the sake of gratifying the restless pruriency of innovation. For this reason his stories seem to bear the design of reconciling the upper and the middle classes (more especially the latter) to the inevitability of change and reform. He taught them that social change did not mean national disaster; that they could have complete faith and assurance in the sturdy common sense of the British people. He stood for steady and prudent advance, not only because he believed that in progress and in improvement in the conditions of the poor lay the real safety and security of other classes. The danger which existed in the neglect of public evils he recognized always. Like Matthew Arnold, he had a fine sense of scorn for

“The barren optimistic sophistries
Of comfortable moles,”

and in *A Tale of Two Cities* he constantly insists that the French Revolution was evoked not because the principles of human brotherhood and industrial emancipation were waiting to be applied to a bold and illfated social experiment, but because oppression had stalked abroad, corruption had eaten out the hearts of nobles and of kings, and indifference—stolid, immovable indifference to the needs of the poor—prevailed in the national life. For him this great internecine struggle possessed no tinselled splendours.

Just as the insular nationalism of Tennyson had caused him to jeer at “the red fool fury of the Seine,”

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

and the middle-class and timorous Arnold to utter that piercing poetic jibe, "France famed in all great arts: in none supreme," so Dickens, whilst exciting our sympathy for the revolutionists, realized but imperfectly all the Revolution has meant for us, and the sheer gain which has come to England, for example, as a result of that singularly tragic, swift, and audacious act in which the people of France engaged. He did not see that certain ideas of liberty were forged in the memorable heat of that bloody time, which we, as a nation, have since approved. All he did see clearly was that France's mistake must be avoided; that by patient and gradual reform we should obviate extreme or raw haste and excesses in political discontent. To him the schemes of social betterment were "too great for haste, too high for rivalry." In so far as this is a fault, it is so only because it is the excess of a great virtue. He was fearful lest the waves of democracy, through dashing too high and relentlessly upon the bulwarks of privilege, should recede the further for the effort. He believed that by the steadier flow would the ground be permanently gained. But he had faith in the final issue all the same. "In my sphere of action I have tried to understand the heavy social grievances of our time, and to help to set them right." That was no idle boast, but the one outstanding feature of his work was that in all his declarations of human equality he went to the very roots of social problems, and impressed the divine stamp upon the uppermost claims of democracy. "I have found even in evil things that soul of goodness which the Creator has put in them. Throughout my life I have been anxious to show that virtue may be

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

found in the by-ways of the world, that it is not incompatible with poverty and even with rags."

Therein was he true to the traditions of the great reforming literary band, which had revolted against the narrow metropolitanism and aristocratic banalities of Pope.

Thomson had struck the first democratic note in "The Seasons" by reprehending the prevailing callousness to the sufferings of the poor. Crabbe had derided the proud pretensions of the arrogantly rich. Goldsmith had uttered his protest against the lordly theft of the people's common land, and warned the nation that "a bold peasantry, their country's pride, when once destroyed can never be supplied." Gray had chastized the insolence of those who disdained "the short and simple annals of the poor." Johnson had hurled forth with stinging emphasis his description of the miseries of the people of London and launched his satirical inquiry: "Has Heaven reserved in pity to the poor no pathless waste or undiscovered shore?" Blake in perfectly beautiful lyric song had revealed his own passionate pity for the oppressed. The great Northern ploughman-poet Burns had foretold the coming of human equality in simple verse which has since become an axiom of common speech. Coleridge, under the influence of that now forgotten poet William Lisle Bowes, had already heralded the time when "Liberty, the soul of life shall reign, shall throb in every pulse, shall flow thro' every vein." Whitman had told us "that amid the measureless grossness and the slag, enclosed and safe within its central heart, nestles the seed-perfection." Tennyson had declared that he had found ploughmen

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

and shepherds, veritable "sons of God and kings of men in utter nobleness of mind." Carlyle was uttering his fierce diatribes against mistaken nobility. Ruskin was preaching a new doctrine of brotherhood in service. Robert Browning was writing poetry which "shows a heart blood-tinctured of a veined humanity." Lowell was penning his matchless songs of freedom, declaring that "the slave, where'er he cowers feels the soul within him climb." Mrs. Browning was plucking up "social fictions bloody rooted," and averring that "first and last are equal, saint and corpse and little child." And so one might proceed. Democracy was being deified in literature and art. The long-neglected were invited to claim their inheritance. The nobility of humble men was being taught, and Dickens came to the teaching with an enthusiastic regard for its truth. He endeavoured, by the might of his energies, as Professor Wilson (Christopher North) well said, "to transmute what was base into what is as precious as beaten gold."

"I believe," said Dickens, "that Virtue shows quite as well in rags and patches as she does in purple and fine linen. I believe that she and every beautiful object in external nature claims some sympathy in the breast of the poorest man who breaks his scanty loaf of daily bread. I believe that she goes bare-footed as well as shod. I believe that she dwells rather oftener in alleys and by-ways than she does in courts and palaces." Here, again, his words ring true, when tested at the heart of social reform, for it is no question of present fitness which determines ultimately social and political changes. Fitness is only found in the exercise of disputed privileges. It is faith, that in all humanity

THE INSTINCTS OF REFORM

there is the same nature, from which the realized fitness of the privileged class has been evoked, which is the prophecy that the same opportunity will produce the same fitness in all.

So that whilst Dickens was not the exponent of any particular theory of general constructive reform, whilst his teaching was limited to emphasizing the necessity for better sanitation and housing and education and denouncing the evils of landlordism, the poor law, the prison system, gambling, usury, war, slavery, child-labour, sweating, and other particular social defects, he yet became the prose-prophet of the cause of social reform itself, and the firm upholder of that which alone is the assurance of its ultimate success, namely, our equality in the primary and fundamental instincts of faith and love and duty. Only from such an equality can just political and social institutions rise and take shape.

CHAPTER III

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

THERE is one aspect, seen from which, the genius of Dickens stands pre-eminent in the whole realm of English literature. He is emphatically our greatest, in some respects our only, interpreter of childhood. More ; he it was who first introduced children into fiction. His supreme triumph, in fact, lies in this : that, while his predecessors were driven almost to exclude children from their works, he wrote of them as freely, naturally, and convincingly, as of their elders.

To-day we are all familiar with children in fiction. We have almost a surfeit of books, in which they play a real part, even where they are not the central figures. Their bright fancies have lit up many a dull page of contemporary novels ; their charm has held many a creaky story together. Often their psychology interests us long after we have surrendered their elders in boredom and despair. Some of the most vivid stories of our time have been written round the personalities of little children. Who has not cried over *Baa, Baa Black Sheep*, or laughed with Pett Ridge's *Son of the State* ? But, remember, till Dickens wrote, such stories were not dreamt of in the philosophy of the novelist. Strange as it seems, till the sun of his genius rose, childhood found practically no expression in English

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

literature. The sketch of Arthur in *King John*, a few fragments of Sir Walter Scott; a chapter or so of *Tristram Shandy* and one or two incredible schoolgirls by Jane Austen—that is all we have of childhood in our literature till Dickens appeared. There has been since an extraordinary output of books, in which children are prominent, from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Little Lord Fauntleroy*; from *Alice in Wonderland* to *Peter Pan*, and *Tom Brown's School Days*. But, in those far-off unhappy days, the only work one can recall as being concerned much with children is that egregious libel upon them, *Sandford and Merton*. The psychology of the child was almost a closed book and the poorer classes were not only taboo, but anathema, in literature, the typical view of any attempt to depict their condition being that of the *Quarterly Review*, which objected, it will be remembered, *in toto* to *Oliver Twist*, with “its representations of the haunts, deeds, language and characters of the very dregs of the community;” an objection that gives us a tolerably good insight into the England that Dickens scourged and shamed, and lashed and laughed away, until it is no more. Dickens, in fact, re-discovered childhood for England, and as an interpreter of its thousand and one varying moods, its extraordinary intuitions, its swift and solemn confidences, its elusive reticences, its joys, and its sorrows, he stands, not merely supreme but almost alone, without a rival or a competitor, with only his pupils and his imitators in the whole of English Literature. While other novelists write of children as of exotics, and with an obvious strain and effort, catching only a few of their moods and presenting

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

these to us as a triumph, Dickens's pages are crowded with all sorts and conditions of children, jostling each other and their elders, ranging from poor little Paul Dombey, with the premonition of death lying heavy upon his tender spirit, to the robustious Master Jack Dawson, *alias* "The Artful Dodger," facing the Bow Street magistrate—and the hulks and transportation—with unruffled impudence and unbroken front; from Little Nell, with ashen face lined by cares beyond her years, to the beautifully *nonchalant* Marchioness, playing "crib" in the damp kitchen. The veriest glimpse of a child through his magic spectacles is worth more than half a dozen completed studies from other pens. Only Meredith approaches him in his almost uncanny intuition into the strange world of boyhood, through which we have all travelled and which opens again to us only at a magician's touch. But Meredith's excursions into boyland are few and far between. Generally his juvenile leads are given a scene or two all to themselves. Dickens's boys and girls, on the other hand, come on and off the stage with the other characters and one is conscious that the master writes of them with no more effort than he does of the adults, whom they alternately dismay and delight. Dickens realized that every man is at heart a boy, or at least, that boyhood is latent to him, and it was his appreciation of this fact that led him to some of his most superb triumphs in characterization—to the immortal Micawber, to Sam Weller, and to that Swiveller who played "Away with melancholy" all night on the flute, what time his landlady waited outside his door to give him notice—surely the most unconscionable boy in all fiction!

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

But, there was another reason for that instinctive grip of boyhood that never left Dickens all his days. As I have already shown, the facts of life had been beaten into his young soul when he was of an age at which most men of letters are leading careless, happy, untroubled lives at school. There is a passage in *Copperfield*, where David at the age of seven goes to call on Captain Hopkins in the Marshalsea prison, and "found him with a very dirty lady in his little room and two wan little girls, his daughters, with shock heads of hair. I thought it was better to borrow Captain Hopkins's knife and fork, than Captain Hopkins's comb. The Captain himself was in the last extremity of shabbiness, with large whiskers, and an old, old brown great coat with no other coat below it. I saw his bed rolled up in a corner; and what plates and dishes and pots he had, on a shelf; and I divined (God knows how) that though the two girls with the shock heads of hair were Captain Hopkins's children, the dirty lady was not married to Captain Hopkins. My timid station on his threshold was not occupied more than a couple of minutes at most; but I came down again with all this in my knowledge, as surely as the knife and fork were in my hand."

The mind that wrote these lines had been hurt into feeling, shocked into consciousness, forced to realize the facts, years and years before most children have ceased to play. He became a man, while he was yet a boy, but—as we shall see—he never lost his boyhood, and the result was, that as has been finely said, Dickens grew up, not to feel *for* children but *with* them. It was this fact that enabled him to achieve what no other English man of letters had then attempted, and to

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

interpret the childhood that till then, had been unrepresented, in the whole realm of literature.

And if we accept for a moment the definition of a reformer given in a previous chapter: that the real pioneer is not he who frames Acts of Parliament and by-laws, but rather the man whose compelling genius creates such an atmosphere as renders them inevitable, then indeed we shall see in this achievement of Dickens the greatest service he has rendered to social reform. We have only to let our minds dwell for a moment on the horrors of child-life when Dickens first wrote, to contrast the extraordinary apathy and unconcern with which England viewed its appalling and ghastly waste, with the temper of mind that prevails to-day upon the subject, to realize how tremendous an obligation we are under to Dickens in this respect. The England into which he was born had practically forgotten childhood, or at least had ceased to think of it, as something precious and beautiful, to be cherished and protected whenever possible. The cry of the little ones was drowned in the ceaseless rattle of the cotton mills, whose wheels they pushed with tired, puny hands. They were "seeking death in life, as best to have." Almost alone in England, William Blake continually raised his voice—that of one crying in the wilderness—against the abomination of forcing their stunted frames up narrow chimneys to clear away the soot. There was no one to denounce the horror of their little naked bodies trembling beneath the cruel weight of a coal truck, in the bowels of the earth. No longer in Mrs. Browning's words do we "stand to move the world on a child's heart," or "stifle down with mailed heel its palpitation."

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

To-day we have changed all that—the child is paramount! A hundred Acts of Parliament protect its rights, philanthropists, whose name is legion, cry aloud its needs. Class distinctions, political obsessions, even religious differences, all are forgotten in its service, whose welfare is now the supreme law.

And the credit of effecting this great and bloodless revolution must be given to Dickens.

Should proof be required let the reader ponder over his observations of child-life as is revealed in *Great Expectations*; remark his descriptions of the little *Necketts* and of Charley; or re-enact mentally the scene between the Constable and Jo; or weep in pity at the story of Jo's death and the author's compassionate moralizings on waifs—all in *Bleak House*. In no tenderer note could we have heard the pathetic story of the hunger of a child than in *Oliver Twist*, and no more resentful voice could have thundered forth its remonstrance against child-labour than that which arises from *Nicholas Nickleby*. Verily, Dickens was chief among the early liberators of the Innocent Young.

True, there have been others at work in the child's cause. There has been the constant activity of legislators, backed up by newspaper campaigns, popular agitations, and above all by the ceaseless pressure of public opinion. But who was it that first created that opinion if not Charles Dickens? What was the reason—to go a little deeper into the matter—that cruelties such as those I have described were ever tolerated by a people so naturally kind-hearted as our own? Surely it was because England had forgotten; it had lost the charm of childhood. Mr. G. K. Chesterton has said

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

very finely of Dickens in another connection, that to really reform a thing, you must first love it. And the great and crowning glory of Dickens is that he re-taught us so to love little children that the thought of their suffering thus became intolerable, until to-day, as I have said, the child's cause is everywhere supreme.

It was characteristic of the courage and insight with which Dickens essayed the task of bringing the nation to some sense of its responsibilities in regard to the coming generation, that his most touching and powerful examples were drawn from emphatically the worst class of children, and that these examples were themselves conspicuous for daring and for evil even among bad companions. It was the child thief, the boy criminal, the juvenile robber that Dickens was most successful in portraying, and the boy thief and criminals he chose were like the Artful Dodger, pre-eminent for intellectual keenness, as well as for moral obliquity, with the result that the English people were stirred to a degree that no mere narrative of suffering innocence and ill-used but honourable juvenility, could perhaps have effected. They saw in the Artful Dodger, with his thorough-going villainy, his daring, his very callousness, qualities that had he been given instruction, proper training and a fair opportunity, would have made a strong resolute man, an asset to the nation ; they realized, as they read the pages of *Oliver Twist*, that the very virtues of the "Dodger," his ingenuity, his *sangfroid*, his fearlessness, had been distorted to his own undoing, and they asked themselves, remembering that the "greater the sinner, the greater the saint," whether it was not time that they did something to give

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

a helping hand to the neglected of the gutter, to the child criminal and the boy thief, who, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, England had passed over for the unconverted of the heathen, for the remote Chinese and the elusive Esquimaux. From the moment that Dickens published *Oliver Twist*, the reaction against this brutality and neglect set in. The handful of devoted workers, who, under Lord Shaftesbury and Leone Levi had been pleading for the street arabs—and pleading largely in vain—suddenly found themselves caught up and borne forward by a great flood of sympathy and support that the pictures of Fagin's school for boy-thieves had evoked among all classes. To realize even faintly, the immense service that Dickens rendered our race, in thus liberating their frozen sympathies and revivifying their lost confidence in childhood, we have but to turn to the fearful records of juvenile crime and the more fearful records of juvenile punishment, in which his time abounds. "I know of one infant," said Dickens himself, "six years old, who has been twice as many times in the hands of the police as years have passed over him." This alas! was no unusual case. A little fellow eight years of age was tried in August, 1845, at Clerkenwell for stealing boxes. He was sentenced to a month and a whipping. In January, 1846, he was again tried for robbing a till. After that he was twice summarily convicted and then again tried at the Central Criminal Court later in the same year—to be sentenced to seven years' transportation when only nine years of age! This sentence was commuted. "But," says Mr. Montague, in his *Sixty Years of Waifdom*, "in 1852, when he was only thirteen years of age,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

and but four feet, two inches high, he was a hardened jailbird, with whom the law was powerless to deal."

Worse even than this is the fact that in England children were regularly and systematically trained in the arts of theft. According to Mr. Montague, "a little fellow whose father and mother were dead, who was alone and uncared for, told his teacher one Sunday that he and twenty more boys were kept by a man and a woman in Wentworth Street, Whitechapel, and taught to pick pockets. The training took six months. Daily the woman dressed herself, put a bell in her pocket, also a purse containing 6*d.* ; any of the pupils who could take the purse from her pocket without causing the bell to tinkle got the 6*d.*, as a reward for his dexterity. When proficient, the boys were sent out to plunder for the pair."

The confession of another thief's tutor was as follows :—

"He had been twenty years living a criminal life, and had been twenty times in prison. He resided in a low lodging-house where he carried on his craft of training young lads to steal. The best hands among them were sent into the streets, and they brought home the plunder on which the criminal school lived. He was too well known to the police to dare to go out himself. 'But,' said he, 'I never can keep the young 'uns long, for as soon as I have made them clever at their profession, if they are not taken by the police, they leave me and start for themselves ; so I am obliged to look out for new hands.' Being asked how many lads he supposed he had trained to be thieves during the twenty years, he replied that he had kept no account,

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

and could not exactly tell, but of this he was sure, that it was not less than *five hundred*.”

It is estimated that 1500 children, infants for the most part, passed through the cruel and soul-destroying horrors of imprisonment during one year, children whom there were none to befriend on their release, who almost certainly went to swell the permanent prison population. Dr. Guthrie, in his *Pleas for Ragged Schools*, paints a fearful picture of the juvenile delinquents who thus found their way to prison.

“No man cared for their souls, or commiserated their condition. Banishing what it did not hang, the country shipped off thousands to rot and fester in our colonies, till these, rising as one man, declared that they would have no more of our refuse and waste; that, if we would grow criminals, we should keep them. Many seemed born for the gallows, and coolly calculated on being hanged, as sailors do on being drowned, or soldiers, in time of war, on being shot. I happened once to find them at their rehearsals. They had a ragged urchin suspended by a rope thrown over the door-lintel of an old house. The noose was dexterously placed under his arm-pits; but the way he hung his head and mimicked the dying spasms, drew up his legs, and kicked, was perfect. So thought his companions. The young savages danced round him in wildest glee, and greeted each kick with roars of laughter. They were familiar with hanging; not much wonder, since Newgate, for instance, used to show ten or a dozen old ruffians with boys, strung up like vermin, and slowly turning round in the morning air, with their white caps—waiting to be cut down. Horrible sight!”

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

“Let me say,” said Dickens, in one of his articles in the *Daily News*, “that I know the prisons of London well; that I have visited the largest of them more times than I could count; and that the children in them are enough to break the heart and hope of any man. I have never taken a foreigner or a stranger of any kind to one of these establishments, but I have seen him so moved at the sight of the child offenders, and so affected by the contemplation of their utter renouncement and desolation outside the prison walls, that he has been as little able to disguise his emotion, as if some great grief had suddenly burst upon him. Mr. Chesterton, and Lieutenant Tracey (than whom more intelligent and humane Governors of Prisons it would be hard, if not impossible, to find) know perfectly well that these children pass and repass through the prisons all their lives; that they are never taught; that the first distinctions between right and wrong are, from their cradles, perfectly confounded and perverted in their minds; that they come of untaught parents, and will give birth to another untaught generation; that in exact proportion to their natural abilities, is the extent and scope of their depravity; and that there is no escape or chance for them in any ordinary revolution of human affairs. Happily, there are schools in these prisons now. If any readers doubt how ignorant the children are, let them visit these schools and see them at their tasks, and hear how much they knew when they were sent there. If they would know the produce of this seed, let them see a class of men and boys together, at their books (as I have seen them in the House of Correction for this County of Middlesex), and mark

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

how painfully the full-grown felons toil at the very shape and form of letters; their ignorance being so confirmed and solid.

“The contrast of this labour in the men, with the less blunted quickness of the boys; the latent shame and sense of degradation struggling through their dull attempts at infant lessons; and the universal eagerness to learn, impress me, in this passing retrospect, more painfully than I can tell.”

This, then, was the position in which the children of the poor stood in relation to the law, when *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, following fast on the unprecedented success of *Pickwick*, stirred the nation to its depths and aroused a fervour and compassion for the young such as no one had suspected was to be found in all England. The first practical effect of the pictures of child-life which they contained, was to place upon the Statute Book an epoch-making piece of legislation, the first of a number of Acts that have revolutionized the position of the child in regard to the State, which was called the Reformatory School Act of 1854. Its effect was instantaneous. It broke up the schools of crime that had flourished under men like Fagin and for the first time, in the history of England, it allowed a magistrate to send a boy guilty of some childish offence, not to prison permanently, but to an industrial school where he got valuable training, healthy discipline and kindly supervision. To-day, when our Chairmen of Quarter Sessions wax enthusiastic over the diminution of juvenile crime, when the records show the success that has attended the passing of the First Offenders' Act, when on all sides the feeling is growing that the

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

child must be kept free from contamination, no matter what its class, or how poor its parents, let it be remembered that the first man to rescue children from the jail was the great novelist of whom we write, and who for this reason has earned surely the gratitude of every humanitarian to-day.

Dickens's own personal efforts in the great revival centred mainly round the Ragged School Union, to whose funds he induced the Baroness Burdett Coutts to subscribe.

He described the work of the schools in an article of irresistible force entitled "A Sleep to Startle us," which appeared in *Household Words* during 1852 :

"I found my first Ragged School, in an obscure place called West Street, Saffron Hill, pitifully struggling for life, under every disadvantage. It had no means, it had no suitable rooms, it derived no power or protection from being recognized by any authority, it attracted within its wretched walls, a fluctuating swarm of faces—young in years, but youthful in nothing else, that scowled Hope out of countenance. It was held in a low-roofed den, in a sickening atmosphere, in the midst of taint and dirt and pestilence : with all the deadly sins let loose, howling and shrieking at the doors. Zeal did not supply the place of method and training ; the teachers knew little of their office ; the pupils with an evil sharpness, found them out, got the better of them, derided them, made blasphemous answers to scriptural questions, sang, fought, danced, robbed each other ; seemed possessed by legions of devils. The place was stormed and carried, over and over again ; the lights were blown out, the books

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

strewn in the gutters, and the female scholars carried off triumphantly to their old wickedness. With no strength in it but its purpose, the school stood it all out, and made its way. Some two years since, I found it, one of many such, in a large convenient loft in this transition part of Farringdon Street quiet and orderly, full, lighted with gas, well whitewashed, numerous attended, and thoroughly established.

“The number of houseless creatures who resorted to it, and who were necessarily turned out when it was closed, to hide where they could in heaps of moral and physical pollution, filled the managers with pity. To relieve some of the more constant and deserving scholars, they rented a wretched house, where a few common beds—a dozen and a half perhaps—were made upon the floor. This was the Ragged School Dormitory; and when I found the school in Farringdon Street, I found the Dormitory in a court hard by, which in the time of the Cholera had acquired a dismal fame. The Dormitory was, in all respects, save as a small beginning, a very discouraging Institution. The air was bad; the dark and ruinous building, with its small close rooms, was quite unsuited to the purpose; and a general supervision of the sleepers was impossible. I had great doubts at the time whether, excepting that they found a crazy shelter for their heads, they were better there than in the streets.

“Having heard, in the course of the last month, that this Dormitory (there were others elsewhere) had grown as the School had grown, I went the other night to make another visit to it. I found the School in the same place, still advancing. It was now an Industrial

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

School too; and besides the men and boys who were learning, some aptly enough; some, with painful difficulty; some, sluggishly and wearily; some, not at all—to read and write and cipher; there were two groups, one of shoemakers, and one (in a gallery) of tailors, working with great industry and satisfaction. Each was taught and superintended by a regular workman engaged for the purpose, who delivered out the necessary means and implements. All were employed in mending, either their own dilapidated clothes or shoes, or the dilapidated clothes or shoes of some of the other pupils. They were of all ages, from young boys to old men. They were quiet, and intent upon their work. Some of them were almost as unused to it as I should have shown myself to be if I had tried my hand, but all were deeply interested and profoundly anxious to do it somehow or other. They presented a very remarkable instance of the general desire there is, after all, even in the vagabond breast, to know something useful. One shock-headed man when he had mended his own scrap of a coat, drew it on with such an air of satisfaction, and put himself to so much inconvenience to look at the elbow he had darned, that I thought a new coat (and the mind could not imagine a period when that coat of his was new!) would not have pleased him better. In the other part of the school, where each class was partitioned off by screens adjusted like the boxes in a coffee-room, with some very good writing, and some singing of the multiplication table, the latter, on a principle much too juvenile and innocent for some of the singers. There was also a ciphering class, where a young pupil teacher

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

out of the streets, who refreshed himself by spitting every half-minute, had written a legible sum in compound addition, on a broken slate, and was walking backward and forward before it as he worked it, for the instruction of his class."

His support of the Union proved invaluable and it was through reading one of his articles on their work that Spurgeon was induced to come forward and give it his powerful support. While he was in Doughty Street and Marylebone, Dickens continually visited the schools and the following letters written concerning their work show the intensely practical nature of the interest he evinced in the development of the schools.

" Broadstairs, Kent.

" September 24th, 1843.

" DEAR SIR,

" Allow me to ask you a few questions in reference to that most able undertaking in which you are engaged—with a view, I need scarcely say, to its advancement and extended usefulness. For the present I could wish it, if you please, to be considered as put in confidence, but not to the exclusion of the gentlemen associated with you in the management of the Ragged School on Saffron Hill.

" It occurred to me, when I was there, as being of the most immense importance that, if practicable, the boys should have an opportunity of washing themselves before beginning their tasks. Do you agree with me? If so, will you ascertain at about what cost a washing-place—a large trough or sink, for instance,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

with a good supply of running water, soap, and towels—could be put up! In case you consider it necessary that some person should be engaged to mind it, and to see that the boys availed themselves of it in an orderly manner, please to add the payment of such a person to the expense.

“Have you seen any place, or do you know of any place in that neighbourhood—any one or two good spacious lofts or rooms—which you would like to engage (if you could afford it), as being well suited for the school? If so, at what charge could it be hired, and how soon?”

“In the event of my being able to procure you the funds for making these great improvements, would you see any objection to expressly limiting visitors (I mean visiting teachers—volunteers, whoever they may be) to confining their questions and instructions, as a point of honour, to the broad truths taught in the School by yourself and the gentlemen associated with you? I set great store by the question, because it seems to me of vital importance that no persons, however well-intentioned, should perplex the minds of these unfortunate creatures with religious mysteries that young people with the best advantages can but imperfectly understand. I heard a lady visitor, the night I was among you, propounding questions in reference to ‘The Lamb of God’ which I most unquestionably would not suffer any one to put to my children; recollecting the immense absurdities that were suggested to my childhood by the like injudicious catechizing.

“I return to Town on Monday, the 2nd of next month; if you write to me before then, please to address

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

your letter here. If after that date, to my house in town.

“With a cordial sympathy in your great and Christian labour,

“I am, dear Sir,

“Faithfully yours,

“CHARLES DICKENS.”

“Mr. Storey.”

“Devonshire Terrace,

“1st February, 1844.

“DEAR SIR,

“Will you have the goodness to turn over in your mind, and to note down for me, as briefly as you please, any little facts or details connected with the Ragged School which you think it would benefit the Union to have publicly known! If you could make it convenient to favour me with a call any evening next week, or on Sunday week, and will let me hear from you to that effect, I shall be glad to make an appointment with you. But pray do not hesitate to let me know what time suits you best, as I can easily accommodate myself to your engagements.

“The kind of thing I wish to know is—your average number of scholars—whether it increases or falls off—whether any boys are pretty constant in their attendance, whether after absenting themselves these return again, whether the ignorance of their parents is one of your rocks ahead, and the like. In short, I think I can turn any result of your experience and observation of these unfortunate creatures to the account you would desire.

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

“ Pray mention to me the discouraging as well as the encouraging circumstances, for they are equally a part of the sad case, and without a knowledge of them it is impossible to state it forcibly.

“ You are at perfect liberty to mention this to the masters in the School. But beyond this, or such other limits as you may consider necessary, I could wish our correspondence to be confidential.

“ Faithfully yours,

“ CHARLES DICKENS.”

“ Mr. R. Storey.”

But Dickens's work went far beyond the Ragged School Union, far beyond even the blessed jail delivery that he effected for the children of his country. There is no doubt that, not only was Dickens the first great fictionist who accustomed us to meet children in his pages, but he broke down once and for all that gloomy and dreadful doctrine of child depravity, which, like an evil inheritance, pressed so hardly on many an English home at the beginning of the last century.

The doctrine has so utterly disappeared from our consciousness that it may be questioned whether we realize how enormous is our obligation to the great champion of childhood in this respect. Our views have changed fundamentally. We no longer look on childhood as something to be sternly repressed, kept in incessant check, made to feel the conviction of sin. We none of us dare to question the right of a child to be joyous. We realize that its unrestrained mirth is a holy and a beautiful thing; that to repress it would be a crime against that child's nature. Far otherwise was it

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

in that early Victorian period which somebody has said were the real dark ages, when children were suspect always, suspect most when they were most like children. Who doesn't remember when Mr. Bumble breathlessly exclaimed :

“‘Mr. Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!’”

“There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

“‘For *more*,’ said Mr. Limbkins. ‘Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?’”

“‘He did, sir,’ replied Bumble.

“‘That boy will be hung,’ said the gentleman in the white waistcoat. ‘I know that boy will be hung.’”

And that night “five pounds and Oliver Twist was offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.”

To-day Bumble's indignation would be laughed at even by a Board of Guardians, and the white-waist-coated gentleman would have been regarded as an eccentric. To-day nearly everybody likes, if they do not love, children. To-day the man who grudges them a service is looked at askance. To-day we all feel the happier when we see children happy and that is the supreme triumph of the genius of Charles Dickens.

Some one (I think it must have been Mr. G. K. Chesterton) says somewhere that, from the frequency with which Dickens attempted the portrait, he must have known in the dark days of his own upbringing some child, prematurely grave and careworn, putting

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

out its little strength against the world and charged with tasks far beyond its powers. It has always seemed to me that that child was Dickens himself—Dickens taking round the circulars of his mother's school, bargaining with the pawnbrokers for the small sum on the remnant of the house, and helping to eke out for his family his miserable earnings of six shillings a week, until at length "nothing remained but a few bits of furniture, mother and children encamping in the two parlours of the empty house ; the boy's own little bed (with the brass coalscuttle, a roasting jack, and a bird-cage 'to make a lot of it') went for a song—'so I heard mentioned, and I wondered what song and thought what a dismal song it must have been to sing.'"

Perhaps it is for this very reason that this particular portrait of childhood never proves quite so convincing, so arresting and vibrant as the blither pictures of his boys and girls, laughing at the troubles that seem to overwhelm them. After all, such sadness and depression was but a part of Dickens's great nature, which refused, not only to be soured, but even permanently saddened by the grey and dreadful morning of his days—a morning that did not rob him of his spirits, his gaiety, his quick eye for contrast and his immense appreciation of the colour side of life. So, perhaps, it comes about that Dickens succeeds more with these presentations of children who show us these qualities also, rather than with those who are so crushed that it is difficult for us to remember that there is anything of childhood about them—more with "the Marchioness" than with Little Nell, more with "The Artful Dodger" than with Oliver Twist. Both appeal with the pathos

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

of those who are overmatched and cruelly weighted down, but somehow their appeal becomes irresistible when allied with the freshness, the good spirits, the *abandon* of youth, rather than when it is borne with the resignation of premature old age. If Kipling's drummer boys of the *Fore and Aft* had crept back with the discreet and wary steps of veterans, there would have been no story to write about them. It is when they strike up the British Grenadiers and swagger along as oblivious of their own danger as though in the barrack yard, that they capture our hearts. And singular to say, Dickens's own grown-up characters seem to find this potency of youthful fearlessness, for it is just to these wayward irresponsible types of true childhood that even the very worst of them succumb. I say the worst, excluding deliberately those of his characters whom we feel instinctively are fundamentally bad—Rudge the outcast, Jonas with blood upon his hands, Jasper the brooding murderer—these are men from whom one realizes children would shrink as they in their turn would from childhood. But others there are, distinctly to be classified as bad, between whom and the children of his creation, strange bonds of unspoken sympathy and understanding grow up naturally and without any formal expression, but are yet binding upon both parties—unto death. There is a striking, as it always seemed to me, a wonderful illustration of this in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. It occurs during that last awful journey of Montague Tigg, from which he knows that Jonas does not mean that he should return alive, the journey on which he will not enter without that "monkey of a boy," whom Mr. Jonas—it is midnight

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

when they set out—tries to send to bed. Alas poor little Bailey who has “climbed into the rumble is thrown out of the carriage in an accident sheer over a five-barred gate.”

“‘When I said to-night that I wish I had never started on this journey,’ cried his master, ‘I knew it was an ill-fated one. Look at this boy!’”

“‘Is that all,’ growled Jonas. ‘If you call that a sign of it——’”

“‘Why, what should I call it a sign of?’ asked Montague hurriedly. ‘What do you mean?’”

“‘I mean,’ said Jonas, stooping down over the body, ‘that I never heard you were his father or had any particular reason to care much about him.’”

Then, later, when the surgeon “gives it for his opinion that Mr. Bailey’s mortal course is run”:

“‘I would rather have lost,’ he said, ‘a thousand pounds than lost the boy just now. But I’ll return home alone. I am resolved upon that. Chuzzlewit shall go forward first and I will follow in my own time. I’ll have no more of this,’ he added, wiping his damp forehead, ‘twenty-four hours of this would turn my hair grey.’”

“For some unexpressed reason,” says Dickens, “he attached a strange value to the company and presence of this mere child.” There is surely something infinitely pathetic in this dilemma of poor Tigg, scoundrel as he was. The one human creature on whose devotion he could count *was* “this mere child.” The men he had dined and wined in the flat in Pall Mall, who had toasted him as their friend, who had battered on him, as men do on a popular and successful swindler, whom

60

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

he had helped with small favours or encouraged with liberal promises—he would have laughed at the thought of relying upon these. But not so upon the little street boy, the child-drudge of Todger's boarding-house! There is something supremely wonderful in the idea of this superlative scoundrel, who trusted no one of necessity, realizing that so long as this child was with him he had protection against the evil presence of Jonas.

As for the boy, he trusted, even revered, the dashing Montague, on whose dog-cart perhaps the proudest moments of his life had been passed, prouder even than when "divesting himself of his neckcloth he sat down in the easy shaving-chair of Mr. Poll Sweedlepipe" and requested to be shaved.

"The barber stood aghast . . . there was no resisting his manner. The evidence of sight and touch became as nothing. His chin was as smooth as a new-laid egg or a scraped Dutch cheese; but Poll Sweedlepipe wouldn't have ventured to deny, on affidavit, that he had the beard of a Jewish Rabbi.

"Go with the grain, Poll, all round please," said Mr. Bailey screwing up his face for the reception of the lather. "You may do what you like with the bits of whiskers. I don't care for 'em."

"The neat little barber stood gazing at him with the brush and soap dish in his hand, stirring them round and round in a ludicrous uncertainty, as if he were disabled by some fascination from beginning. At last he made a dash at Mr. Bailey's cheek. Then he stopped again, as if the ghost of a beard had suddenly receded from his touch, but receiving mild encouragement

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

from Mr. Bailey, in the form of an adjuration to 'go in and win' he lathered him bountifully. Mr. Bailey smiled through the suds and with satisfaction.

" 'Gently over the stones, Poll. Go a tip-toe over the pimples ! ' "

It was this beardless infant that Tigg trusted for protection and who looked up to Tigg, villain as he was, with the same worship that Quilp's boy, Tom Scott, bestowed upon the dwarf between him and whom there existed a strange kind of mutual liking how born or bred, or nourished upon blows and threats on one side and retorts and defiance on the other, is not to the purpose ! Quilp, certainly, would suffer nobody to contradict him but the boy, and the boy would assuredly not have submitted to be so knocked about by anybody but Quilp when he had the power to run away any time he choose.

" 'Now,' said Quilp, passing into the wooden country house, 'you mind the wharf. Stand upon your head again, and I'll cut one of your feet off.'

" The boy made no answer, but directly Quilp had shut himself in, stood on his head before the door, then walked on his hands to the back and stood on his head there, and then to the opposite side and repeated the performance. There were indeed, four sides to the country house, but he avoided that one where the window was, deeming it probable that Quilp would be looking out of it."

It was from the bottom of this wharf that Quilp stepped into the river, which carried him miles down and laid him, a torn mass, on a marshy bank there to be discovered days later, when poor Tom Scott sheds

THE INTERPRETER OF CHILDHOOD

the only tears wept over his master and wants to fight the jury for returning a verdict of *Felo de se*.

These two men, need we say, are presented to us as bad, but not in the sense that Jonas or that Rudge is. There is an old-fashioned saying, that has dropped into desuetude, to the effect that a man to whom children take readily is not given over wholly to the powers of darkness, and that there is some good in him at bottom. And we may know that this is true even of Tigg and of Quilp by the fact that we read of both, even as we despise both, with avidity. Of Jonas, or say, of Jasper, we read with repulsion; we shudder as we turn the page, and of a certainty our children would shrink from them. But they might well laugh, as we do, at Quilp's antics and make friends with the eccentric Mr. Tigg. For, as Dickens made us realize, the unspoilt perceptions of the child, its untroubled and discerning vision, are often more reliable guides than all the tests and creeds which we have fashioned for the judgment of the soul of man.

Again and yet again Dickens uses this magic touchstone of a child's innocence to confound the elders given over to the pomps and vanities of this world, and blind to the realities that the fresher mind perceives. Who does not remember little Paul Dombey's question of his father :

“ ‘ Papa, what's money after all ? ’

“ Heaven and Earth, how old his face was as he turned it up again towards his father.

“ ‘ What is money after all,’ said Mr. Dombey, . . . gazing in sheer amazement at the presumptuous atom that propounded such an inquiry.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ ‘ I mean, Papa, what can it do ? ’ returned Paul, folding his arms (they were hardly long enough to fold), and looking at the fire, and up at him, and at the fire, and up at him again.

“ Mr. Dombey drew his chair back to its former place and patted him on the head. ‘ You’ll know better by-and-by, my man,’ he said. ‘ Money can do anything.’ He took hold of the little hand and beat it softly against one of his own, as he said so.

“ ‘ Anything, Papa ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, anything—almost,’ said Mr. Dombey. . . .

“ ‘ If it’s a good thing and can do anything,’ said the little fellow thoughtfully, as he looked at the fire, ‘ I wonder why it didn’t save me my mamma.

“ ‘ It can’t make me strong and quite well, Papa, can it ? ’ asked Paul.”

Perhaps that is the supreme exemplification of the question that Dickens asked of our civilization in the name of the Child, whom he found and set up again in our midst. What does our wealth, our resources, our pomp, our dignity avail if it leaves us cold, frigid, haughty prisoners in the midst of it all, with stunted sympathies and sterile understandings, and with the heir to our glories starved of affection, aged in mind, stricken in body ? What after all does it avail a nation, more than a man, if it gain the whole world and lose its own soul ?

CHAPTER IV

REAL EDUCATION

“I saw a Minister of State, sitting in his Closet ; and all around about him, rising from the country which he governed, up to the Eternal Heavens, was a low dull howl of Ignorance. It was a wild inexplicable mutter, confused but full of threatening, and it made all hearers’ hearts to quake within them. But, few heard. In the single city where this Minister of State was seated, I saw Thirty Thousand children hunted, flogged, imprisoned, but not taught—who might have been nurtured by the wolf or bear, so little of humanity had they within them or without—all joining in this doleful cry. And, ever among them, as among all ranks and grades of mortals, in all parts of the Globe, the Spirit went ; and ever by thousands, in their brutish state, with all the gifts of God perverted in their breasts or trampled out, they died.”—“A December Vision.” *Household Words*, December 14th, 1850.

CHARLES DICKENS entered manhood flushed with the triumph of a success almost unprecedented in literature, with the *joie de vivre* tingling in his veins, and with nearly all the world at his feet. But the sufferings of his own wronged and neglected up-bringing still rankled in his mind, and he was haunted by the ghosts of other children, who cried to him aloud for aid and for redress, saying that their lives had been ruined ere they had begun ; that they, too, had known indifference, lack of training, want of care and education, and had been

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

balked thereby, even of a chance of a strong and happy manhood. Their sufferings, and the tragedy of their neglect, obsessed Dickens. He became fiercely resentful of the cynical indifference towards the claims of childhood that marked the age. The efforts then on foot to secure educational reform roused in him the liveliest enthusiasm, and eventually found in him an ardent, and an invincible advocate of the cause. The preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* chronicles his grim determination, now that *Pickwick* had brought him an audience, to end once and for all the horrors of the Yorkshire schools, and to expose the miseries of the dark hells then masquerading as educational establishments up and down the country. He threw himself into the task of their destruction with an exultant energy that no other reform ever quite roused in him. He took their pretensions and hypocrisies in his strong, resolute hands, and, in a few inspired chapters tore them to tatters. The effect on the nation was electrical. All England was roused at the fearful picture Dickens drew of Dotheboys Hall, where said Mr. Squeers—

“ ‘Every wholesome luxury, sir, that Yorkshire can afford, every beautiful moral that Mrs. Squeers can instil ; every—in short, every comfort of a home that a boy could wish for will be theirs, Mr. Snawley.’

“ ‘I should wish their morals to be particularly attended to,’ said Mr. Snawley.

“ ‘I am glad of that, sir,’ replied the schoolmaster, drawing himself up. ‘They have come to the right shop for morals, sir.’

“ ‘You are a moral man yourself,’ said Mr. Snawley.

“ ‘I rather believe I am, sir,’ said Mr. Squeers.

REAL EDUCATION

“ ‘ I have the satisfaction to know that you are, sir,’ said Mr. Snawley. ‘ I asked one of your references, and he said you were pious.’

“ ‘ Well, sir, I hope I am a little in that line,’ replied Squeers.

“ ‘ I hope I am also,’ rejoined the other. ‘ Could I say a few words to you in the next box ? ’

“ ‘ By all means,’ rejoined Squeers, with a grin. ‘ My dears, will you speak to your new playfellow a minute or two ? This is one of my boys, sir. Belling his name is—a Taunton boy that, sir.’

“ ‘ Is he, indeed ? ’ rejoined Mr. Snawley, looking at the poor little urchin as if he were some extraordinary natural curiosity.

“ ‘ He goes with me to-morrow, sir,’ said Squeers. ‘ That’s his luggage he is sitting upon now. Each boy is required to bring, sir, two suits of clothes, six shirts, six pairs of stockings, two night-caps, two pocket-handkerchiefs, two pairs of shoes, two hats, and a razor.’

“ ‘ A razor ! ’ exclaimed Mr. Snawley, as they walked into the next box. ‘ What for ? ’

“ ‘ To shave with,’ replied Squeers, in a slow and measured tone.

“ There was not much in these three words, but there must have been something in the manner in which they were said to attract attention, for the schoolmaster and his companion looked steadily at each other for a few seconds, and then exchanged a very meaning smile.”

A shudder ran through the land at the vision, more fearful than any Dante saw in the Inferno, and stamped with the remorselessness of truth, of the :

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“Pale and haggard faces, lank and bony figures, children with the countenances of old men, deformities with irons upon their limbs, boys of stunted growth, and others whose long meagre legs would hardly bear their stooping bodies, all crowded on the view together ; there was the bleared eye, the hare-lip, the crooked foot, and every ugliness or distortion that told of unnatural aversion conceived by parents for their offspring, or of young lives which, from the earliest dawn of infancy, had been one horrible endurance of cruelty and neglect. There were little faces which should have been handsome, darkened with a scowl of sullen, dogged suffering ; there was childhood with the light of its eye quenched, its beauty gone, and its helplessness alone remaining ; there were vicious-faced boys, brooding, with leaden eyes, like malefactors in a jail ; and there were young creatures on whom the sins of their frail parents had descended, weeping even for the mercenary nurses they had known, and lonesome even in their loneliness. With every kindly sympathy and affection blasted at its birth, and with every young and healthy feeling flogged and starved down, with every revengeful passion that can fester in swollen hearts, eating its way to their core in silence, what an incipient Hell was breeding there !”

Never did an author write with effect more magical ! It was as though a wand had been waved causing the scales to drop from eyes that had hitherto been too drowsy or too feeble to discern. Once seen those horrors became impossible. In a very special sense, the Yorkshire schools “broke up” for ever. The demand for efficiency in education grew on all sides. Parents

REAL EDUCATION

rebelled against their children being taught any longer by half-starved underpaid ushers employed by "ignorant, sordid, brutal men," the Yorkshire schoolmasters of whom Dickens wrote :

"Although any man who had proved his unfitness for any other occupation in life, was free, without examination or qualification, to open a school anywhere ; although preparation was required for the functions he undertook ; was required in the surgeon who assisted to bring a boy into the world, or might one day assist, perhaps, to send him out of it ; in the chemist, the attorney, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker ; the whole round of crafts and trades, the schoolmaster excepted ; and although schoolmasters, as a race, were the blockheads and impostors who might naturally be expected to spring from such a state of things, and to flourish in it, they were the lowest and most rotten rung in the whole ladder."

They were stung by the absurdity of illiterate ruffians like Squeers and Creakle, posing as schoolmasters, and amassing riches out of their own credulity. Copperfield and Nickleby brought it home, even to the deadened intelligence of early Victorian England, that a schoolmaster, no less than a plumber, required special training and special qualifications, and accordingly the demand for certified teachers became loud and insistent. In a word, so far as the lifting up of education from the rut—not to say the gutter—into which it had fallen, to such a level of efficiency as most men insist on in their business, or their homes, Dickens was supremely successful. Dotheboys Hall began to be forgotten or "spoken of as among the things that had been." But

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

that did not end his task. "A long day's work remains to be done about us," Dickens wrote, "in the way of education."

Even more important than the abolition of the Yorkshire schools was the provision of education, real education for the mass of the children of the people. The effect of their ignorance on the statistics of crime was, as Dickens pointed out, positively appalling. In a paper dealing with London crime he remarks that:—

"One extraordinary feature of the prison tables, is the immense number of persons who have no trade or occupation, which may be stated, in round numbers, as amounting to eleven thousand one hundred out of forty-one thousand men, and to seventeen thousand one hundred out of twenty thousand five hundred women. Of this last-mentioned number of women, nine thousand can neither read nor write, eleven thousand can only read, or read and write imperfectly, and only fourteen can read and write well! The proportion of total ignorance, among the men, is as thirteen thousand out of forty-one thousand; only one hundred and fifty out of eleven thousand of that forty-one thousand can read and write well; and no more knowledge than the mere ability to blunder over a book like a little child, or to read and write imperfectly, is possessed by the rest. This state of mental comparison is what has been commonly called 'education' in England for a good many years. And that ill-used word might, quite as reasonably, be employed to express a teapot."

"It should be remembered that the very best aspect of this widely-diffused ignorance among criminals, is presented through the medium of these returns, and

REAL EDUCATION

that they are probably unduly favourable to the attainments of these wretched persons. It is one of the properties of ignorance to believe itself wiser than it is. Striking instances are within our knowledge in which the alleged ability to read well, and write a little—appearing to be claimed by offenders in perfect good faith—has proved, on examination, scarcely to include the lowest rudiments of a child's first primer. Of this vast number of women who have no trade or occupation—seventeen thousand out of twenty thousand—it is pretty certain that an immense majority have never been instructed in the commonest household duties, or the plainest use of needle and thread. Every day's experience in our great prisons show the prevailing ignorance in these respects among the women who are constantly passing and re-passing through them, to be scarcely less than their real ignorance of the arts of reading and writing and the moral ends to which they conduce. And in the face of such prodigious facts, sects and denominations of Christians quarrel with each other and leave the prisons full up and ever filling with people who begin to be educated within the prison walls.

“The notion that education for the general people is comprised in the faculty of tumbling over words, letter by letter, and syllable by syllable, like the learned pig, or of making staggering pothooks and hangers inclining to the right, has surely had its day by this time, and a long day too. The comfortable conviction that a parrot acquaintance with the Church Catechism and the Commandments is enough shoe leather for the poor pilgrims by the Slough of Despond, sufficient armour against the

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Giants Slaying Good and Despair, and a sort of Parliamentary train for third-class passengers to the beautiful Gate of the City, must be pulled up by the roots, as its growth will over-shadow this land. Side by side with crime, Disease and Misery in England, Ignorance is always brooding, and is always certain to be found. The union of Night and Darkness is not more certain and indisputable. Schools of Industry, schools where the simple knowledge learned from books is made pointedly *useful*, and immediately applicable to the duties and business of life, directly conducive to order, cleanliness, punctuality, and economy—schools where the sublime lessons of the New Testament are made the super-structure to be reared, enduringly, on such foundations ; not frittered away piecemeal into harassing intelligibilities, and associated with weariness, langour and distaste, by the use of the Gospel as a dog's-eared spelling-book, than which nothing in what is called instruction is more common, and nothing more to be condemned—schools on such principles, deep as the lowest depth of Society, and leaving none of its dregs untouched, are the only means of removing the scandal and the danger that beset us in this nineteenth century of our Lord. Their motto they may take from More : ' Let the State prevent vices, and take away the occasions for offences by well ordering its subjects, and not by suffering wickedness to increase afterward to be punished.' ”

Again and again Dickens pleaded, begged, urged and insisted on the recognition of the need for universal education—

“ ‘ And in my history for the Month of May,’ said the

REAL EDUCATION

Old Year of 1852 with a heavy groan, ' I find it written :
" Two little children whose heads scarcely reached the
top of the dock were charged at Bow Street on the
seventh, with stealing a loaf out of a baker's shop.
They said, in defence, that they were starving, and
their appearance showed that they spoke the truth.
They were sentenced to be whipped in the House of
Correction." To be whipped! Woe, woe! can the
State devise no better sentence for its little children?
Will it never sentence them to be taught? " "

But Dickens was not content merely to point out
that Society by failing to educate the young, was in
reality breeding criminals. He struck a deeper note
when he attacked the cardinal cause of the whole evil,
the doctrine of child depravity which had obtained a
firm hold upon the pastors, and masters of the period.
The idea of children then paramount was that of the
Murdstones, who would not let David play with any
other because they maintained " all children to be a
swarm of little vipers and held that they contaminated
one another." Those were days for children of " whole-
some repression and punishment and fear. The cor-
ruption of our hearts the evil of our ways, the curse that
is upon us, the terrors that surround us—these," says
Mrs. Clennam, " were the themes of my childhood."
They were the themes of thousands more children, who
cowered under the cane, who grew up dull, listless, too
dispirited even to find vent for their troubles in the whole-
some relief of tears. " The only care they knew was to
be beaten, threatened, stinted, and abused sometimes,
and they might have done better without that." }

" ' David,' said Mr. Murdstone, making his lips thin,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

by pressing them together, ' If I have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with, what do you think I do ? '

" I don't know.

" ' I beat him.' "

" I had answered in a kind of breathless whisper but I felt, in my silence, that my breath was shorter now.

" ' I make him wince and smart. I say to myself, " I'll conquer that fellow," and if it were to cost him all the blood he had, I should do it.' "

Thus were children held in subjection. They were regarded more or less in the light of evil things—to be conquered, if not by the whip, then by methods scarcely less cruel ; by harsh rigorous discipline, that was unrelieved by any tenderness, unblessed by any affection. And, strange to say, the overthrow of Squeers and the Yorkshire schools helped to accentuate some of the worst of these evils. From being so hopelessly happy-go-lucky and slipshod in their methods that none of their pupils learnt anything, schools became so severely mechanical and highly organized, with a view to teaching all of them everything, that they were found to be in practice even a greater failure. Whereas under the old system the children had been neglected and allowed to run wild (so that in some cases they picked up for themselves, like Dickens, some precious crumbs of culture), under the new type of school their interests were tied down and narrowed to a curriculum that could not possibly excite any of that individual interest and response without which all teaching is vain. Whereas the occasional cruelties of the old system had repressed the spontaneity and free play of childhood, the rigours

REAL EDUCATION

of the new subjected the children to so severe and so merciless a *régime* as to produce results little better than the brutalities they had superseded. What made the situation worse, of course, was the fact that, while it had been easy to rouse the nation against Squeers or Creakle, it was far more difficult to get the Philistines to realize the mischiefs wrought by their successors—men who were generally incapable of active unkindness, and with expert qualifications.

But Dickens brought to the task two qualities that in combination proved almost irresistible. He had an unerring eye for the weak spot in the enemy's defences, and the batteries he turned on the foe were charged with the deadly ridicule that kills. He saw at a glance that the curse of this system lay in cramming, and in *Dombey & Son* he so satirized the method that almost as he wrote it became discredited.

“Whenever a young gentleman was taken in hand by Dr. Blimber, he might consider himself sure of a pretty tight squeeze. The Doctor only undertook the charge of ten young gentlemen, but he had, always ready, a supply of learning for a hundred, on the lowest estimate; and it was at once the business and delight of his life to gorge the unhappy ten with it.

“In fact, Dr. Blimber's establishment was a great hothouse, in which there was a forcing apparatus incessantly at work. All the boys blew before their time. Mental green-peas were produced at Christmas, and intellectual asparagus all the year round. Mathematical gooseberries (very sour ones too) were common at untimely seasons, and from mere sprouts of bushes, under Dr. Blimber's cultivation. Every description of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Greek and Latin vegetable was got off the driest twigs of boys, under the frostiest circumstances. Nature was of no consequence at all. No matter what a young gentleman was intended to bear, Dr. Blimber made him bear to pattern, somehow or other. This was all very pleasant and ingenious, but the system of forcing was attended with its usual disadvantages. There was not the right taste about the premature productions, and they didn't keep well. Moreover, one young gentleman with a swollen nose and an excessively large head (the oldest of the ten who had 'gone through' everything), suddenly left off blowing one day, and remained in the establishment a mere stalk. And people did say that the Doctor had rather overdone it with young Toots, and that when he began having whiskers he left off having brains."

"The young gentlemen," Dickens continues, "were prematurely full of carking anxieties. They knew no rest from the pursuit of stony-hearted verbs, savage noun-substantives, inflexible systematic passages, and ghosts of exercises that appeared to them in their dreams. Under the forcing system, a young gentleman usually took leave of his spirits in three weeks. He had all the cares of the world on his head in three months. He conceived bitter sentiments against his parents and guardians in four; he was an old misanthrope at five; envied Curtius that blessed refuge in the earth in six; and at the end of the first twelvemonth had arrived at the conclusion, from which he never afterwards departed, that all the fancies of the poets and lessons of the sages, were a mere collection of words and grammar, and had no other meaning in the world.'"

REAL EDUCATION

Mr. Dombey, it will be remembered, had taken Paul to Dr. Blimber's establishment exclaiming exultingly, " 'This is the way indeed to be Dombey and Son and have Money. You are almost a man already.' "

" 'Almost,' " returns Paul, but before the father goes he tells him he would sooner be a child, and in that one sentence perhaps is the sum of all objections to the Blimber forcing system, under which little Paul is forbidden to mention " Old Glubb " and lives on, a solitary child, surrounded by " the arabesque of his musing fancy with no one to understand or to sympathize with him "—lives on to die, the victim of a system as short-sighted and as cruel as the *régime* of Squeers or Creakle !

We all remember the piteous portrayal of the effect the forcing system had upon poor little Paul :

" When he had spelled out number two, he found he had no idea of number one ; fragments whereof afterward obtruded themselves into number three, which slid into number four, which grafted itself on to number two. So that whether twenty Romuluses made a Remus, or hic haec hoc was troy weight, or a verb always agreed with an ancient Briton, or three times four was Taurus a bull were open questions with him.

" ' Oh, Dombey, Dombey ! ' said Miss Blimber, ' this is very shocking. ' "

Paul, as we have seen, died. The other young gentlemen were less fortunate. See how they grew up :—

" In the confidence of their own room upstairs, Briggs said his head ached ready to split, and that he should wish himself dead if it wasn't for his mother and a blackbird he had at home. Tozer didn't say much, but he sighed a good deal, and told Paul to look out, for

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

his turn would come to-morrow. After uttering these prophetic words, he undressed himself moodily and got into bed. Briggs was in his bed too, and Paul in his bed too, before the weak-eyed young man appeared to take away the candle, when he wished them goodnight and pleasant dreams. But his benevolent wishes were in vain as far as Briggs and Tozer were concerned ; for Paul, who lay awake for a long while, and often woke afterward, found that Briggs was ridden by his lesson as a nightmare ; and that Tozer, whose mind was affected in his sleep by similar causes, in a minor degree, talked unknown tongues, or scraps of Greek and Latin—it was all one to Paul—which, in the silence of night, had an inexpressibly wicked and guilty effect.”

* * * * *

“ When the midsummer vacation approached, no indecent manifestations of joy were exhibited by the leaden-eyed young gentlemen assembled at Dr. Blimber’s. Any such violent expression as ‘ breaking up ’ would have been quite inapplicable to that polite establishment. The young gentlemen oozed away, semi-annually, to their own homes ; but they never broke up. They would have scorned the action.

“ Tozer, who was constantly galled and tormented by a starched white cambric neckerchief, which he wore at the express desire of Mrs. Tozer, his parent, who, designing him for the Church, was of opinion that he couldn’t be in that forward state of preparation too soon. Tozer said, indeed, that choosing between two evils, he thought he would rather stay where he was, than go home. However inconsistent this declaration

REAL EDUCATION

might appear with that passage in Tozer's essay on the subject, wherein he observed 'that the thoughts of home and all its recollections awakened in his mind the most pleasing emotions of anticipation and delight,' and had also likened himself to a Roman General, flushed with a recent victory over the Iceni, or laden with Carthaginian spoil, advancing within a few hours' march of the Capitol, pre-supposed, for the purposes of the simile, to be the dwelling-place of Mrs. Tozer, still it was very sincerely made. For it seemed that Tozer had a dreadful uncle, who not only volunteered examination of him, in the holidays, on abstruse points, but twisted innocent events and things, and wrenched them to the same fell purpose. So that if his uncle took him to the play, or, on a similar pretence of kindness, carried him to see a giant, or a dwarf, or a conjurer, or anything, Tozer knew he had read up some classical allusion to the subject beforehand, and was thrown into a state of mortal apprehension; not foreseeing where he might break out, or what authority he might not quote against him.

"As to Briggs, *his* father made no show of artifice about him. He would never leave him alone. So numerous and severe were the mental trials of that unfortunate youth in vacation time, that the friends of the family (then resident Bayswater, London) seldom approached the ornamental piece of water in Kensington Gardens without a vague expectation of seeing Master Briggs's hat floating on the surface and an unfinished exercise lying on the bank. Briggs, therefore, was not at all sanguine on the subject of holidays; and these two sharers of little Paul's bedroom were so fair a sample

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

of the young gentlemen in general, that the most elastic among them contemplated the arrival of those festive periods with genteel resignation."

What effect did the forcing system have on Dickens himself? In his most interesting description of the Stepney Schools he tells us—

"When I was at school, one of seventy boys, I wonder by what secret understanding our attention began to wander when we had pored over our books for some hours. I wonder by what ingenuity we brought on that confused state of mind when sense became nonsense, when figures wouldn't work, when dead languages wouldn't construe, when live languages wouldn't be spoken, when memory wouldn't come, when dullness and vacancy wouldn't go. I cannot remember that we ever conspired to be sleepy after dinner, or that we ever particularly wanted to be stupid, and to have flushed faces and hot, beating heads, or to find blank hopelessness and obscurity this afternoon in what would become perfectly clear and bright in the freshness of to-morrow morning. We suffered for these things, and they made us miserable enough. Neither do I remember that we ever bound ourselves by any sacred oath or other solemn obligation, to find the seats getting too hard to be sat upon after a certain time; or to have intolerable twiches in our legs, rendering us aggressive and malicious with those members; or to be troubled with a similar uneasiness in our elbows, attended with fistic consequences to our neighbours; or to carry two pounds of lead in the chest, four pounds in the head, and several active bluebottles in each ear. Yet, for certain, we suffered under those distresses, and were always charged

REAL EDUCATION

at for labouring under them, as if we had brought them on of our own deliberate act and deed.”

It would not be very difficult, of course, to find establishments in which the defects of the Blimber system of forcing are re-produced with startling fidelity. Still, so far as the middle and upper classes are concerned, we may claim that Dickens's victory has been tolerably complete. For them, Blimberism is extinct. Indeed, the complaints of parents and guardians have swung round to the opposite pole, and, of late, a cloud of witnesses have complained in letters to the papers that, so far from being taught too much, their boys are taught nothing except how to enjoy themselves in the playing-fields. The answer that they grow up none the less strong, healthy, alert Englishmen and that that, after all, is the end of Schooling, would have delighted the heart of Dickens. But it is by no means so certain that when he contemplated the schools of the poor, which, after all, are of infinitely more importance, he would have rejoiced as heartily. For, granted that these are far better served and of infinitely superior equipment than when he pleaded for universal instruction to lift the blight of ignorance from the land, yet not only does the cardinal curse of cramming still remain but to it is added the dreadful “Gospel of Monotony,” which Dickens foresaw would prove the despair of all true educationalists. Dickens has drawn an immortal picture of the sort of instruction enjoined by that gospel when Mr. Gradgrind told Mr. M'Choakumchild that—

“ ‘ Now what I want is facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon facts ; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to facts, sir.'

"The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the Schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by a wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry and dictatorial.

" 'In this life we want nothing but facts, sir : nothing but facts.'

"The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim."

Let no one think the picture highly coloured or over-drawn, or if they do let them look again at the immortal creation of Bradley Headstone—himself a product of the "Gospel according to Monotony" to be again a teacher of it:—

"He had acquired mechanically a great store of teacher's knowledge. He could do mental arithmetic

REAL EDUCATION

mechanically, sing at sight mechanically, blow various wind instruments mechanically, even play the great church organ mechanically. From his early childhood up, his mind had been a place of mechanical stowage. The arrangement of his wholesale warehouse, so that it might always be ready to meet the demands of retail dealers—history here, geography there, astronomy to the right, political economy to the left, natural history, the physical sciences, figures, music, the lower mathematics, and what not, all in their several places—this care had imparted to his countenance a look of care ; while the habit of questioning and being questioned has given him a suspicious manner, or a manner that would be better described as one of lying in wait. There was a kind of settled trouble in the face. It was the face belonging to a naturally slow or inattentive intellect that had toiled hard to get what it had won, and that had to hold it now that it was gotten. He always seemed to be uneasy lest anything should be missing from his mental warehouse, and took stock of himself.

“Suppression of so much to make room for so much, had given him a constrained manner, over and above.”

We shall see presently how far Dickens's matchless sarcasm, allied to his constructive teaching in regard to education, succeeded in undermining this, the third and most vicious factor in the trinity of evils, which have proved the curse of English education. First, however, it would be as well that we should see in what his constructive philosophy consisted. It was at once profoundly simple and profoundly true, and Dickens summed it up in an immortal phrase, which proclaims

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

that "It is a crime against a child to rob it of its childhood." In that single sentence the Master has expressed for us all that a century of educational reformers have ever since Froebel been trying to make clear. Professor Hughes, in his admirable volume on the subject, points out that Dickens "studied Froebel with great care." He was not merely a student of the theoretical principles, of what was beginning to be known as the "new Education," but, with the practical thoroughness that always marked him when in earnest, "he was a very frequent visitor to the first kindergarten opened in England." Madame Kraus-Boelte, who assisted Madame Ronge in its management, remembers very distinctly his frequent visits and his deep interest. "He would sometimes stay during a whole session." These visits soon found stimulating expression. Under the title of "Infant Gardens," in *Household Words*, Dickens printed the first account of an experiment that was to become the type of the educational institution of the future. The article, which was written by Henry Morley, is of immense interest, for it gives us a clear insight into the view of education to which Dickens was already converted (indeed, we may surmise it to have been innate within him), before he became familiar with its elaboration by the great German thinker, and whose message he subsequently delivered.

"The whole principle of Froebel's teaching is based on a perfect love for children, and a full and genial recognition of their nature, a determination that their hearts shall not be starved for want of sympathy; that since they are by Infinite Wisdom so created as to find happiness in the active exercise and development of their

REAL EDUCATION

faculties, we, who have children round about us, shall no longer repress their energies, tie up their bodies, shut their mouths, and declare that they worry us by the incessant putting of the questions which the Father of us all placed in their mouths, so that the teachable one for ever cries to those who undertake to be its guide, 'What shall I do?' To be ready at all times with a wise answer to that question, ought to be the ambition of every one upon whom a child's nature depends for the means of healthy growth. The frolic of childhood is not pure exuberance and waste. 'There is often a high meaning in childish play,' said Froebel. Let us study it, and act upon hints—or more than hints—that nature gives. They fall into a fatal error who despise all that a child does as frivolous. Nothing is trifling that forms part of a child's life."

That roughly expressed Dickens's own view of the art of teaching. He was at once intensely conscious of the beauty and of the value of free childhood, and profoundly distrustful of any attempt at instruction based, in defiance of that freedom, on any code or regulation or cast iron routine, no matter by whomsoever planned and prepared. Mrs. Pipchin's theory of a child's mind was "to open it by force like an oyster." But her Creator knew better, and held that it was right "to encourage a child's mind to develop and expand itself like a young flower." Mrs. Pipchin's rule, it will be remembered, was "to give children everything they didn't like and nothing they did like," words that curiously recall the stately condemnation of Gladstone, who, when over seventy, looking back upon his school-days remarked of his teachers: "I did not learn to

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

set a due value on the imperishable and inestimable principles of human liberty. The temper that I think prevailed amongst them was that liberty was regarded with jealousy and that fear could not be wholly dispensed with." It was for that liberty, more than for anything else, that Dickens contended. That it involved among other things a new, almost a perfect type of teacher, he realized full well. Dickens it was, who first taught us to believe in the supreme importance, the paramount necessity of that vivid personal sympathy between pupil and teacher, without which lessons become, as they did to David Copperfield, when the Murdstones took him in hand, "a grievous daily drudgery and misery; they were very long, very numerous, very hard—and perfectly unintelligible," those same lessons that taught by his mother David had loved! As Dickens declares in his article on kindergartens:—

“ Let nobody suppose that any scheme of education can attain its end, as a mere scheme, apart from the qualifications of those persons by whom it is to be carried out. Very young children can be trained successfully by no person who wants hearty liking for them and who can take part only with a proud sense of restraint in their chatter and their play. It is in truth no condescension to become in spirit as a child with children, and nobody is fit to teach the young who holds a different opinion. Unvarying cheerfulness and kindness, the refinement that belongs naturally to a pure, well-constituted woman's mind are absolutely necessary to the management of one of Froebel's infant gardens.”

These qualities, that we are still in danger of

REAL EDUCATION

forgetting, are essential to the true teacher. Without them learning, certificates, and efficiency avail nothing. Dickens's pages are plentifully bestrewn with portraits of born teachers—men and women, whom we realize would be instantaneously successful in the handling of boys and girls, because they bring to their task that refreshing sympathy, understanding, affection, *camaraderie* and goodwill, to which all normal children, and, for the matter of that, all men and women, instantly respond. "My comprehension," says Esther, in *Bleak House*, "is quickened when my affection is." One remembers little Phoebe, who taught a little school during the day. When Barbox Brothers was at Mugby Junction he heard the children singing in the school, and watched them trooping home happily till he became so interested in what was going on in the cottage that he went in to investigate. He found a small but very clean room, with Phoebe lying on her couch. He asked her if she was learned in the new system of teaching, meaning the kindergarten system, because he had heard her children singing as he passed.

"'No,' she said, 'I am very fond of children, but I know nothing of teaching, beyond the interest I have in it, and the pleasure it gives me, when they learn. I have only read and been told about the new system. It seemed so pretty and pleasant, and to treat them so like the merry robins they are, that I took up with it in my little way. My school is a pleasure to me. I began it, when I was but a child, because it brought me and other children into company, don't you see? I carry it on still, because it keeps the children about me. I do it as love, not as work.'"

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Then there is Agnes in *David Copperfield*, Martin, the perfect schoolmaster in *Little Nell*, and, above all, there is Doctor Strong, in whose school, says Copperfield, "we had plenty of liberty"; that same Doctor Strong, whose benign simplicity and cheery selflessness, so serene in its unvexed outlook, so tender and considerate for all within its purview, had caught surely more than a gleam of radiant power from the Greatest of all Teachers, who, in His time, discarded dead formulæ, set rules and "The letter that killeth," and "whose service," we are taught, "is perfect freedom."

This, then, was the first great principle that Dickens propounded. The teacher must love his work and must love his pupils and loving both he will not rely, he will not think of coercion, but only of setting up between the pupils and himself that fellowship, sympathy, understanding—call it what we will—without which all teaching, or rather all attempts at teaching, in life as well as in the schoolroom, are vain. "How is it that you always win your cases?" a young lady once asked a famous K.C., a man who impressed one as being even more commonplace than he was successful. "Because," said he, "I am always the thirteenth jurymen." That, of course, is the essence of advocacy. To feel with the audience you are addressing, to cry as their tears flow, to laugh as they smile; to halt when they are abashed, and to gather fire from their indignation—that is the aim of every man, who has stood upon a platform and lost himself in the sea of humanity he faces. Equally must the teacher feel with the children he is teaching, and unless that strange electric current of sympathy can be set up between them, then rules,

88

REAL EDUCATION

regulations, accomplishments and proficiency all go for nothing. Thus it was necessary, as Dickens taught, that the teacher should bring to his work an abundance of sympathy, an enthusiasm for childhood that first found expression, so far as literature is concerned, in his pages. That was the first essential. Much more remained to be achieved. Dickens grasped firmly the absolute necessity of children's studies being so correlated to one another that their significance could be easily comprehended and the details readily retained. The absurd and deforming habit of giving definitions of abstractions to children, and expecting them to be understood, he shatters with ridicule, stinging and strong enough to wring the withers even of a County Council Inspector. One remembers Cornelia Blimber explaining the word "analysis" to Paul Dombey. Thus does she express it:—

"If my recollection serves me, the word analysis as opposed to synthesis, is thus defined by Walker: "The resolution of an object, whether of the senses or of the intellect, into its first elements." As opposed to synthesis, you observe. *Now* you know what analysis is, Dombey.'

"Dombey," says Dickens, "didn't seem to be absolutely blinded by the light let in upon his intellect, but he made Miss Blimber a little bow."

Poor Paul!

Again, who doesn't remember Bitzer's definition of a horse, given to M'Choakumchild and Gradgrind:—

"Quadruped, graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eyeteeth, and twelve incisors. Shed coats in the spring; in marshy countries shed

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' ”

“How clear,” says Professor Hughes, “would this make the conception of a horse, to a man who had never seen one.” Then see how Sissy Jupe suffered under this absurd system.

“M'Choakumchild reported that she had a very dense head for figures ; that, once possessed with a general idea of the globe, she took the smallest conceivable interest in its exact measurements ; that she was extremely slow in the acquisition of dates, unless some pitiful incident happened to be connected therewith ; that she would burst into tears on being required (by the mental process) immediately to name the cost of two hundred and forty-seven muslin caps at fourpence half-penny ; that she was as low down in the school as low as could be ; that after eight weeks of induction into the elements of political economy, she had only yesterday been set right by a prattler three feet high, for returning to the question, ‘What is the first principle of this science ?’ the absurd answer, ‘To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me.’ ”

Dickens's philosophy of life led him quite naturally to place his finger on the vital defect of this cruel system of unrelated cram. Mr. Gradgrind believed that he could reduce human nature in all its complexities to statistics, and that “with his rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table, he could weigh and measure any parcel of human nature and tell you exactly what it comes to.” Dickens did not. He held that in every child there is an element “defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no more known to

90

REAL EDUCATION

his arithmetic than his Creator is." Dickens differed from Gradgrind in believing that man has a soul, and, believing that, he was compelled to hold that the soul was, as Professor Hughes puts it, "the real selfhood of each child, and as the only true reality in his nature, the dominating influence in his life and character. He did not believe that knowledge formed the soul, but that the soul transformed knowledge. He did not believe that knowledge gave form, colour, and tone to the soul, but that the soul gave new form, colour and tone to knowledge. He ridiculed the idea that the educator, by using great care in the selection of his knowledge, could produce a man of such a character as he desired; that ten pounds of yellow knowledge and ten pounds of blue knowledge judiciously mixed in a boy would certainly produce twenty pounds of green manhood."

Almost inevitably, therefore, Dickens laid enormous stress upon the culture in children of imagination and fancy in which the souls of all of us, adult as well as children, overflow. The whole of the address in the first number of *Household Words* is a plea for cherishing "that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast." He knew that without it education would be an arid waste, a desert, a wilderness full at the best of emptiness, at the worst of strange, incomprehensible, meaningless things that the child could not relate either to himself or to each other, but which, if touched even lightly by a fancy would fall into order and animation. He insists in his speeches and in his novels, on the double danger of this divorce between imagination and pedagogics. The latter will be emasculated into meaninglessness. The former, sweet and wholesome of itself,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

may be rendered devilish. "Crush or neglect the imagination of the child," he says, "cease to encourage its growth, fail to turn its course into the green avenues, the towering heights or wooded valleys that await its coming; drive it back again, in on the child itself, and it may, nay will, turn to festering bitterness and all uncleanness." He dwelt on this evil in many a speech; he exposed it in some of the brightest passages of his novels. Says he of Mr. M'Choakumchild, giving his first lesson:—

"He went to work in this preparatory lesson not unlike Morgiana in the Forty Thieves; looking into all the vessels ranged before him, one after another, to see what they contained. Say, good M'Choakumchild, when from thy boiling store thou shall fill each jar full by and by, dost thou think thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within—or sometimes only maim him and distort him?"

Again, he shows us the horror of teaching from which the imagination is excluded—"where only facts matter"—personified in some of his most biting, most arresting creations. The Smallweeds, for instance:—

"Had strengthened themselves in their practical character discarded all amusements, discountenanced all storybooks, fairy tales, fictions, and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact that it has had no child born to it, and that the complete little men and women it has produced have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds.

"Mr. Smallweed's grandfather is in a helpless condition as to his lower, and nearly so as to his upper

REAL EDUCATION

limbs ; but his mind is unimpaired. It holds, as well as it ever held, the first four rules of arithmetic, and a certain small collection of the hardest facts. In respect of ideality, reverence, wonder, and other such phrenological attributes, it is no worse off than it used to be. Everything that Mr. Smallweed's grandfather ever put away in his mind was a grub at first, and is grub at last. In all his life he has never bred a single butterfly."

Against this, the besetting sin of our education—"that much abused and slandered word"—its colourlessness, its remorseless repression of the imagination and the individuality of its scholars, its consequent failure to arouse and liberate their mental energies, its forbidding bleakness, its exacting routine, Dickens was for ever thundering.

"Do not," he says in one of his speeches, "in a laudable pursuit of the facts that surround us, neglect the fancy and the imagination which equally surround us as a part of the great scheme. Let the child have its fables ; let the man or woman into which it changes always remember those fables tenderly." In a word, do not leave out the vital factors, the imagination and the feelings, without which education becomes an empty wearisome routine ; highly organized, no doubt, minutely efficient, as is the human body itself, but like the body when drained of its warm, red blood—a dead thing !

"Let the child have its fables ; let the man or woman into which it changes always remember those fables tenderly. Let numerous graces and ornaments that cannot be weighed and measured and that seem at first sight idle enough, continue to have their places about us, be we never so wise. The hardest head may

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

co-exist with the softest heart. The union and just balance of these two is always a blessing to the possessor and a blessing to mankind. . . . As the utmost results of the wisdom of men can only be at last to help to raise this earth to that condition to which His doctrine, untainted by the blindness and passions of men would have exalted it long ago, so let us always remember that He set us the example of blending the understanding and the imagination, and that following it ourselves we tread in His steps and help our race on to its better and best days. Knowledge, as all followers of it must know, has a limited power when it informs the head alone ; but when it informs the head and the heart too, it has a power over life and death, the body and the soul and dominates the universe."

What has been the nett result of all that Dickens has written, all that he has taught us, as regards education ? In some respects his genius has proved supremely triumphant. The Yorkshire schools are swept away. Blimberism and the forcing system is dead—for the rich. Cramming and corporal punishment are alike discredited. Creakle and his successors no longer flog on the slightest provocation. Feeder, B.A., still persists but is regarded as rather a bore, at best a necessary nuisance, who is by no means to be encouraged. There is, so far as the middle and upper classes go, a real *camaraderie* between pupils and teachers, masters and boys. It is bad form to cane overmuch, and the boys of those classes speak of their schools as "jolly" and delight in the field sports they afford. But the schools of the poor, the schools that Dickens laboured to win, and did not live to see—what of them ? Has the

REAL EDUCATION

Master's message been as clearly heard here? I trow not. True, those schools are no longer badly built, ill-equipped, starved of proper accessories, unprovided with trained teachers. But they are still overcrowded, so overcrowded that real instruction becomes in many of them an impossibility. Their rooms are still bare, still colourless, still ungraced by objects of beauty or colour. The children still hail the teachers in the ridiculous fashion that Dickens ridiculed in *Our Mutual Friend*; they still keep up the "monotonous droning noise, as if they were performing out of time and tune on a ruder sort of bagpipe," so that Inspectors themselves complain of the horrors of the system of "noisy bawling and trumpeting," of words without meaning. Says Mr. Aldis, His Majesty's Inspector of Schools: "That any capacity for profiting by such instruction remains in children after they have passed the ordeal of such instruction says much for the intellectual vigour of our race. The child's right to the innocent enjoyment of life seems, in most cases, undreamed of." Strong words from an authority of such eminence, but no stronger than the facts warrant for, alas, the Gospel according to Monotony still holds sway in the people's school, and we may still, with Ruskin, "commiserate the hapless Board-school child as a being shut out from dreamland and poetry, and prematurely hardened and vulgarized by the pressure of codes and formularities. He spends his years as a tale that is not told."

Yet, on the other hand, a new spirit is quickening the dry bones of the educational hierarchy. Nominally, at all events, those authorities have approved and endorsed teaching on Froebelian lines. Unco-related

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

lists of object-lessons are disappearing. Imagination drawings are no longer taboo. Plants even have found their way into the infant schools. Stories are recommended. Pictures are permitted. Above all, the healthiest sign of all, boys and girls alike are taught at least one sport and excel in it, some of them achieving feats a Byron might not disdain. These are but straws, which show the way of the wind. But that wind blows strong and fresh towards the free childhood for which Dickens pleaded. Slowly but surely the nation is realizing the huge waste of the code, with its stereotyped teaching, its failure to raise the general level of intelligence, its arbitrary and despotic harshness, its inadequate and meaningless provisions. Slowly but surely we are realizing what Dickens taught us fifty years ago that a system of education is vain unless it makes some appeal to the imagination or to the feelings of its pupils, unless it does something to cultivate "those imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be morally struck dead, and the plainest national prosperity figures can show, will be but the writing on the wall."

CHAPTER V

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

“ It behoves every journalist . . . to warn his readers whatsoever be their ranks and conditions, that unless they set themselves in earnest to improve the towns in which they live, and to amend the dwellings of the poor, they are guilty before God of wholesale murder.”—“ To Working Men.” *Household Words*. 7th October, 1854.

“ GOD,” said the great Lord Shaftesbury, “ gave Charles Dickens a general retainer against all suffering and oppression.” It was a tremendous part, calling for exhaustless energy, and boundless sympathy.

In one of his speeches, Dickens relates how a young advocate who afterwards achieved fame, found himself, on rising to address the Court, tongue-tied with nervousness. “ Then,” said the barrister, “ I felt my little children tugging at my gown, and that gave me courage.” Dickens’s children were the poor, and they were for ever tugging at the heart-strings of the mightiest pleader their cause has ever had. Their sufferings obsessed him, filled him with a consuming fire that would not let him rest night or day, and that burnt itself out only with his life. No task was too hard to be essayed for the poor. No artistic obligation was so precious that he would not put it lightly aside in their service. Even while he is writing *Nicholas Nickleby*, the novel charged

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

with the great purpose of destroying the Yorkshire schools, he is puzzling to see if he cannot "strike a blow" in its pages for the sweated factory operatives. Even when he is working out, often in an agony of anxiety, the baffling intricacies of his later plots, we find that he weaves them quite naturally round some phase of poverty which photographs itself for ever on every sensitive mind. There is scarcely one of his novels in which the lightnings of his splendid energy does not rip up and shatter half-a-dozen abuses, each of them sufficient to leave a modern novelist weighed down and exhausted by the effort.

But Dickens was borne up by a priceless gift of humour, which not only perpetually renewed and refreshed his spirit, but kept his vision of the poor always unsoured, and always sane. "He saw them steadily and saw them whole." His was pre-eminently the genius of that strong common-sense, which one of his disciples has taught us, is among the rarest gifts vouchsafed to man, and having that, Dickens perceived clearly fifty years ago, the fact that is just dawning on the mass of social reformers, namely that the most clamant need of our time—more urgent even than that of education—is the solution of that housing problem which he, first of all, forced upon the attention of a hitherto listless nation.

Dickens saw very clearly, as we are slowly beginning to realize, that unless this question is settled first, all our other efforts to raise the status of the mass of the people are futile, and all our preaching vain. "The reform of the people's habitations must precede all other reforms ; without it all other reforms must fail. Neither

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

Religion nor Education will make any way . . . until a Government shall have discharged its first obligation and secured to the people Homes, instead of polluted dens." So he avowed.

"More and more," he said, in his speech to the members of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association, "I am driven to the conviction that certain sanitary reforms must precede all other social remedies, and that neither education nor religion can do anything useful, until the way has been paved for their ministrations by cleanliness and decency." "Of what avail," he asked, "is it to send missionaries to the miserable man condemned to work in a foetid court, with every sense bestowed upon him for his health and happiness turned into a torment, with every month of his life adding to the heap of evils under which he is condemned to exist? What human sympathy within him is that instructor to address? What natural old chord within him is he to touch? Is it a memory of his children?—a memory of destitution, of sickness, of fever, and of scrofula? Is it his hopes, his latent hopes of immortality? He is so surrounded by and embedded in material filth, that his soul cannot rise to the contemplation of great truths of religion, or if the case is that of a miserable child, bred and nurtured in some noisome, loathsome place, and tempted in these better days, into the ragged school, what can a few hours' teaching effect against the ever renewed lesson of a whole existence? But give them a glimpse of heaven through a little of its light and air; give them water; help them to be clean; lighten that heavy atmosphere in which their spirits flag, and in which they become the callous things they are, and then

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

they will be brought willingly to hear of Him, whose thoughts were so much with the poor and who had compassion for all human suffering."

It was in this majestic diction, "rare and refreshing" indeed, after the timid and flabby vapourizings and the dreary and valueless statistical abstractions to which the "social reformers" of our own time have accustomed us; so strong in its human appeal; so arresting in its remorseless common sense; so free from that pretentious cant which depicts the poor standing constantly in peculiar need of supervision and inspection—as if it were not the *chance* to practise wisdom in their lives that they needed—it was in this clang of exquisite phrase that Charles Dickens initiated one of the most successful agitations that have ever swept England from end to end, regardless of party, creed, or class. "Sanitas, sanitas, omnia sanitas!" exclaimed Lord Beaconsfield despairingly, a few years later, when Dickens had roused the obmutescent mass, and the whole country, shuddering at the evils he had described, was insistent in its demand for reform.

Dickens had thrown himself into the campaign with all the strength of his vigorous nature, and with all the intensely practical powers of application that gave such point to his advocacy of any cause. In almost every number of *Household Words*, he appealed, in articles of matchless force and judgment, alike to the compassionate humanity, and to the sense of preservation of the middle class, to end insanitary abuses which, though fearful, were none the less stoutly defended. Those articles, models for reformers who want to enlist public sympathy, were extraordinarily well reasoned,

100

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

wonderfully cogent, forceful and moving but never hysterical, and based, as all the writings of Dickens were based, upon a consciousness of the good sense and good feeling of mankind and of the ultimate triumph of these qualities over the powers of evil and neglect. As an instance recall the vivid picture which came to the Spirit in the Vision in the *Household Words* article of December, 1850, from which I have already quoted :—

“ I saw a poisoned air in which Life drooped. I saw Disease arrayed in all its store of hideous aspects and appalling shapes, triumphant in every alley, by-way, court, back-street, and poor abode, in every place where human beings congregated—in the proudest and most boastful places, most of all. I saw innumerable hosts foredoomed to darkness, dirt, pestilence, obscenity, misery and early death. I saw, wheresoever I looked, cunning preparations made for defacing the Creator’s Image, from the moment of its appearance here on earth, and stamping over it the image of the Devil. I saw, from those reeking and pernicious stews, the avenging consequences of such Sin issuing forth and penetrating to the highest places. I saw the rich struck down in their strength, their darling children weakened and withered, their marriageable sons and daughters perish in their prime. I saw that not one miserable wretch breathed out his poisoned life in the deepest cellar of the most neglected town, but, from the surrounding atmosphere some particles of his infection were borne away, charged with heavy retribution on the general guilt.”

There is another article in particular in which Dickens, having described the meanderings of an open

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

sore of a filthy drain, through one poorer part of South London, exclaims :—

“Members of the skating club, morning bathers, ladies galloping so gracefully in Rotten Row, this filthy place of which I have been speaking is upon the banks of the Serpentine. It is the same river that adorns Kensington Gardens and pollutes the slums of Chelsea. Leaving the Park, it flows among the poor, and becomes a sewer quite as foul as the Fleet Ditch, and no man cares. Under and about good houses it flows unseen, carefully concealed by stout arches from eyes and nose. From these it escapes to pour its whole poison among the dwellings of the miserable poor; for them no arches are built, from them no filth is kept, no ugliness is hidden; they are quiet, they bear without remonstrance and have all to bear.”

Dickens followed up this attack by describing several poor neighbourhoods, which without efficient drainage were kept permanently short of water for the ordinary purposes of life—neighbourhoods where, “when there is a fire the water is turned on and there flows of necessity an extra supply out of the taps in courts and alleys and the people exclaim, ‘Thank God, there is a fire; we will get some water now!’” Like the consummate propagandist that he was, he kept his indignation for horrors such as these, and refusing to waste it on his opponents, turned on them the hose of his bantering humour, which scattered their discredited and covering forces in all directions. We have said that the movement for sanitary reform was stoutly opposed and the struggle seems to have tempted forth from the retreat of suburban villadom a figure that we are tolerably

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

familiar with in our own day, that of the disgruntled occupier intent on "keeping down the rates." Thus Dickens parodied his manifesto :—

"Ratepayers, Cess-cum-Poolton ! Rally round your vested interests. Health is enormously expensive. Introduce the Public Health Act and you will be pauperized ! Be filthy and be fat. Cess-pools and Constitutional Government ! Gases and glory !! No insipid water !!!"

"When people say that a small payment for health and strength brings in even a large money profit and invite us to reason with them on the subject," he made their spokesman assert, "we say reason with you ? No, we don't do that. We are not talking about reason, but about rates. We see no reason in them and we object to them. We shall not spend our brains to save our pockets ; you shall get from us, if we can have our own way, neither wit nor wealth. Let us alone !"

It is passages such as these which drive like rain, to the root of the problem.

This is his rendering of a typical petition to the authorities against some proposed sanitary reform :—

"The taxation for the purpose of draining and ameliorating such would fall most unjustly and oppressively on your memorialist, whose manor-house, lawns, pleasure grounds, arable lands and pasture grounds, could neither directly nor indirectly derive any benefit whatsoever from the purpose for which such hereditaments and tenements would be rated in pursuance of the powers of the Public Health Act."

It is not surprising that Dickens and the sanitarians triumphed over opposition such as this, but they only

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

did it after a fierce and determined struggle, lasting many years and even now their victory is not complete. For although in the majority of our large cities, sanitary draining is the rule, the exceptions among towns that we may write down as second class are appallingly numerous, while, of course, in the country districts adequate drainage is still the exception rather than the rule. In another book * I have related the result of my own investigations in many agricultural counties of the Kingdom ; of the discovery of whole villages without a drop of water from end to end ; of cottages without even the ordinary conveniences which the law of common decency demands ; of grotesque overcrowding and the frightful immorality engendered by the herding and huddling together of people of both sexes and of all ages in the same room.

On the whole, however, we may say that, so far as London and the great industrial centres are concerned, the crusade has succeeded signally, but from the opposition it encountered, and from the partial nature of its victories even now, it is more than doubtful, if without Dickens's powers of unequalled satire, his vigour and his determination, it would have recovered from the scores of rebuffs that it at first encountered. However, the achievement, such as it was, belongs almost wholly to Dickens, who alone among the reformers had the gifts necessary to popularize subjects so apparently prosaic as drain-pipes and water-supplies. But Dickens's efforts did not end here. He went far beyond the stage of demanding such reforms as would ensure common decency, and prevent a recurrence of cholera or a

* "The Cottage Homes of England."

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

visitation of plague. He entered into the then novel task of insisting on decent homes for the people. Till his epoch-making articles appeared in *Household Words*, housing reform had been scarcely heard of. He made it a national question. Again and again he recurred to the subject, in article upon article, all of which compelled attention; partly because of the horrors they described, partly because of their resistless appeal to human sympathy; but chiefly because the growing recognition of evils such as depicted brought the feeling that to suffer them to continue was to betray the interests of mankind. Whatever the Housing Acts have accomplished towards the mitigation of this crying social question, Dickens is entitled to the credit, for though his was not the hand to draw up their provisions, without his pleadings they would never have been passed. His exposures roused such a body of public opinion as even impelled the drowsy mid-Victorian Parliament to action. Aided by Lord Shaftesbury, and a band of workers hardly less self-sacrificing, he attacked the homes and warrens of the poor in a series of papers never approached for power in the whole of English journalism. The evils he described were Dantesque in their horrors; he portrayed:—

“Houses and lanes so mean and desolate and rotten that one might reasonably suppose them to be bred, as men once said of crocodiles, in all their loathsomeness, from the surrounding filth!”

He pictured a home “in which lay the uncoffined body of a child decently put out on the shelf till the coffin could be earnt.”

“Not many weeks before the mother of the household

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

had perished and been kept in the room for a fortnight unburied; that room which was at once the workroom and the living room of the family!"

He demanded "that the law that condemns bad meat and bad fish as unfit for human food, ought to condemn all houses that are unfit for human habitation, and that every house in which tenants die of typhus fever should be held suspect, examined by the authorities, and if need be summarily closed like a foul grave-yard until it has been put into a wholesome state."

If these demands seem elementary to us—and some of them remember have still to be granted—they are so because it fell to Dickens to win the necessary recognition of the first principles upon which we have built.

He pleaded vigorously for model dwellings as the most immediately practical alternative to the fearful slums and hovels in which the children of the poor were being destroyed at a rate that seems perfectly appalling.

Lord Shaftesbury, and the Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Poor were, like the first Housing Acts, the outward and visible sign of his energies, and the Sutton Trustees, who are now engaged in expending the huge fortune left for this work by the generous beneficiary, are erecting, not only homes for the people, but monuments to their champion who wrote, fifty years ago:—

"We can raise up floor over floor of well-constructed buildings planned into cheerful, well-ventilated, well-drained wholesome rooms, supplied freely with water and provided at the base with proper storage for the fruits and other wares of hawkers, for the trucks and carts and donkeys of those who own them, and with a

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

set of public baths and wash-houses and a little hall for concerts and lectures.”

Dickens achieved these victories only by the exercise of unlimited patience, by keeping close to his facts when he wrote, and by taking care never to be afraid of enforcing their obvious moral when he did. He would have had little sympathy, and much scorn, for some of his nerveless successors, who prefer to deplore the slowness of evolution, rather than to demand action, vigorous and prompt, to amend evils that they shamefacedly point as the fault, not of individuals, but of “a system.” Dickens gave no countenance to the futile appeals and anæmic apologies of this school. He denounced the evil in bold, unmeasured but never exaggerated terms. He appealed courageously to the conscience of mankind and not to an intangible abstraction, and he had no hesitancy in identifying and making odious, whenever he could, the transgressor, knowing full well that “no system” can be worked without men, and that once certain acts become atrocious in their eyes, economic pressure and the like are unavailing to force men to commit them. Thus does he hold up to execration such a slum-owner as he depicted later in those of the pages of *Little Dorrit*, which Mr. Pancks and Mr. Christopher Casby immortalized :—

“This fellow,” he says, “fattening on the rents he grinds out of us poor courtiers,” he is speaking in the character of a slum tenant—“lives in a pleasant house at Highgate; a little gem of a cottage, where there is ivy and lilac and geranium; where the odours of hayricks float in the air on golden wings, a little sweet smelling eyrie on a high hill which stands nodding

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

familiarly to Hampstead. Does he ever think of Slaughterhouse Court ; where the filthy houses he lets and persists in letting and in conniving at sub-letting and in refusing to improve, so that they are so noisome, so infected, so hideous that the swallows will not sit on the eaves to sun themselves ; that the shrewd starlings avoid the place with a sidelong cockeyed glance of aversion ? . . . What live things could thrive in Slaughterhouse Court save obscene rats ? ”

There is no man with heart and conscience, who reads this, who would not feel impelled to strong action against the cruel injustice that it so well brings home, but many men have slept, and doubtless many men will sleep, heavily over the columns of statistics, which recall that so many thousands of inhabitants spend so many thousand hours in so many thousand dwellings, contaminated by so many estimated cubic feet of bad air. And here we have the key to Dickens's seemingly miraculous success, not only in regard to the housing question, but in the whole realm of social reform. His philosophy of life was a vital one. It forbade him to excuse men, to blame evolution, and to talk tepidly of a system that he believed was born of the devil and of neglect and which it needed only resolute action to abolish. He laid that anachronic spectre. When he wrote, men roused themselves ; when he spoke, they listened. He retained that genius for indignation that a great preacher told us this age has lost.

He may not appeal to the cultured expert nor to the youth, down from Oxford, interested in Labour questions, nor to the under Secretary, who is getting up social problems and wants a reliable guide “ don't you know.”

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

These Dickens may not interest. But he speaks to the soul of man, and Maarten Maartens says the humblest intellect is the servant of the soul which sprang from God ; the loftiest is nothing more.

“ Let us,” Dickens wrote, “ hear of the father, who, from scanty means, pays what is truly the fair price of a wholesome room or den of which it makes us sick at heart to think. Let us hear from him of the dead child, who dying cried for air, and was not satisfied, because they dared not throw open a window to let in more fully the stench that, nevertheless, did pour in between the rags and papers that filled up the broken panes. Let the wife tell how desperately she rocked upon her lap the single child that was left to her kisses, of five that she had rocked in vain, let her tell how she lost all and strove to satisfy the craving of her heart by taking to her wretched home some other woman’s child and loving it. Men would not slightly shrug their shoulders then. Perhaps the Lord Seymour of the House of Commons would not laugh.”

There is another passage, which it seems to me sums up admirably the brave and wholesome and profoundly practical philosophy that Dickens cherished on these and other questions. He has been describing a visit he has paid with Lord Shaftesbury to Wild Court, Drury Lane, which thoroughfare that nobleman and his associates pulled down and renovated.

He descends into that brutal arena of pitiless savagery and depicts for us the horrors of the houses, outside which, the children and infants may be seen shivering of winter nights about the Courts ; where the parents have shrunk from the filth and misery of their own

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

lodgings ; where, as we have seen, the dying could not get fresh air and the living grew up poisoned.

To sweep such abominations away, he tells us, we have but to be determined. "Mighty are the soul's commandments and we can stir even dirt if we will only lay the right commandments on ourselves and those whom our opinions control."

But the genius of Dickens was far too broad and comprehensive in its sweep, and touched life at far too many tangents, for him to remain concerned only with the Housing Question as it affected the towns. As a matter of fact, he was one of the first to call attention to an aspect of rural housing with which, in our time, we have become familiar to the point of boredom. There is something strikingly modern—to use a much abused word—and in a more real sense something startlingly reproachful—in the fact that the need for dealing on bold and comprehensive lines with the shortage in the cottage homes in England was stated with convincing force and clearness fifty years ago by the man who, as we have seen, had focussed and enthused the movement for reform in the towns. In a memorable article in *Household Words*—an article that even now one would long to see reprinted and circulated by the thousand—and entitled "How to kill Labourers," Dickens permitted to be exposed the evil, the sinister immensity of which he perceived clearly enough in those far off mid-Victorian days, and which we are slowly beginning to discern.

That article made clear its cause in characteristically arresting fashion :—

"A Wiltshire farm labourer, died not many weeks

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

ago, bowed down in toil, decrepit and rheumatic at the age of fifty-five. During the last thirty-three years of his life there had been added to his bodily work proper, an unnecessary walk of 82,368 miles. If he had walked straight on, instead of to and fro, from home to work and from work home again, and if there had been a pavement laid down for him on the surface of the sea, this man could have walked three times round the world and made a trip to the North Pole and back, out of the waste exertion added to his daily work upon a farm, with hand and foot and body."

That was not the worst of the case. Embling, the victim, had not only to walk three miles to his work and three miles back, which he did for thirty-three years, but "Sunday was not a day of rest! He went to the milking on the Sunday morning, returned to his family during the day for a taste of home, a shave, and a clean shirt, and went back to the afternoon's milking, so that he walked in addition to his farm work, 48 miles a week—about 2500 a year!" Then, during a spell of bad weather, he took a chill, and being drenched in the rain and already stooping and infirm with premature old age, the man died.

What was the cause of this man's walks? Simply this: that he could not get house room any nearer his work. It was the same evil that we are now at long-last recognizing and seeking, still but feebly, to remedy. For over twelve years some of us have been repeating with an insistence which has become tiring to the point of monotony, that there is a cottage famine in our countryside; that the system renders the labourer a serf, giving arbitrary unnatural power over not only

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

his work but over his life as well. In whole districts and union-areas there is not a vacant dwelling. Men, capable and willing workers, deprived of their homes for any cause, frequently have had with their wives and little ones to seek shelter in the casual wards of the workhouses of the land. As I write, a new crusade of burning splendour is announced to be launched. The problems of land and housing are to form a new evangel. Unhappily their solution is to depend upon the fatuities of mere party manœuvring, instead of upon a well-directed effort of brain and conscience and the statesmanship of men of all classes and political creeds. But the new crusaders whoever they are will be confronted with the grim and grinning paradox which Dickens predicted. Side by side with a peasantry without homes, has arisen a countryside without real peasants. Scandalous overcrowding there still is, and all the evils which flourish in its train, but the exodus of the finest agricultural workers still goes on, unchecked. The tragedy of the countryside, with its lack of happy homesteads, has been followed by the deeper tragedy, which Dickens pointed out was inevitable, a lack of people to house! Had our fathers given heed to Dickens's prophetic voice, to the warning he uttered of the dangers of neglected childhood, we should have been spared this most serious social sore of our day—an empty countryside, where only the old and the crippled stay, from which the young and the vigorous depart, leaving behind them the helpless and the decadent in crowded dens; where, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton says: "The village Hampdens wither, and the village idiots grow."

But, alas, the nation did not listen, though Dickens

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

gave them case upon case, with chapter and verse, verifying all the particulars and details with the scrupulous care that marked him in this as in every relation of life. The names he altered. The facts remain and speak for themselves. They might have been written only last week, so thoroughly typical are they of the evil that still persists throughout "our green and pleasant land."

"Charles Weary and his family can obtain no home in their own parish, and are compelled to live in Reading and to pay 2s. a week for three small rooms, among dirt, filth, and noises. Weary leaves his home at half-past five in the morning and walks three miles to his work; his wife goes the same distance to earn 8d. a day.

"Richard Worm has a wife and three children; walks three miles to his work; used to live at Caversham but could get no house there although he had worked under different masters for 24 years. The walking fatigues him; when he gets wet, 'his clothes dry on him and make him shiver.' The wife says the distance makes a difference of 2s. a week in the expenses of living. *This man remembers several cottages being pulled down—the house in which he was born among the number.*"

The strangest, saddest paradox in the chapter of the history of rural England that Dickens here uncovers for us, is the extraordinary fact that, in face of this overwhelming need for house room, a need inflicting such cruelties upon the labourers, the crime of destroying these cottages was ever contemplated or allowed. They had been erected by some early pioneer in rural housing to be let at 2s. per week and had two good rooms on the first floor and two on the second, all light, lofty

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

and well ventilated ; the front room with dresser and cupboards, the back room with a copper and kitchen furniture. To every room there was a fireplace and to every cottage a neat garden plot, and a quarter of an acre of ground.

Let no one think that the shameful and wicked destruction of these homes for the people where they were most needed is incapable of repetition in our own day. Only a few years ago, a local magnate first bought and razed to the ground some cottages which an enterprising builder had erected with a view to meeting the house famine obtaining in the district. In this case the object of the destruction was to raise rents. In the cases cited by Dickens, the guiding motive was to prevent a "settlement" of the labourers on the village poor rate. But for whatever motive, it is a blind generation indeed, that does not brand such an act as a blow at the nation which no man with the instincts of patriotism could commit. But, alas, our social consciousness comes only in flashes of light, not from a steady, sustained and settled vision. All the subsidiary evils that this grossly insane system was producing, Dickens realized, and he repeats his warnings in speech of resonant emphasis and passages that ascend in incandescent adjectives. Do you recall that dramatic scene in *The Chimes*, when the labourer breaks in upon the banquet on New Year's Day at Bowley Hall, and utters his passionate protest ?

"The ragged visitor—for he was miserably dressed—looked round upon the company, and made his homage to them with a humble bow.

"'Gentlefolks !' he said. 'You've drunk the Labourer. Look at me !'

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

“ ‘ Just come from jail,’ said Mr. Fish.

“ ‘ Just come from jail,’ said Will. ‘ And neither for the first time, nor the second, nor the third, nor yet the fourth.’ Mr. Filer was heard to remark testily, that four times was over the average ; and he ought to be ashamed of himself.

“ ‘ Gentlefolks ! ’ repeated Will Fern. ‘ Look at me ! You see I’m at the worst. Beyond all hurt or harm ; beyond your help ; for the time when your kind words or kind actions could have done ME good,’ he struck his hand upon his breast, and shook his head, ‘ is gone, with the scent of last year’s beans or clover on the air. Let me say a word for these,’ pointing to the labouring people in the Hall ; ‘ and when you’re met together, hear the real Truth spoke out for once.’

“ ‘ There’s not a man here,’ said the host, ‘ who would have him for a spokesman.’

“ ‘ Like enough, Sir Joseph. I believe it. Not the less true, perhaps, is what I say. Perhaps that’s a proof on it. Gentlefolks, I’ve lived many a year in this place. You may see the cottage from the sunk fence over yonder. I’ve seen the ladies draw it in their books, a hundred times. It looks well in a picter, I’ve heerd say ; but there an’t weather in picters, and maybe ’tis fitter for that, than for a place to live in. Well ! I lived there. How hard—how bitter hard I lived there I won’t say. Any day in the year, and every day, you can judge for your own selves.’

“ He spoke as he had spoken on the night when Trotty found him in the street. His voice was deeper and more husky, and had a trembling in it now and then ; but he never raised it passionately, and seldom lifted

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

it above the firm stern level of the homely facts he stated.

“ ‘Tis harder than you think for, gentlefolks, to grow up decent, commonly decent, in such a place. That I grewed up a man and not a brute, says something for me—as I was then. As I am now, there’s nothing can be said for me or done for me. I’m past it.’

“ ‘I am glad this man has entered,’ observed Sir Joseph, looking round serenely. ‘Don’t disturb him. It appears to be Ordained. He is an example : a living example. I hope and trust, and confidently expect, that it will not be lost upon my Friends here.’

“ ‘I dragged on,’ said Fern, after a moment’s silence, ‘somehow. Neither me nor any other man knows how ; but so heavy, that I couldn’t put a cheerful face upon it, or make believe that I was anything but what I was. Now, gentlemen, you gentlemen that sits at Sessions—when you see a man with discontent writ on his face, you says to one another, “He’s suspicious. I has my doubts,” says you, “about Will Fern. Watch that fellow !” I don’t say, gentlemen, it ain’t quite nat’ral, but I say ’tis so ; and from that hour, whatever Will Fern does, or lets alone—all one—it goes against him.’

“Alderman Cute stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, and leaning back in his chair, and smiling, winked at a neighbouring chandelier. As much as to say, ‘Of course ! I told you so. The common cry ! Lord bless you, we are up to all this sort of thing—myself and human nature.’

“ ‘Now, gentlemen,’ said Will Fern, holding out his hands, and flushing for an instant in his haggard face,

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

‘ see how your laws are made to trap and hunt us when we’re brought to this. I tries to live elsewhere. And I’m a vagabond. To jail with him ! I comes back here. I goes a-nutting in your woods, and breaks—who don’t ? —a limber branch or two. To jail with him ! One of your keepers sees me in the broad day, near my own patch of garden, with a gun. To jail with him ! I has a nat’ral angry word with that man, when I’m free again. To jail with him ! I cuts a stick. To jail with him ! I eats a rotten apple or a turnip. To jail with him ! It’s twenty mile away ; and coming back I begs a trifle on the road. To jail with him ! At last, the constable, the keeper—anybody—finds me anywhere, a-doing anything. To jail with him, for he’s a vagrant, and a jail-bird known ; and jail’s the only home he’s got.’

“The Alderman nodded sagaciously, as who should say, ‘ A very good home too.’

“‘Do I say this to serve MY cause !’ cried Fern. ‘ Who can give me back my liberty, who can give me back my good name, who can give me back my innocent niece ? Not all the lords and ladies in wide England. But gentlemen, gentlemen, dealing with other men like me, begin at the right end. Give us, in mercy, better homes when we’re a-lying in our cradles ; give us better food when we’re a-working for our lives ; give us kinder laws to bring us back when we’re a-going wrong ; and don’t set Jail, Jail, Jail, afore us, everywhere we turn. There ain’t a condescension you can show the Labourer then, that he won’t take, as ready and as grateful as a man can be ; for, he has a patient, peaceful, willing heart. But you must put his rightful spirit in him first ; for whether he’s a wreck and ruin such as me,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

or is like one of them that stand here now, his spirit is divided from you at this time. Bring it back, gentle-folks, bring it back ! Bring it back, afore the day comes when even his Bible changes in his altered mind, and the words seem to him to read, as they have sometimes read in my own eyes—in Jail : “ Whither thou goest, I can Not go ; where thou lodgest, I do Not lodge ; thy people are Not my people ; Nor thy God my God ! ” ” ”

In that wonderful passage the Master made Will Fern very deeply a man if but dumbly a poet.

Dickens, with his usual pregnant and invincible common sense, made it clear that it was not the labourers only who suffered from the lack of cottages. The working farmers—aye and the landlords too, were hit by a policy as shortsighted as it was cruel, a policy that was hastening agriculture on its way to ruin.

He pointed out that one farmer gave up his farm because the landlord would not allow him to erect cottages upon the land for the accommodation of labourers ; that other employers complained bitterly of the wasted strength of the men they had to use and that the paralysis that even then was creeping over the countryside was due in no small measure to this insane prohibition. If he pleaded largely in vain, it was not his fault. England's eyes then were turned on the cotton mills, and the coal fields. She was gloating over the bounding prosperity of the great industries and the triumphant rise of the towns. It was another quarter of a century before the two most alert statesmen of their period, Lord Randolph Churchill and Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, agreed in proclaiming that to restore the

HOUSING AND SANITARY REFORM

countryside and the villages to something of their pristine glory was necessary, not only for the country, but for the towns, now swollen by the ever-increasing exodus from the rural districts. But what they realized in the eighties when the twig was dry, Dickens saw while it was yet green, thirty years previously. "He saw England steadily and saw her whole," and he knew that the destruction of the labourers' homes at Caversham was the cause of their being driven to herd in the warrens of Wild Court and Bethnal Green.

He knew that nothing but a bold, vigorous, and thorough action on broad, comprehensive lines, free from party bias, but resolute and unsparing and suffering no private pettiness before public gain, that nothing, in short, but a great national effort, would save for the people of England their last heritage—their homesteads and their homes. To-day, as I have said, the air is thick with rumours of the great Land Campaign that is to stir the nation to its depths and to demand for every man the right to the sacred privilege, the blessed boon of home. On every side, and in almost every journal we read of Town planning, of Garden Cities, and we are continually hearing of immense and immeasurable strides in almost every phase of housing reform. If these efforts bear fruit, if it is really the case that they are destined to change life for the coming generation, that a race is to grow up which shall not know the slum, or the basement home, the mean street, or the dark alley, then the praise must be given to the man whose virile resonance half a century ago demanded that the joys, the blessings, the healing beauties of the peace of home should no longer be denied to the poor, but should be

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

the common heritage of our Anglo-Saxon race. This to Dickens was democracy ; this to him, as to Shelley, was freedom herself.

“ For the labourer thou art bread,
And a comely table spread ;
From his daily labour come
In a neat and happy home.”

CHAPTER VI

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

“ . . . Bethink yourselves . . . that there are scores of thousands breathing now, and breathing thick with painful toil, who have never lived at all, nor had a chance of life ! Go ye, Teachers of content and honest pride, into the mine, the mill, the forge, the squalid depths of deepest ignorance and uttermost abyss of man’s neglect and say can any hopeful plant spring up in air so foul that it extinguishes the soul’s bright torch as fast as it is kindled ! And oh ! ye Pharisees of the nineteen hundredth year of Christian Knowledge, who soundingly appeal to human nature, see first that it *be* human.”—*Martin Chuzzlewit*.

THE reverence on the part of Dickens for the homes of the poor whose simple virtues we find continually exalted in his pages, his whole-hearted delight in their happy fireside scenes, which he so loved to depict, his instinctive recognition of the strength and of the value of the family affection bred in them ; all these perpetually recurring expressions of one of his deepest feelings have a supreme importance for those, who would clearly understand his view of the poor, and his diagnosis of their poverty. For they indicate unmistakably that between him and that school of social reformers, who have become most notorious in our own time, there is a fundamental difference on a question vital to our civilization.

Dickens’s view of the poor was simple. He refused

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

absolutely to think of them as a class apart, conspicuous either for wickedness or inertia. He held that the fault of their condition lay not in them, but in bad laws, defective social arrangements, inefficient administration and general neglect. In short they were the creatures of their environment. Believing this, he set to work, and, in the space of a few short years, effected sweeping and enduring reforms in housing, in education, and in the general treatment of children, by the community. The school of social reformers, to which I am referring, can boast of no such considerable achievements. Their case is that the cause of poverty lies in the poor themselves, who, they frequently assert, require constant inspection, close supervision, more severe regulating, and more stringent disciplining.

Of course inspection in some cases is eminently desirable if sanely and humanely conducted. The visitation of a municipal officer to a home may prove excellent, if serviceable and practical advice be given, say, to a distracted mother in the case of a sick child. But the advice must be tendered in such a way as to indicate no intolerable interference. An efficient inspection, without being obtrusive, too, may render enormous aid in preventing unscrupulous landlordism from exacting high rents for grossly over-crowded habitations with inadequate water supplies and insanitary accommodation. But the tendency nowadays is to go much further than this, and there is an imminent danger of officialdom harassing and worrying the poor, with endless restrictions and elaborate and bewildering regulations.

Dickens, early, saw alike, the futility and the

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

annoyance, of this attitude of benevolent fussiness towards the victims of social injustice, and has drawn for us an immortal picture of its exasperating complacency, its abject, pitiable failure. Who that has read *The Chimes* does not remember the effect that much harrying of this kind has on the spirit of poor Trotty Veck?

“ ‘It seems as if we can’t go right, or do right, or be righted,’ says Trotty. ‘I hadn’t much schooling myself, when I was young; and I can’t make out whether we have any business on the face of the earth, or not. Sometimes I think we must have—a little; and sometimes I think we must be intruding. I get so puzzled sometimes that I am not even able to make up my mind whether there is any good at all in us, or whether we are born bad. We seem to do dreadful things; we seem to give a deal of trouble; we are always being complained of and guarded against. One way or another we fill the papers. Talk of a New Year!’ said Trotty mournfully. ‘I can bear up as well as another at most times; better than a good many, for I am as strong as a lion, and all men ain’t; but supposing it should really be that we have no right to a New Year—supposing we really are intruding.’ ”

That is a faithful and an exact interpretation of a certain modern attitude towards the poor—mostly assumed by religious and philanthropic and even by some political organizations. The poor are “intruders” who must be re-cast after a new model or there is no hope for them. They are to be supervised in all the relations of life. Nothing is too trivial for their inquisitors.

Again one recalls Trotty, whose daughter, it will be

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

remembered, has brought him as a great treat a dish of his own favourite tripe :

“ ‘ But who eats tripe ? ’ said Mr. Filer, looking round. ‘ Tripe is, without an exception, the least economical and the most wasteful article of consumption that the markets of this country can by any possibility produce. The loss upon a pound of tripe has been found to be, in the boiling, seven-eighths of a fifth more than the loss upon a pound of any other animal substance whatever. Tripe is more expensive, properly understood, than the hot-house pineapple. Taking into account the number of animals slaughtered yearly within the bills of mortality alone ; and forming a low estimate of the quantity of tripe which the carcasses of those animals, reasonably well butchered, would yield ; I find that the waste on that amount of tripe, if boiled, would victual a garrison of five hundred men for five months of thirty-one days each, and a February over. The Waste, the Waste ! ’

“ Trotty stood aghast, and his legs shook under him. He seemed to have starved a garrison of five hundred men with his own hand.

“ ‘ Who eats tripe ? ’ said Mr. Filer, warmly. ‘ Who eats tripe ? ’

“ Trotty made a miserable bow.

“ ‘ You do, do you ? ’ said Mr. Filer. ‘ Then I’ll tell you something. You snatch your tripe, my friend, out of the mouths of widows and orphans.’

“ ‘ I hope not, sir,’ said Trotty faintly. ‘ I’d sooner die of want ! ’

“ ‘ Divide the amount of tripe before mentioned, Alderman,’ said Mr. Filer, ‘ by the estimated number of

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

existing widows and orphans, and the result will be one pennyweight of tripe to each. Not a grain is left for that man. Consequently, he's a robber.'

"Trotty was so shocked that it gave him no concern to see the Alderman finish the tripe himself. It was a relief to get rid of it anyhow."

Mr. Filer, it may be urged, is but a caricature. True; but behind the caricature there is a stern, an ugly reality and the temper of mind that seeks to find in poverty an excuse for perpetual interference with the lives of other people, and to gratify the passion for dominion, and the lust for cruelty, that is an evil that has become of late years increasingly serious, and one that Dickens clearly foresaw.

". . . There was a native organization in Coketown itself, whose members were to be heard of in the House of Commons every session, indignantly petitioning for acts of Parliament that should make these people religious by main force. Then came the Teetotal Society, who complained that these same people would get drunk, and showed in tabular statements that they did get drunk, and proved at tea-parties that no inducement, human or divine (except a medal), would induce them to forego their custom of getting drunk. Then came the chemist and druggist, with other tabular statements, showing that when they didn't get drunk, they took opium. Then came the experienced chaplain of the gaol, with more tabular statements, outdoing all the previous tabular statements, and showing that the same people would resort to low haunts, hidden from the public eyes, where they heard low singing and saw low dancing, and mayhap joined in it; and where

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

A.B., aged twenty-four next birthday, and committed for eighteen months' solitary, had himself said (not that he had ever shown himself particularly worthy of belief) his ruin began, as he was perfectly sure and confident that otherwise he would have been a tip-top moral specimen. Then came Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby, the two gentlemen at this present moment walking through Coketown, and both eminently practical, who could, on occasion, furnish more tabular statements derived from their own personal experience, and illustrated by cases they had known and seen, from which it clearly appeared—in short, it was the only clear thing in the case—that these same people were a bad lot altogether, gentlemen ; that, do what you would for them, they were never thankful for it, gentlemen ; they were restless, gentlemen ; that they never knew what they wanted ; that they lived upon the best, and bought fresh butter ; and insisted on Mocha coffee, and rejected all but prime parts of meat, and yet were eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable.”

That was the view of the poor current when Dickens took up his pen in their service to cover it with ridicule, and to expose the vital flaw, which vitiated its conclusions. It has long ceased to be tenable or to meet with general acceptance. But by a sinister and most ironical paradox, to-day we find that it is not capitalist organizers like Gradgrind and Bounderby who preach the unfitness of the poor, but that this text is left almost exclusively to a section of those whose economic doctrines are diametrically opposite. To obtain the hard facts about poverty is, to-day, an entirely necessary thing. Indeed, reform proceeds so slowly and the

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

heavy mass of prejudice and indifference is so difficult to lift, that it is only when the search-light is turned upon the definite and positive facts, and the loathsome hideousness of squalor is disclosed, that the public conscience is stirred. But the search for the facts need not be carried to such absurd extremes, as to menace the privacy of home-life among the working classes or deprive the poor man of his sanctuary.

We need be at no great loss to imagine the feelings which any prospect of such a thing would have excited in the breast of the man, who more than any other writer, has taught us that for the poor, the word "home" has a significance, a compelling charm, that only those fighting day by day, the battle of poverty, can hope to realize. Turn for a moment to the description of Kit's home in *The Old Curiosity Shop* :

"The room in which Kit sat himself down, in this condition, was an extremely poor and homely place, but with that air of comfort about it, nevertheless, which—or the spot must be a wretched one indeed—cleanliness and order can always impart in some degree. Late as the Dutch clock showed it to be, the poor woman was still hard at work at an ironing table; a young child lay sleeping in a cradle near the fire; and another, a sturdy boy of two or three years old, very wide awake, with a very tight nightcap on his head, and a nightgown very much too small for him on his body, was sitting bolt upright in a clothes-basket, staring over the rim with his great round eyes, and looking as if he had made up his mind never to go to sleep any more; which, as he had already declined to take his natural rest, and had been brought out of bed in consequence, opened a

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

cheerful prospect for his relations and friends. It was rather a queer-looking family : Kit, his mother, and the children being all strongly alike.

“ Kit was disposed to be out of temper, as the best of us are too often—but he looked at the youngest child who was sleeping soundly, and from him to his other brother in the clothes-basket, and from him to their mother, who had been at work without complaint since morning, and thought it would be a better and kinder thing to be good-humoured. So he rocked the cradle with his foot ; made a face at the rebel in the clothes-basket, which put him in high good humour directly ; and stoutly determined to be talkable and make himself agreeable.”

No doubt a fussy district visitor or a charity organization society Inspector would have found fault—maybe justifiably so—with Kit’s home. It would be vain to plead to them that its deficiencies were perhaps set off by the indescribable charm of love blossoming daily into a thousand gracious acts. Love, as Mr. Gradgrind told us, is not a fact, and it is only facts that the inspector with the note book can write down. And it is perhaps just here that we stumble on the cardinal defect of this attempt to cure poverty by adapting the poor to their environment and ignoring the permanent needs of human nature. Said poor Stephen Blackpool :

“ ‘ Sir, I were never good at showin’ o’t, though I ha’ had’n my share in feeling o’t. ’Deed we are in a muddle, sir. Look round town—so rich as ’tis—and see the numbers o’ people as has been broughten into bein’ heer, fur to weave, an’ to card, an’ to piece out a livin’, aw the same one way, somehows, ’twixt their

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an' wheer we live, an' in what numbers, an' by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look how the mills are awlus a-goin', and how they never works us no nigher to ony dis'ant object—ceptin' awlus, Death. Look how you considers of us, an' writes of us, an' talks of us, an' goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin' ever we were born. Look how this ha' grown an' grown, sir, bigger an' bigger, broader an' broader, harder an' harder, fro' year to year, fro' generation unto generation. Who could look on't, sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?'

“ ‘Of course,’ said Mr. Bounderby. ‘Now perhaps you’ll let the gentleman know how you would set this muddle (as you’re so fond of calling it) to rights. . . .’

“ ‘Sir, I canna, wi’ my little learning an’ my common way, tell the genelman what will better aw this—though some working-men o’ this town could, above my powers—but I can tell him what I know will never do ’t. Agreeing fur to mak’ one side unnat’ally awlus and for ever right, and toother side unnat’rally awlus wrong and for ever wrong, will never, never do ’t. Nor lettin’ alone will never do ’t. Let thousands upon thousands alone, aw leadin’ the like lives and all faw’en into the like muddle, and they will be as one, and yo will be as anoother, wi’ a black unpassable world betwixt yo, just as long or short a time as sitch-like misery can last. Not drawin’ nigh to fok, wi’ kindness and patience an’ cheery ways, that so draws nigh to one another in their money troubles, and so cherishes one another in their

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

distresses wi' what they need themseln—like I humbly believe, as no people the genelman ha' seen in aw his travels can beat—will never do 't till th' Sun turns t' ice. Most o' aw, ratin' 'em as so much Power, and reg'latin' 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines: wi'out loves and likens, wi'out memories and inclinations, wi'out souls to weary and souls to hope—when aw goes quiet, draggin' on wi'em as if they'd nowt o' th' kind, an', when aw goes onquiet, reproachin' 'em for their want o' sitch humanly feelin's in their dealins wi' yo this will never do't, sir, till God's work is onmade.' ”

That is the final and crushing refutation of all the arguments that can be urged for the plan of abolishing poverty by the process of merely inspecting it away. It is against the facts of human nature as we know them. “The destruction of the poor is their poverty”—not innate wickedness, not any cardinal defect of conduct, nor their outlook on life, which is eminently sane and cheerful. The task of so recasting them that poverty ceases to be an inconvenience is an impossible one. Certain elements in human nature are eternal and will remain “till God's work is onmade.” Till then, mankind cannot be so remoulded as to fit naturally into the economy ordained by district visitors. One of my friends reminds me of the case of a poor bed-ridden woman, the mother of a struggling family whom she only saw alas! when they were too worn and tired to do much else but get to bed. The poor widow's delight was a little canary that sang sweetly to her all day long and cheered her in her lonely suffering. But the canary consumed groundsel and groundsel costs so many pence and the dispenser of the charity, she was compelled to

130

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

seek, to eke out her wretched pittance, proved by reason analogous to Filer on tripe, that with so many more pence, saved on groundsel, the widow could buy so much more bread and tea—if that luxury were permitted. So the district visitor had her way, and the canary was banished; the little room was never filled with its sweet song again, and remained always with the perpetual hush of suffering upon it, until the poor woman died! Long before Dickens, another great satirist, whose heart was charged with pity for the poor, laid his finger on the weak spot in this precious plan of adapting resources to needs. “This,” said Dean Swift, “would involve our cutting off our feet to avoid the expense of buying boots.” There are parts of man’s nature as indispensable as feet, and they revolt at the continued emasculation, the perpetual denial, by which the poor are to be made to live. But Dickens taught us better. He showed us again and again in a series of pictures of wonderful realism that it is often the very virtues of the poor, that have kept them poor, that their condition, not they, are to blame; that it is not more supervision, not more inspecting, that the poor need, but merely a chance, the chance that their poverty continually denies them, to turn those virtues to account. Above all, he saw, and taught us to see in the poor, not their reproach so much as our own. Against the hatred, the impatience, the fretful resentment, which in his day the poor almost universally inspired—fires which are not yet burnt out—Dickens waged incessant war. Then, as now, it was the rich who loved most to dwell on the virtues of thrift; then as now it was the idlers who grew most eloquent over the dignity of labour.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

There is a passage in *Hard Times* which exemplifies very clearly the feeling that the genius of Dickens did so much to scourge away, a passage in which Mrs. Sparsit asks of Bitzer :

“ ‘ What are the restless wretches doing now ? ’

“ ‘ Merely going on in the old way, ma’am. Uniting, and leaguering, and engaging to stand by one another.’

“ ‘ It is much to be regretted,’ said Mrs. Sparsit, making her nose more Roman and her eyebrows more Coriolanian in the strength of her severity, ‘ that the united masters allow of any such class combinations.’

“ ‘ Yes, ma’am,’ said Bitzer.

“ ‘ Being united themselves, they ought one and all to set their faces against employing any man who is united with any other man,’ said Mrs. Sparsit.

“ ‘ They have done that, ma’am,’ returned Bitzer, ‘ but it rather fell through, ma’am.’

“ ‘ I do not pretend to understand these things,’ said Mrs. Sparsit with dignity, ‘ my lot having been originally cast in a widely different sphere ; and Mr. Sparsit, as a Fowler, being also quite out of the pale of any such dissensions. I only know that these people must be conquered, and that it’s high time it was done, once for all.’ ”

Dickens’s defence of the workmen’s right to combine in Trade Unions is the more interesting because it came at a time when nearly every one in England was denouncing these organizations, and when even Dickens himself was being subjected to the strongest possible pressure, even from his own familiar friends, to revise his views. There is extant an extremely interesting letter to Wills, his sub-Editor, on *Household Words*, in

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

which he answers the plea that some strikers were injuring their wives and children by remaining out. John Hampden, he points out, injured the immediate interests of the County of Bucks by raising a troop of horse therefrom, but still he was right : and the test of the striker's action was whether in the long run their families did not benefit. Dickens, in fact, was the first great democratic teacher in England, who refused to assent to the idea "that these people were to be conquered once for all" ; who held that the poor had rights, and who knew that they had, not only virtues, but resources and capacities, which, give them but an opportunity, they could display to as great advantage as those who dismissed them so cheaply. There is an extremely interesting article descriptive of a great labour struggle which appeared in *Household Words* during 1854, which throws this point into bold relief and incidently gives us some insight into Dickens's own views on labour unrest.

" Travelling down to Preston a week from this date," he writes, " I chanced to sit opposite to a very acute, very determined, very emphatic personage, with a stout travelling rug so drawn over his chest that he looked as if he were sitting up in bed with his great-coat, hat, and gloves on, severely contemplating your humble servant from behind a large blue and grey checked counterpane. In calling him emphatic, I do not mean that he was warm ; he was coldly and bitingly emphatic as a frosty wind is.

" ' You are going through to Preston, sir ? ' says he, as soon as we were clear of the Primrose Hill tunnel.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ The receipt of this question was like the receipt of a jerk of the nose ; he was so short and sharp.

“ ‘ Yes.’

“ ‘ This Preston strike is a nice piece of business ! ’ said the gentleman. ‘ A pretty piece of business ! ’

“ ‘ It is very much to be deplored,’ said I, ‘ on all accounts.’

“ ‘ They want to be ground. That’s what they want, to bring ’em to their senses,’ said the gentleman ; whom I had already begun to call in my own mind Mr. Snapper, and whom I may as well call by that name here as by any other.

“ I deferentially inquired who wanted to be ground ?

“ ‘ The hands,’ said Mr. Snapper. ‘ The hands on strike, and the hands who help ’em.’

“ I remarked that if that was all they wanted, they must be a very unreasonable people, for surely they had had a little grinding, one way and another, already. Mr. Snapper eyed me with sternness, and after opening and shutting his leathern-gloved hands several times outside his counterpane, asked me abruptly, ‘ Was I a delegate.’

“ I set Mr. Snapper right on that point, and told him I was no delegate. . . .

“ Mr. Snapper had no doubt after this that I thought the hands had a right to combine.

“ ‘ Surely,’ said I. ‘ A perfect right to combine in any lawful manner. The fact of their being able to combine and accustomed to combine may, I can easily conceive, be a protection to them. The blame even of this business is not all on one side. I think the associated Lock-out was a grave error. And when you Preston masters . . . ’

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

“ ‘*I am not a Preston master,*’ interrupted Mr. Snapper.

“ ‘When the respectable combined body of Preston masters,’ said I, ‘in the beginning of this unhappy difference, laid down the principle that no man should be employed henceforth who belonged to any combination—such as their own—they attempted to carry with a high hand a partial and unfair impossibility, and were obliged to abandon it. This was an unwise proceeding and the first defeat.’ ”

It is in Preston that Dickens is so supremely interesting, picturing the strike scenes, the meetings and the leaders with his wonderful descriptive powers, and bringing vividly before us that quiet ability and steady grip that at times of crisis, workmen, no less than others of the Anglo-Saxon race, invariably display :

“ On Sunday morning, I repaired to the Delegates’ meeting :

“ These assemblages take place in a cockpit, which, in the better times of our fallen land, belonged to the late Lord Derby for the purpose of the intellectual recreation implied in its name. I was directed to the cockpit up a narrow lane, tolerably crowded by the lower sort of working people. Personally, I was quite unknown in the town, but every one made way for me to pass, with great civility and perfect good humour. Arrived at the cockpit door, and expressing my desire to see and hear, I was handed through the crowd, down into the pit, and up again, until I found myself on the topmost circular bench, within one of the secretary’s table, and within three of the chairman. Behind the chairman was a great crown on the top of a pole made of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

parti-coloured calico, and strongly suggestive of May-day. There was no other symbol or ornament in the place.

“ It was hotter than any mill or factory I have ever been in ; but there was a stove down in the sanded pit, and delegates were seated close to it, and one particular delegate often warmed his hands at it, as if he were chilly. The air was so intensely close and hot, that at first I had but a confused perception of the delegates down in the pit, and the dense crowd of eagerly listening men and women (but not very many of the latter) filling all the benches and choking such narrow standing room as there was. When the atmosphere cleared a little, on better acquaintance, I found the question under discussion to be, whether the Manchester Delegates in attendance from the Labour Parliament, should be heard ?

“ If the Assembly, in respect of quietness and order, were put in comparison with the House of Commons, the Right Honourable the Speaker himself would decide for Preston. The chairman was a Preston weaver, two or three and fifty years of age, perhaps ; a man with a capacious head, rather long, dark hair growing at the sides and back, a placid attentive face, keen eyes, a particularly composed manner, a quiet voice, and a persuasive action of his right arm. Now look 'ee heer, my friends. See what t' question is. T' question is, shall these heer men be heard. Then t' cooms to this, what ha' these men got t' tell us ? Do they bring mooney ? If they bring mooney t'ords t' expences o' this strike, they're welcome. For, Brass, my friends, is what we want, and what we must ha',

136

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

(Hear, hear, hear.) Do they coom to us wi' any suggestion for the conduct of this strike? If they do, they're welcome. Let 'em give us their advice and we will hearken to 't. But if these men coom here, to tell us what t' Labour Parliament is, or what Ernest Jones's opinion is, or t' bring in politics and differences amoong us when what we want is 'armony, brotherly love, and concord; then I say t' you, decide for yoursel' carefully, whether these men ote to be heard in this place. (Hear, hear, hear! and No, no, no!) Chairman sits down, earnestly regarding delegates, and holding both arms of his chair. Looks extremely sensible; his plain coarse working man's shirt collar easily turned down over his loose Belcher neckerchief. Delegate who had moved that Manchester delegates be heard, presses motion—Mr. Chairman, will that delegate tell us, as a man, that these men have anything to say concerning this present strike and lock-out, for we have a deal of business to do, and what concerns this present strike and lock-out is our business and nothing else is. (Hear, hear, hear!) Delegate in question will not compromise the fact; these men want to defend the Labour Parliament from certain charges made against them. Very well, Mr. Chairman, then I move as an amendment that you do not hear these men now, and that you proceed wi' business—and if you don't I'll look after you, I tell you that. (Cheers 'and laughter.) Coom, lads, prove't them! Two or three hands for the delegates; all the rest for the business. Motion lost, amendment carried, Manchester deputation not to be heard.

“ But now starts up the delegate from Throstletown, in a dreadful state of mind. Mr. Chairman, I hold in

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

my hand a bill ; a bill that requires and demands explanation from you, sir ; an offensive bill ; a bill posted in my town of Throstletown without knowledge, without the knowledge of my fellow delegates who are here beside me ; a bill purporting to be posted by the authority of the massed committee, sir, and of which my fellow delegates and myself were kept in ignorance. Why are we to be slighted ? Why are we to be insulted ? Why are we to be meanly stabbed in the dark ? Why is this assassin-like course of conduct to be pursued towards us ? Why is Throstletown, which has nobly assisted you, the operatives of Preston, in this great struggle, and which has brought its contribution up to the full sevenpence a loom, to be thus degraded, thus aspersed, thus traduced, thus despised, thus outraged in its feelings by un-English and unmanly conduct ? Sir, I hand you up that bill, and I require of you, sir, to give me a satisfactory explanation of that bill. And I have that confidence in your known integrity, sir, as to be sure that you will give it, and that you will tell us who is to blame, and that you will make reparation to Throstletown for this scandalous treatment. Then, in hot blood, up starts Gruffshaw (professional speaker) who is somehow responsible for this bill. O my friends, but explanation is required here ! O my friends, but it is fit and right that you should have the dark ways of the real traducers and apostates, and the real un-English stabbers, laid bare before you. My friends, when this dark conspiracy first began—But here the persuasive right hand of the chairman falls gently on Gruffshaw's shoulder. Gruffshaw stops in full boil. My friends, these are hard words of my friend Gruffshaw, and this

138

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

is not the business. No more it is, and once again, sir, I the delegate who said that I would look after you, do move that you proceed to business! Preston has not the strong relish for personal altercation that Westminster hath. Motion seconded and carried, business passed to, Gruffshaw dumb.

“ Perhaps the world could not afford a more remarkable contrast than between the deliberate, collected manner of these men proceeding with their business, and the clash and hurry of the engine among which their lives are passed. Their astonishing fortitude and perseverance ; their high sense of honour among themselves ; the extent to which they are impressed with the responsibility that is upon them of setting a careful example, and keeping their order out of any harm and loss of reputation ; the noble readiness in them to help one another, of which most medical practitioners and working clergymen can give so many affecting examples ; could scarcely ever be plainer to an ordinary observer of human nature than in this cockpit. To hold, for a minute, that the great mass of them were not sincerely actuated by the belief that all these qualities were bound up in what they were doing, and that they were doing right, seemed to me little short of an impossibility. As the different delegates (some in the very dress in which they had left the mill last night) reported the amounts sent from the various places they represented, this strong faith on their parts seemed expressed in every tone and every look that was capable of expressing it. One man was raised to enthusiasm by his pride in bringing so much ; another man was ashamed and depressed because he brought so little ; this man triumphantly

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

made it known that he could give you, from the store in hand, a hundred pounds in addition next week, if you should want it ; and that man pleaded that he hoped his district would do better before long ; but I could as soon have doubted the existence of the walls that enclosed us, as the earnestness with which they spoke (many of them referring to the children who were born to labour after them) of ‘ this great, this noble, gallant, godlike, struggle.’ ”

The fact that Dickens was himself opposed to this particular strike—as to strikes generally—makes the tribute of this wonderful word picture all the more impressive. Even to-day we feel that it is something of a revelation of the quiet intensity, the grim capacity, that lies beneath what has become familiar to us as Labour Unrest, and, at the time, when it was published, when to mention the social question was heresy and when trade unions were anathema, its effect must have been remarkable. But to the mind of Dickens this inherent capacity of the poor, their wonderful faculty of making the best of things, their supreme good sense, their appreciation of all that would prove really helpful to them in their lives, their habits of control, of cheerful, steady endurance and of good temper—to Dickens all these were continually present, and he was as much encouraged and heartened by these qualities in the class he loved, as he was dispirited by the abject failure of the administrative and governing classes to find scope for these precious gifts. In this clue we may find without any straining of the facts, Dickens’s own general remedy for the poverty in which he found so many thousands of his fellow countrymen sunk. He looked forward to

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

the time when the great mass of the English people would themselves take hold of the machine of Government and, with the firm, strong grip of the Anglo-Saxon, level up industrial conditions, remove the social sores that disfigured their fair land, and deal on broad, practical lines with political evils and abuses. In one of the most successful of his many political short stories, Dickens tells the tale of a man who:—

“ . . . lived in a busy place and worked very hard to live. He had no hope of ever being rich enough to live a month without hard work, but he was quite content, God knows, to labour with a cheerful will. He was one of an immense family, all of whose sons and daughters gained their daily bread by daily work, prolonged from their rising up betimes until their lying down at night. Beyond this destiny he had no prospect and he sought none.

“ There was overmuch drumming, trumpeting and speech-making in the neighbourhood where he dwelt. But he had nothing to do with that. Such clash and uproar came from the Bigwig family, at the unaccountable proceedings of which race he marvelled much. They set up the strangest statues, in iron, marble, bronze, and brass, before his door ; and darkened his house with the legs and tails of uncouth images of horses. He wondered what it all meant, smiled in a rough, good-humoured way he had, and kept at his hard work.”

The Man is the common people. The Bigwigs, I need hardly say, are the aristocracy, and they engage to manage his affairs to arrange his life, to educate his children, to provide him with innocent amusement and with a decent living place ; in a word, with materials for human life, none of which things do they perform. So

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

that the man knows "the evil consequences of imperfect instruction, of pernicious neglect, of unnatural restraint and the denial of humanizing influence," and he is, if I remember right, finally carried off by the pestilence, patient and uncomplaining to the last. Dickens looked beyond this. He had "an infinite faith in the people governed; and infinite contempt for those governing them;" for the humbugs of the Circumlocution Office, for the Bigwigs and the Coodles and the Noodles of the Treasury Bench, for the Honeythunder impostors of the Havens of Philanthropy, and for the Filers and the Gradgrinds out to inquisitorially inspect and to elaborately tabulate the poor. Dickens saw through the transparently vulgar pretensions of these, to the great masses of the English people quiet, steady, reliant, who needed only to be roused to shake the Barnacles off, and to take up the task that was so obviously beyond the strength of their pastors and masters. To them did he appeal "to beware of being led astray from their dearest interests, by high political authorities on the one hand, no less than by sharking mountebanks on the other. The noble lord, the right honourable baronet, and the honourable gentleman, and the honourable and learned gentleman, and the honourable and gallant gentleman, and the whole of the honourable circle, have, in their contest for places, power and patronage, loaves and fishes, distracted the working man's attention from his first necessity. . . . Whatsoever shadows these may offer in lieu of substances, it is the first duty of the People to be resolutely blind and deaf; firmly insisting, above all things, on their and their children's right to every means of life

142

HIS ATTITUDE TO THE POOR

and health that Providence has afforded for all, and firmly refusing to allow their name to be taken in vain for any purpose, by any party.”

Turn to *Dombey and Son*, to *Chuzzlewit*, to *Bleak House*, to *Hard Times*, to *Our Mutual Friend*, to *Miscellaneous Papers*, and from out of each and all emerges an atmosphere of resentment at the futility of class pride, of snobbery, and class consciousness, and a spirit of all-pervading love of everything that concerned the poor and oppressed.

From the latter named volume let us recite that string of stirring verse—so redolent of Russell Lowell and Mrs. Browning—which he called the “Hymn of the Wiltshire Labourers.” The circumstances of its production are explained by the late Mr. F. G. Kitton. It appears that one, Lucy Simpkins, of a parish in Wiltshire had addressed a night meeting of the wives of the agricultural labourers in that county in support of a petition for Free Trade. In the course of her speech she asked, “Don’t you all think that we have a great need to cry to our God, to put it in the hearts of our greassous Queen and her members of Parlerment to grant us free bread ?” This simple appeal touched the great heart of Dickens and under his own name in the *Daily News* he uttered this earnest poetic protest against oppression :—

“ Oh God, who by Thy Prophet’s hand
Did’st smite the rocky brake,
Whence water came, at Thy command,
Thy people’s thirst to slake ;
Strike now, upon this granite wall,
Stern, obdurate, and high ;
And let some drops of pity fall
For us who starve and die !

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

The God, who took a little child,
And set him in the midst,
And promised him His mercy mild
As, by Thy Son, Thou did'st :
Look down upon our children dear,
So gaunt, so cold, so spare,
And let their images appear
Where Lords and Gentry are !

Oh God, teach them to feel how we,
When our poor infants droop,
Are weakened in our trust of Thee,
And how our spirits stoop ;
For, in Thy rest, so bright and fair,
All tears and sorrows sleep :
And their young looks, so full of care,
Would make Thine Angels weep !

The God, who with His finger drew
The Judgment coming on,
Write, for these men what must ensue,
Ere many years be gone !
Oh God, whose bow is in the sky,
Let them not brave and dare,
Until they look (too late) on high,
And see an Arrow there !

Oh God, remind them ! In the bread
They break upon the knee,
These sacred words may yet be read
' In memory of Me.'
Oh God, remind them of His sweet
Compassion for the poor,
And how He gave them Bread to eat
And went from door to door ! "

“ The sweet compassion ” of Charles Dickens “ for the poor ” was Christ-like in its depth and sincerity.

CHAPTER VII

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

“ . . . It is overwhelming to think of the Treasury of the Dogs. There are no such fortunes embarked in all the enterprises of life, as have gone their way. They have a capital Drama, for their amusement and instruction. They have got hold of all the People's holidays for the refreshment of weary frames and the renewal of weary spirits. They have left the People little else in that way but a Fast now and then for the ignorances and imbecilities of their rulers. Perhaps those days will go next. To say the plain truth, very seriously, I shouldn't be surprised.”—*Gone to the Dogs : Household Words*, March 10th, 1855.

No part of the social message of Charles Dickens has more potent significance for us and for our time than his vigorous and masterly defence of the People's Pleasures. With his large humanitarian outlook on life, his instinctive sympathies with poor humanity's frailties, his fierce detestation of hypocrisy and oppression, above all with his intimate knowledge of the often colourless, cheerless lives of the common people, so full of grey anxiety and monotonous toil, it was small wonder that Dickens insisted over and over again on the importance of those humanizing enjoyments without which man, who does not live by bread alone, becomes dull, listless, and apathetic, a sorry reflection indeed of the Godhead.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

To-day the pleasures of the people are constantly being assailed or menaced by fussy busybodies or pragmatical officialdom. Theatres, music-halls, Sunday concerts, dances, picture palaces, art galleries, and even statuary which adorns public buildings are perpetually subjected to an illogical censorship by people of the type who, in the early Dickens's period, sought, and in many cases succeeded, in making joy become positively joyless. Our own Censorship of Plays is the laughing-stock of Europe, and we have not rendered it less ludicrous by the appointment, as Censor, of the author whose adaptation of a questionable French farce (which Mr. Archer describes as the glorification of cynical adultery) was reprobated by the robust good taste and common sense of the people themselves. The existing censorship of plays, which pretends to be the guardian of public morals, is the outward and visible sign of our national hypocrisy and prurient Puritanism. It has changed but little since the day, some sixty odd years ago, when Dickens himself lashed at it as "a mere piece of court favour and dandy conventionality" instead of "a real responsible educational trust."

Now Dickens was, unconsciously, if you like, the great Anti-Puritan. To him, life was made for bright laughter, not for sombre Melancholy. The Puritan distrusts human nature. It must always be drilled and disciplined; its exuberances must be checked; its lightnesses must be suppressed. The pleasures which men seek, not in solitude or surreptitiously, but openly and in public places, present to the Puritan a precipitant catastrophe! Long ago Dickens realized the fundamental falsity of that view. He believed in Human

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

Nature ; he held it to be a good and wholesome thing. He believed that the primal instincts of man are mainly right and true, that the perversion of those instincts alone renders them wrong and false. Of course he did not close his eyes to the fact that there is, in the products of a grotesque environment, enormous capacity for cruelty and evil. How often has he, with relentless analysis, shown us that side of perverted mankind? But Dickens saw, with his wide-orbed vision of the world, that lovelessness is usually the product of a loveless life ; that cruelty springs out of squalor ; that crime arises from social and economic misery ; that brutality and bestiality are developed in loneliness, repression, austerity, and aloofness, rather than in the pursuit of those pleasures which render men children again, make them forget their cares, and induce them to mix in joyous fellowship one with the other.

While the Puritan fears licentiousness, Dickens realized that the great danger to man lay in loneliness, in lack of fellowship, and his stories are replete with warnings of its evil. Let me cite *Dombey*, whose sense of injustice is with him all along, and "the more he represses it, the more unjust he necessarily is"; old Martin Chuzzlewit made cruel by isolation ; old Harmon in *Our Mutual Friend* who is dead before the book begins, but whose tortured soul dominates the story.

Dickens believed that happiness and joyousness were cardinal virtues ; he held with Tennyson that "only with others" can these virtues be developed or made complete. He detested solitude ; he exalted communion. He believed in Man and therefore in Man's pleasures, and he accepted them as healthy, admirable.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

The Puritan distrusting man puts his pleasures under a microscope ; Dickens called for them as requisite for man's full growth and development. He knew that a full life is only possible where men are enabled to develop their instincts and nature to the utmost, and here he was in direct antagonism to the Puritan, who is for ever seeking to develop only *some* instincts after a plan of the Puritan's own.

Do you recall the exquisite satire which Dickens pours upon Gradgrind, the "man of realities," the "man of facts and calculations," when he finds his "own metallurgical Louisa and his own mathematical Tom "peeping with all their might through a hole in a deal board at a circus" ?

". . . ' In the name of wonder, idleness, and folly ! ' said Mr. Gradgrind, leading each away by a hand, ' what do you do here ? '

" ' Wanted to see what it was like, ' returned Louisa, shortly.

" ' What it was like ? ' "

" ' Yes, father. ' "

" There was an air of jaded sullenness in them both, and particularly in the girl ; yet, struggling through the dissatisfaction of her face, there was a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow, which brightened its expression. Not with the brightness natural to cheerful youth, but with uncertain, eager, doubtful flashes, which had something painful in them, analogous to the changes on a blind face groping its way. . . .

" ' You ! Thomas and you, to whom the circle of

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

the sciences is open ; Thomas and you, who may be said to be replete with facts ; Thomas and you, who have been trained to mathematical exactness ; Thomas and you, here !' cried Mr. Gradgrind. ' In this degraded position ! I am amazed.'

" ' I was tired, father. I have been tired a long time,' said Louisa.

" ' Tired ? Of what ?' asked the astonished father.

" ' I don't know of what—of everything, I think . . . '

" ' What,' he repeated presently, ' would Mr. Bounderby say ?' All the way to Stone Lodge, as with grave indignation he led the two delinquents home, he repeated at intervals, ' What would Mr. Bounderby say ?'—as if Mr. Bounderby had been Mrs. Grundy. . . ."

Now, Gradgrind was the Puritan, sincere, well-meaning, and in some respects unselfish, but consumed with the passion of remoulding human nature after his own plan, of excluding joy and laughter and light, and of making the world a population of calculating machines.

It may be urged " but surely there was no great harm in preventing children from seeing a circus with questionable surroundings and low jokes." Dickens did not regard the circus as so questionable and even the jokes he viewed with a compassionate toleration. But that act of Gradgrind's represented a part of a general attitude towards life. And see how that policy worked out ! Recall that wonderful dramatic chapter at the end of the second book in *Hard Times*, where Louisa visits her father at night and " uncovering her head and letting her cloak and hood fall where they

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

might, stood looking at him ; so colourless, so dishevelled, so defiant and despairing that he was afraid of her.

“ . . . Father, you have trained me from my cradle ? ”

“ ‘ Yes, Louisa. ’ ”

“ ‘ I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny. ’ ”

“ He looked at her in doubt and dread, vacantly repeating, ‘ Curse the hour ? Curse the hour ? ’ ”

“ ‘ How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death ? Where are the graces of my soul ? Where are the sentiments of my heart ? What have you done, O father, what have you done with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here ? . . . ’ ”

“ . . . ‘ Would you have doomed me, at any time, to the frost and blight that have hardened and spoiled me ? Would you have robbed me—for no one’s enrichment—only for the greater desolation of this world—of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me, my school in which I should have learned to be more humble and more trusting with them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better ? ’ ”

“ ‘ O, no, no. No, Louisa. ’ ”

“ ‘ Yet, father, if I had been stone blind ; if I had groped my way by my sense of touch, and had been free, while I knew the shapes and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them ; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

all good respects, than I am with the eyes I have. Now, hear what I have come to say.'

"He moved to support her with his arm. She rising as he did so, they stood close together; she, with a hand upon his shoulder, looking fixedly in his face.

" 'With a hunger and thirst upon me, father, which have never been for a moment appeased; with an ardent impulse towards some region, where rules, and figures, and definitions were not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling every inch of my way.'

" 'I never knew you were unhappy, my child.'

" 'Father, I always knew it. In this strife, I have almost repulsed and crushed my better angel into a demon. What I have learned has left me doubting, misbelieving, despising, regretting what I have not learned; and my dismal resource has been to think that life would soon go by, and that nothing in it could be worth the pain and trouble of a contest. . . .'

She relates the story of her wretched married life and speaks of the new lover who has come into it.

" . . . 'This night, my husband being away, he has been with me, declaring himself my lover. This minute he expects me, for I could release myself of his presence by no other means. I do not know that I am sorry, I do not know that I am ashamed, I do not know that I am degraded in my own esteem. All that I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!'

"He tightened his hold in time to prevent her sinking on the floor, but she cried out in a terrible voice, 'I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!'

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

And he laid her down there, and saw the pride of his heart and *the triumph of his system*, lying, an insensible heap at his feet."

This is Dickens's picture of what life, deprived of imagination, deprived of joy, such as the Puritan would impose, would become for men. Pleasure excluded, we should be so trained that, like Louisa, we should "never dream a child's dream" nor think a child's thought. Gradgrind's "system" was a relentless one; the "system" which would arise from regulated and controlled and calculated Puritan pleasures would be equally relentless, equally unimaginative, equally cold and equally disastrous. Every gay impulse would be strangled and man would become afraid of himself.

The Puritan of to-day of course finds it impossible to keep children from circuses and men from music-halls. But he insists on seeing that those circuses and music-halls are harassed, scotched and restricted as much as possible. The Puritan would have them rendered difficult, uncomfortable, inconvenient, and so discourage the people in their pleasure of visiting them.

Dickens had no such squeamishness.

Turn to the *Old Curiosity Shop* and read that delightful description of Kit's outing to Astley's. Let me give you the atmosphere:—

"... Dear, dear, what a place it looked, that Astley's; with all the paint, gilding, and look-glass; the vague smell of horses suggestive of coming wonders; the curtain that hid such gorgeous mysteries; the clean white sawdust down in the circus; the company coming in and taking their places; the fiddlers looking carelessly up at them while they tuned their

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

instruments, as if they didn't want to play to begin, and knew it all beforehand! What a glow was that, which burst upon them all, when that long, clear, brilliant row of lights came slowly up; and what the feverish excitement when the little bell rang and the music began in good earnest, with strong parts for the drums, and sweet effects for the triangles! Well might Barbara's mother say to Kit's mother that the gallery was the place to see from, and wonder it wasn't much dearer than the boxes; well might Barbara feel doubtful whether to laugh or cry, in her flutter of delight.

“Then the play itself! The horses which little Jacob believed from the first to be alive, and the ladies and gentlemen of whose reality he could be by no means persuaded, having never seen or heard anything at all like them—the firing, which made Barbara wink—the forlorn lady, who made her cry—the tyrant, who made her tremble—the man who sang the song with the lady's maid and danced the chorus, who made her laugh—the pony who reared up on his hind legs when he saw the murderer, and wouldn't hear of walking on all four again until he was taken into custody—the clown who ventured on such familiarities with the military man in boots—the lady who jumped over the nine-and-twenty ribbons and came down safe upon the horse's back—everything was delightful, splendid, and surprising! Little Jacob applauded till his hands were sore; Kit cried ‘an-kor’ at the end of everything, the three-act piece included; and Barbara's mother beat her umbrella on the floor, in her ecstasies, until it was nearly worn to the gingham. . . .”

Could a jollier picture of honest, healthy fun than

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

that be conceived ? But to-day the "Clown's familiarities" would probably be censured by a committee, and the jumping lady would doubtless be denounced by some Puritan parson as "indelicate." But little Jacob and his creator were in the right.

Recall, too, the supper which the party afterwards enjoyed when Kit told the waiter to look sharp—"and he not only said he would look sharp, but he actually did, and presently came running back with the newest loaves, and the freshest butter, and the largest oysters, ever seen. Then said Kit, to this gentleman, 'a pot of beer'—just so—and the gentleman, instead of replying, 'Sir, did you address that language to me?' only said 'Pot o' beer, sir? Yes, sir,' and went off and fetched it, and put it on the table in a small decanter-stand."

And how "the greatest miracle of the night was little Jacob who ate oysters as if he had been born and bred to the business," and how, "in short, there never was a more successful supper; and when Kit ordered in a glass of something hot to finish with, and proposed Mr. and Mrs. Garland before sending it round, there were not six happier people in the world." And at the end of it all "Kit took little Jacob on his back and giving his arm to his mother and a kiss to the baby, they all trudged merrily home together."

There is simple human happiness if you will, but modern-day Puritanism would scowl on scenes like these. Imagine what would be said by the elders of our Ebenezer Chapels if a modern Kit—a comparative youngster—were to be overheard calling for "a pot of beer"! The Puritanism of our time has already made such a supper party as this quite impossible.

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

Astley's was a fragrant memory with Dickens. He never forgot it. There was no place which recalled "so strongly our recollections of childhood."

". . . It was not a 'Royal Amphitheatre' in those days, nor had Ducrow arisen to shed the light of classic taste and portable gas over the sawdust of the circus; but the whole character of the place was the same, the pieces were the same, the clown's jokes were the same, the riding-masters were equally grand, the comic performers equally witty, the tragedians equally hoarse, and the 'highly-trained chargers' equally spirited. Astley's has altered for the better—we have changed for the worse. Our histrionic taste is gone, and with shame we confess, that we are far more delighted and amused with the audience, than with the pageantry we once so highly appreciated."

Writing from Italy to Mr. Clarkson Stanfield, he said, "So you were at Astley's last night . . . that smell of sawdusty horses which was never in any place in the world, salutes my nose with a painful distinctness."

In *Sketches by Boz* he portrays all the vivid delights which came to men and children as they watched the performances there. Every witticism, every ludicrous grimace, every joke of clown or riding-master is received with vociferous delight, and Dickens, like the common people he loved, took his pleasures gladly.

Note, too, the relish with which the great humorist depicts the scenes at "Greenwich Fair," or at "a regular Sunday water party" up or down the river. All the excitement, turmoil, good-natured sport and banter is presented with manifest glee. The fair was "a sort of spring-rash, a three days' fever which cools

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

the blood for six months afterwards, at the expiration of which London is restored to its old habits of plodding industry.”

It is obvious to any one who peruses these sketches carefully that Dickens, who knew and loved the people, never suspected that there lurked danger in their hilarity. How alien was his outlook from that of the latter-day Puritan who demands that there shall be an inspector at every play, a “licence” for every song, who shrinks in horror from the dance and who views with dread and misgiving any “jollity” for the poor!

But probably an even more striking evidence of Dickens’s attitude to the amusements of the people is forthcoming in two of those illuminating articles which the industry and research of Mr. B. W. Matz rescued from that splendid literary sepulchre, *Household Words*, and which, together with articles from *The Examiner*, *The Daily News*, *The Morning Chronicle*, and *All the Year Round*, have since been compiled and published, as I have intimated, under the title of *Miscellaneous Papers*. In the first of these the master says:—

“. . . It is probable that nothing will ever root out from among the common people an innate love they have for dramatic entertainment in some form or other. It would be a very doubtful benefit to society, we think, if it could be rooted out. The Polytechnic Institution in Regent Street, where an infinite variety of ingenious models are exhibited and explained, and where lectures comprising a quantity of useful information on many practical subjects are delivered, is a great public benefit and a wonderful place, but we think a people formed entirely in their hours of leisure by Polytechnic

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

Institutions would be an uncomfortable community. We would rather not have to appeal to the generous sympathies of a man of five-and-twenty in respect of some affliction of which he had had no personal experience, who had passed all his holidays, when a boy, among cranks and cogwheels. We should be more disposed to trust him if he had been brought into occasional contact with a maid and a Magpie; if he had made one or two diversions into the Forest of Bondy; or had gone the length of a Christmas Pantomime. There is a range of imagination in most of us which no amount of steam-engines will satisfy, and which The-great-exhibition-of-the-works-of-industry-of-all-nations itself will probably leave unappeased. The lower we go, the more natural it is that the best-relished provision for this should be found in dramatic entertainments; as at once the most obvious, the least troublesome, and the most real of all escapes out of the literal world. Joe Whelks, of the New Cut, Lambeth, is not much of a reader, has no great store of books, no very commodious room to read in, no very decided inclination to read, and no power at all of presenting vividly before his mind's eye what he reads about. But put Joe in the gallery of the Victoria Theatre; show him doors and windows in the scene that will open and shut and that people can get in and out of; tell him a story with these aids, and by the help of live men and women dressed up, confiding to him their innermost secrets, in voices audible half a mile off; and Joe will unravel a story through all its entanglements, and sit there as long after midnight as you have anything left to show him. Accordingly the Theatres to which Mr. Whelks

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

resorts are always full ; and whatever changes of fashion the drama knows elsewhere, it is always fashionable in the New Cut."

In his second article Dickens describes a visit to another people's theatre—

" . . . It was apparent here, as in the theatre we had previously visited, that one of the reasons of its great attraction was its being directly addressed to the common people, in the provision made for their seeing and hearing. Instead of being put away in a dark gap in the roof of an immense building, as in our once National Theatres, they were here in possession of eligible points of view and thoroughly able to take in the whole performance. Instead of being at a great disadvantage in comparison with the mass of the audience, they were here *the* audience, for whose accommodation the place was made. We believe this to be one great cause of the success of these speculations. In whatever way the common people are addressed, whether in churches, chapels, schools, lecture-rooms, or theatres, to be successfully addressed they must be directly appealed to. No matter how good the feast, they will not come to it on mere sufferance. If on looking round us we find that the only things plainly and personally addressed to them from quack medicines upwards be bad or very defective things, so much the worse for them and for all of us, and so much the more unjust and absurd the system which has haughtily abandoned a strong ground to such occupation.

"We will add that we believe these people have a right to be amused. A great deal that we consider to be unreasonable is written and talked about not licensing

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

these places of entertainment. We have already intimated that we believe a love of dramatic representations to be an inherent principle in human nature. In most conditions of human life of which we have any knowledge, from the Greeks to the Bosjesmen, some form of dramatic representation has always obtained. We have a vast respect for county magistrates, and for the lord chamberlain, but we render greater deference to such extensive and immutable experience, and think it will outlive the whole existing court and commission. We would assuredly not bear harder on the fourpenny theatre than on the four shilling theatre or the four guinea theatre; but we would decidedly interpose to turn to some wholesome account the means of instruction which it has at command, and we would make that office of Dramatic Licensor, which, like many other offices, has become a mere piece of Court favour and dandy conventionality, a real, responsible, educational trust. . . .

“Ten thousand people, every week, all the year round, are estimated to attend this place of amusement. If it were closed to-morrow—if there were fifty such and they were all closed to-morrow—the only result would be to cause that to be privately and evasively done which is now publicly done; to render the harm of it much greater, and to exhibit the suppressive power of the law in an oppressive and partial light. The people who now resort here *will* be amused somewhere. It is of no use to blink that fact, or to make pretences to the contrary.”

That was Dickens's plain message to the English people; it was, and is, the normal view, the healthy

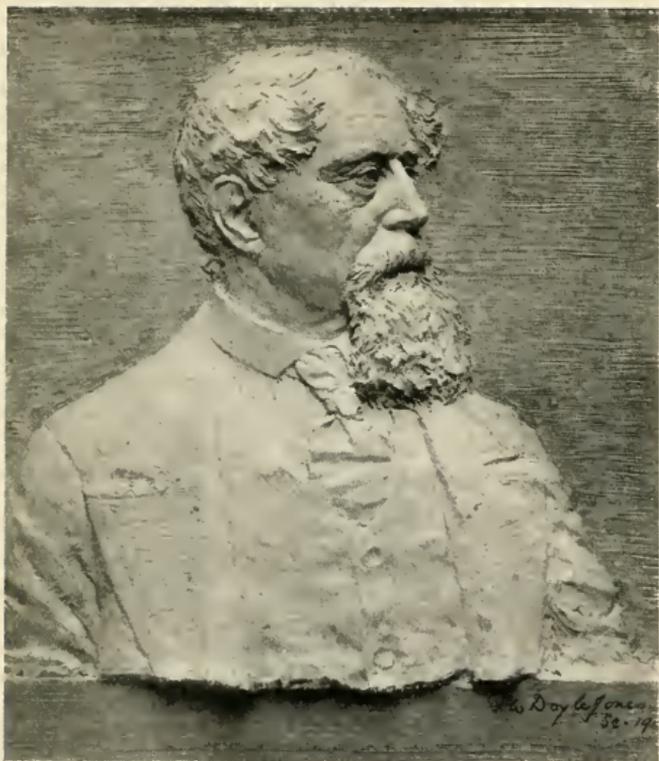
CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

view. I believe the Puritan plan, although temporarily in the ascendant, is but a purely ephemeral thing because it is unnatural and because it is divorced from the common life of the common people.

* * * * *

Take another product of the Puritan—the English Sunday—and see what Dickens's attitude was toward this. Did he desire it to be a day of drabness—something set apart from life? Did he hold that there was but one day in the week which men should set apart for holiness, or did he believe that every day should be, in truth, a holy day, and every week a sacrament? Let us turn to Chapter III of *Little Dorrit* and read there the answer:—

“It was a Sunday evening in London, gloomy, close, and stale. Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous. Melancholy streets in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of the people who were condemned to look at them out of windows in dire despondency. In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead carts were going round. Everything was bolted and barred that could by possibility furnish relief to an overworked people. No pictures, no unfamiliar animals, no rare plants or flowers, no natural or artificial wonders of the ancient world—all taboo with that enlightened strictness, that the ugly South Sea gods in the British Museum might have supposed themselves at home again. Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets.



CHARLES DICKENS.

Relief portrait by Francis Doyle-Jones, Chelsea, 1912.

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up. Nothing for the spent toiler to do, but to compare the monotony of his seventh day with the monotony of his six days, think what a weary life he led, and make the best of it—or the worst, according to the probabilities. . . .”

“Mr. Arthur Clennam sat in the window of the coffee-house on Ludgate Hill, counting one of the neighbouring bells, making sentences and burdens of songs out of it in spite of himself, and wondering how many sick people it might be the death of in the course of the year. As the hour approached, its changes of measure made it more and more exasperating. At the quarter, it went off into a condition of deadly-living importunity, urging the populace in a voluble manner to Come to church, Come to church, Come to church! At the ten minutes it became aware that the congregation would be scanty, and slowly hammered out in low spirits, They *won't* come, they *won't* come, they *won't* come. At the five minutes, it abandoned hope, and shook every house in the neighbourhood for three hundred seconds, with one dismal swing per second, as a groan of despair.

“‘Thank Heaven!’ said Clennam, when the hour struck and the bell stopped.

“But its sound had revived a long train of miserable Sundays, and the procession would not stop with the bell, but continued to march on. ‘Heaven forgive me,’ said he, ‘and those who trained me. How I have hated this day!’

“There was the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title why he was going to Perdition—a piece of curiosity that he really in a frock and drawers was not in a condition to satisfy—and which, for the further attraction of his infant mind, had a parenthesis in every other line with some hiccuping reference. There was the sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a picquet of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy ; and when he would willingly have bartered two meals of indigestible sermon for another ounce or two of inferior mutton at his scanty dinner in the flesh. There was the interminable Sunday of his nonage ; when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a bible—bound, like her own construction of it, in the hardest, barest and straitest boards, with one dented ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves—as if it, of all books, were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse. There was the resentful Sunday of a little later, when he sat glowering and glooming through the tardy length of the day, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart, and no more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament than if he had been bred among idolaters. There was a legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing before him.”

There is not a syllable of exaggeration in that merciless description of our English Sunday. Speak to the man who has experienced something of the loneliness of

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

London—the young provincial who has come to town, the alluring light of ambition in his eyes and unquenchable hope in his heart. Ask him whether he has not realized the poignant truth of the phrase, *Magna civitas, magna solitudo* ; inquire of him what the sense of aloofness in this teeming city means and then speak to him of the Sabbath ! Early in my own manhood I tasted its pitiless misery, its forbidding austerity, and standing within the shadow of St. Paul's I have known what it is to cry, " I testify that Thou can'st make Hell, O God ! "

Since the day that Clennam spent his Sunday in bitter reflection we have made some advances, but the Puritan is still abroad waiting for the nation to go back to its old stern and rigidly unnatural habits of observing the one day which we should devote to restful recreation and helpful pleasure. He is still wringing his hands and declaring that we are a Godless people—thus convicting himself of that most culpable and stupendous of all blasphemies that God is the Creator and Author of Unhappiness, that Joy is an unnatural thing and that He is only duly worshipped when men shut out of their hearts and lives the gladness which brings peace and the lightness which brings love. The Puritan still talks in horrified tones of that, to him, ghastliest of all things, " The Continental Sunday ! " He has rarely, if ever, experienced a Sunday outside Suburbia, and its tin Tabernacle, and he knows nothing of the rational pursuits to which, say, the middle-class French family devote their seventh day. He has no conception of the most excellent way in which the French artisan will train his children to worship their Maker by true reverence and sacrifice, but also by a rational appreciation

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

of the physical and mental qualities with which an All-wise Creator has endowed them. He knows nothing of that family which devotes its earliest hours of the Sunday to public worship, and he would be astounded to see a little later that same family with its father carrying a hamper and the mother the baby, trudging away into the beautiful park, or to the village green to enjoy their Sunday meal, and to spend the after-hours in innocent games and joyous mirth !

Dickens had lived abroad. He had been the witness of many such scenes ; he was free from the almost impenetrable prejudices which arise from the narrow outlook and the insular ignorance of the Puritan. But long before even he had had the opportunity of travelling and observing the less fanatical customs of other lands, Dickens had instinctively pronounced himself on the side of freedom and against the bigots who were promulgating their squalid Sabbatarian doctrines. His *Timothy Sparks* pamphlet, which he called *Sunday under Three Heads*, with a scorchingly satirical dedication to the Bishop of London, is as fine a defence of the people's right to rational amusement as has ever been penned.

“ . . . The pampered aristocrat, whose life is one continued round of licentious pleasures and sensual gratifications ; or the gloomy enthusiast who detests the cheerful amusements he can never enjoy and envies the healthy feelings he can never know and who would put down the one and suppress the other until he made the minds of his fellow beings as besotted and distorted as his own—neither of these men can by possibility form an adequate notion of what Sunday is to those

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

whose lives are spent in sedentary or laborious occupations and who are accustomed to look forward to it through their whole existence as their only day of rest from toil and innocent enjoyment."

He describes the perfunctory service of the Church, the amazingly vulgar and hysterical ravings in a white-washed chapel, contrasts these with the scenes in the streets on the Sunday morning and the excursions in the afternoon of those who seek some place "where they can see the sky, the fields, the trees, and breathe for an hour or two the pure air which so seldom plays upon that poor girl's form or exhilarates her spirits." Then comes the passionate outburst—"I would to God that the ironhearted man who would deprive such people as these of their only pleasures could feel the sinking of heart and soul, the wasting exhaustion of mind and body, the utter prostration of present strength and future hope, attendant upon that incessant toil which lasts from day to day and month to month, that toil which is too often resumed with the first stir of morning. How marvellously would his ardent zeal for other men's souls diminish after a short probation and how enlightened and comprehensive would his views of the real object and meaning of the institution of the Sabbath become."

How, too, he lashes the saintly Puritans of his time who were exclaiming for a law which "shall convert the day intended for rest and cheerfulness into one of universal gloom, bigotry, and persecution."

Dickens never dipped his pen in satire more mordant, or criticism more direct and piercing, than when he set out to depict the Sunday as it would be under the Puritan

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

régime. His verbal photographs would cause a man possessed of any sanity to shudder. He warns the fanatics in solemn terms, "Strike home to the comforts of every man's fireside—tamper with every man's freedom and liberty—and one month, one week may arouse a feeling abroad, which a king would gladly yield his crown to quell, and a peer would resign his coronet to allay."

To Dickens, Puritanism presented a problem inexplicable apart from selfishness of the most inordinate type. He sought for the motives which inspired its disciples' melancholy meddling, and here is his view:—

" . . . It may be asked, what motives can actuate a man who has so little regard for the comfort of his fellow beings, so little respect for their wants and necessities, and so distorted a notion of the beneficence of his Creator. I reply, an envious, heartless, ill-conditioned dislike to seeing those whom fortune has placed below him cheerful and happy—an intolerant confidence in his own high worthiness before God, and a lofty impression of the demerits of others—pride, selfish pride, as inconsistent with the spirit of Christianity itself, as opposed to the example of its Founder upon earth.

"To these may be added another class of men—the stern and gloomy enthusiasts, who would make earth a hell, and religion a torment; men, who having wasted the earlier part of their lives in dissipation and depravity, find themselves when scarcely past its meridian steeped to the neck in vice, and shunned like a loathsome disease. Abandoned by the world, having nothing to fall back upon, nothing to remember but time mis-spent, and energies misdirected, they turn their eyes and not their

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

thoughts to Heaven, and delude themselves into the impious belief that in denouncing the lightness of heart which they cannot partake, and the rational pleasures from which they never derived enjoyment, they are more than remedying the sins of their old career, and like the founders of monasteries and builders of churches, in ruder days—establishing a good set claim upon their Maker. . . .”

The Sunday which Dickens wanted to see survive in England was one in which the great mass of toilers should be provided with real amusements and healthy games and “the museums and repositories of scientific and useful inventions crowded with ingenious mechanics and industrious artizans.” His description of the happy little country meadow, with young and old engaged in games, was the ideal he sought:—

“ . . . I should like to see the time arrive,” he said, “when a man’s attendance to his religious duties might be left to that religious feeling which most men possess in a greater or less degree, but which was never forced into the breast of any man by menace or restraint. I should like to see the time when Sunday might be looked forward to as a recognized day of relaxation and enjoyment, and when every man might feel, what few men do now, that religion is not incompatible with rational pleasure and needful recreation. . . .”

“Fancy the pleasant scene. Throngs of people, pouring out from the lanes and alleys of the metropolis, to various places of common resort at some short distance from the town, to join in the refreshing sports and exercises of the day—the children gambolling in crowds upon the grass, the mothers looking on, and enjoying

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

themselves the little game they seem only to direct ; other parties strolling along some pleasant walks, or reposing in the shade of the stately trees ; others again intent upon their different amusements. Nothing should be heard on all sides, but the sharp stroke of the bat as it sent the ball skimming along the ground, the clear ring of the quoit, as it struck upon the iron peg, the noisy murmur of many voices, and the loud shout of mirth and delight, which would awaken the echoes far and wide, till the fields rung with it. The day would pass away in a series of enjoyments, which would awaken no painful reflections when night arrived ; for they would be calculated to bring with them only health and contentment. The young would lose that dread of religion which the sour austerity of its professors too often inculcates in youthful bosoms ; and the old would find less difficulty in persuading them to respect its observances. The drunken and dissipated, deprived of any excuse for their misconduct, would no longer excite pity, but disgust. Above all, the more ignorant and humble class of men, who now partake of many of the bitters of life, and taste but few of its sweets, would naturally feel attachment and respect for that code of morality, which, regarding the many hardships of their station, strove to alleviate its rigours, and endeavoured to soften its asperity.

“ This is what Sunday might be made, and what it might be made without impiety or profanation. The wise and beneficent Creator who places men upon earth requires that they shall perform the duties of that station of life to which they are called, and He can never intend that the more a man strives to discharge those duties

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

the more he shall be debarred from happiness and enjoyment. Let those who have six days in the week for all the world's pleasures appropriate the seventh to fasting and gloom, either for their own sins or those of other people, if they like to bewail them, but let those who employ their six days in a worthier manner devote their seventh to a different purpose. Let divines set the example of true morality; preach it to their flocks in the morning, and dismiss them to enjoy true rest in the afternoon; and let them select for their text, and let Sunday legislature take for their motto, the words which fell from the lips of that Master, whose precepts they misconstrue, and whose lessons they pervert—'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man to serve the Sabbath.' ”

Dickens harked back to that text in his article in *Household Words* which he called *The Sunday Screw* when he alternately covered with ridicule and fierce denunciation the Honourable Member for Whitened Sepulchres, who stopped the delivery of letters on a Sunday on the ground that it was a Godless practice.

“What is it that the Honourable Member for Whitened Sepulchres . . . wants to do? He sees on a Sunday morning, in the large towns of England, when the bells are ringing for church and chapel, certain unwashed, dim-eyed, dissipated loungers, hanging about the doors of public-houses and loitering at the street corners, to whom the day of rest appeals in much the same degree as a sunny summer day does to so many pigs. Does he believe that any weight of handcuffs on the Post-Office, or any amount of restriction imposed on

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

decent people, will bring Sunday home to these ? Let him go, any Sunday morning, from the new town of Edinburgh where the sound of a piano would be a profanation to the old Town, and see what Sunday is, in Canongate. Or let him get up some statistics of the drunken people in Glasgow, while the churches are full—and work out the amount of Sabbath observance which is carried downward by rigid shows and sad-coloured forms.

“ But there is another class of people, those who take little jaunts, and mingle in social assemblages, on a Sunday, concerning whom the whole constituency of Whitened Sepulchres, with their Honourable Member in the chair, find their lank hair standing on end with horror, and pointing as if they were all electrified, straight up to the skylights of Exeter Hall. In reference to this class we would whisper in the ears of the disturbed assemblage three short words, ‘ Let well alone ! ’

“ The English people have long been remarkable for their domestic habits and their household virtues and affections. They are now beginning to be universally respected by intelligent foreigners who visit this country for their unobtrusive politeness, their good humour, and their cheerful recognition of all restraints that really originate in consideration for the general good. They deserve this testimony (which we have often heard of late with pride) most honourably. Long maligned and mistrusted, they proved their case from the first moment of having it in their power to do so ; and have never on any single occasion within our knowledge, abused any public confidence that has been reposed in them. It is an extraordinary thing to know

170

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

of a people, systematically excluded from galleries and museums for years, that their respect for such places and for themselves as visitors to them, dates, without any period of transition, from the very day when their doors were freely opened. The national vices are surprisingly few. The people in general are not gluttons, nor drunkards, nor gamblers, nor addicted to cruel sports, nor to the pushing of any amusement to furious and wild extremes.

“They are moderate and easily pleased and very sensible to all affectionate influences. Any knot of holiday-makers without a large proportion of women and children among them would be a perfect phenomenon. Let us go into any place of Sunday enjoyment where any fair representation of the people resort, and we shall find them decent, orderly, quiet, sociable, among their families and neighbours. There is a general feeling of respect for religion and for religious observances. The churches and chapels are well filled. . . . Lord Brougham never did Henry Brougham more justice than in declaring that there is no country where the Sabbath is, on the whole, better observed than in England. Let the constituency of Whitened Sepulchres ponder, in a Christian spirit, on these things; take care of their own consciences; leave their Honourable Member to take care of his; and let well alone.

“For it is in nations as in families. Too tight a hand in these respects is certain to engender a disposition to break loose, and to run riot. . . . The Honourable Member for Whitened Sepulchres had better accustom his jaundiced eyes to the Sunday sight of dwellers in towns roaming in green fields, and gazing

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

upon country prospects. If he will look a little beyond them, and lift up the eyes of his mind, perhaps he may observe a mild, majestic figure in the distance, going through a field of corn, attended by some common men, who pluck the grain as they pass along and whom their Divine Master teaches that He is Lord, even of the Sabbath-Day."

It is reverent anti-sabbatarianism of this kind which scourges the Pharisees and hypocrites of our day with lashes like serpents.

* * * * *

A great Dickensian once remarked that "two of the finest phrases in our language are 'Music Hall' and 'Public House.'" Rightly understood, surely this is so. The one, a hall of music, where there is warmth and brightness and laughter and joy; the other a house of refreshment free and open to all. Think of that little village inn with its glowing fire, its cheerful hearth, the brightness and the warmth again and men harmlessly exchanging views and opinions over a fraternal glass! But these two names uttered by the pious and prurient Puritan have become almost anathema to respectable Suburbia.

Dickens had no such narrow conception of either one or the other of them. *Pickwick* is full of inns, and a right royal appreciation they invariably receive at his hands. Let this brief sketch of "The Marquis of Granby" speak for itself:—

"The Marquis of Granby in Mrs. Weller's time was quite a model of a roadside Public-house of the better class—just large enough to be convenient, and small enough to be snug. On the opposite side of the road

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

was a large signboard on a high post, representing the head and shoulders of a gentleman with an apoplectic countenance, in a red coat with deep blue facings, and a touch of the same blue over his three-cornered hat, for a sky. Over that again were a pair of flags ; beneath the last button of his coat were a couple of cannon ; and the whole formed an expressive and undoubted likeness of the Marquis of Granby and of glorious memory.

“ The bar window displayed a choice collection of geranium plants, and a well-dusted row of spirit phials. The open shutters bore a variety of golden inscriptions, eulogistic of good beds and neat wines ; and the choice group of countrymen and hostlers lounging about the stable-door and horse-trough, afforded presumptive proof of the excellent quality of the ale and spirits which were sold within. . . . The fire was blazing brightly under the influence of the bellows, and the kettle was singing gaily under the influence of both. A small tray of tea-things was arranged on the table, a plate of hot buttered toast was gently simmering before the fire, and the red-nosed man himself was busily engaged in converting a large slice of bread into the same agreeable edible, through the instrumentality of a long brass toasting-fork. Beside him stood a glass of reeking hot pine-apple rum and water, with a slice of lemon in it ; and every time the red-nosed man stopped to bring the round of toast to his eye, with a view of ascertaining how it got on, he imbibed a drop or two of the hot pine-apple rum and water, and smiled upon the rather stout lady as she blew the fire.”

Mark the real enjoyment with which Dickens pens the description of another tavern :—

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ The bar of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters was a bar to soften the human breast. The available space in it was not much larger than a hackney-coach ; but no one could have wished the bar bigger, that space was so girt in by corpulent little casks, and by cordial bottles radiant with fictitious grapes in bunches, and by lemons in nets, and by biscuits in baskets, and by the polite beer-pulls that made low bows when customers were served with beer, and by the cheese in a snug corner, and by the landlady’s own small table in a snigger corner near the fire, with the cloth everlastingly laid. This haven was divided from the rough world by a glass partition and a half-door with a leaden sill upon it for the convenience of resting your liquor ; but, over this half-door the bar’s snugness so gushed forth, that, albeit customers drank there standing, in a dark and draughty passage where they were shouldered by other customers passing in and out, they always appeared to drink under an enchanting delusion that they were in the bar itself.

“ For the rest, both the tap and parlour of the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters gave upon the river, and had red curtains matching the noses of the regular customers, and were provided with comfortable fireside tin utensils, like models of sugar-loaf hats, made in that shape that they might, with their pointed ends, seek out for themselves glowing nooks in the depths of the red coals, when they mulled your ale, or heated for you those delectable drinks, Purl, Flip, and Dog’s Nose. The first of these humming compounds was a speciality of the Porters, which, through an inscription on its door-posts, gently appealed to your feelings as, ‘ The Early Purl House.’ For, it would seem that Purl must always be taken

174

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

early ; though whether for any more distinctly stomachic reason than that, as the early bird catches the worm, so the early purl catches the customer, cannot here be resolved. It only remains to add that in the handle of the flat-iron, and opposite the bar, was a very little room like a three-cornered hat, into which no direct ray of sun, moon, or star, ever penetrated, but which was superstitiously regarded as a sanctuary replete with comfort and retirement by gaslight, and on the door of which was therefore painted its alluring name : Cosy."

Those who have laughed over *Pickwick* or perused with sustained wonder and admiration the stories of *Martin Chuzzlewit* or *Barnaby Rudge* will remember many another such scene—each and every one of them indicating the "Public House" and the Tavern as a place of warmth and jollity necessary to man. This does not convict Dickens of being unmindful of the evils of intemperance. No man had a profounder horror of the abuses which have grown up side by side with our great gin palaces and drinking saloons. But these places are not "public-houses" in the true sense of the name. They are the product of abounding poverty—the natural corollary of the poisonous squalor which eats its way into the very vitals of the poor. Read that remorseless criticism of the gin palaces which had sprung up in his time, in and about the narrow streets and dirty courts which divided Drury Lane from Oxford Street. In that sketch (*Sketches by Boz*) he shows a fine appreciation for vivid and arresting contrasts. The ostentatious splendour of the glass and brass drinking-den only serves to bring into bolder relief the abject misery and

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

the foully pestilential conditions of the life of the people. And yet how opposite is his rebuke to the ordinary temperance reformers who seek to alter the habits of the people merely by Acts of Parliament. Dickens knew that the real evil was more deep-seated and deep-rooted than the superficial Puritan, even of our own time, believes. He says:—

“ Well-disposed gentlemen, and charitable ladies, would alike turn with coldness and disgust from a description of the drunken besotted men, and wretched broken-down miserable women, who form no inconsiderable portion of the frequenters of these haunts ; forgetting, in the pleasant consciousness of their own rectitude, the poverty of the one, and the temptation of the other. Gin-drinking is a great vice in England, but wretchedness and dirt are a greater ; and until you improve the homes of the poor, or persuade a half-famished wretch not to seek relief in the temporary oblivion of his own misery, with the pittance, which, divided among his family, would furnish a morsel of bread for each, gin-shops will increase in number and splendour. If temperance societies would suggest an antidote against hunger, filth, and foul air, or could establish dispensaries for the gratuitous distribution of bottles of Lethe-water, gin-palaces would be numbered among the things that were.”

Were that insufficient in itself we still have the fine exposition of his views which Forster presents in the *Life*. He says : “. . . No man advocated temperance, even as far as possible its legislative enforcements, with greater earnestness, but he made important reservations. Not thinking drunkenness to be a vice inborn,

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

or incident to the poor, more than to other people he never would agree that the existence of a gin-shop was the alpha and omega of it. Believing it to be *the* 'national horror,' he also believed that many operative causes had to do with having made it so, and his objection to the temperance agitation was that these were left out of account altogether. He thought the gin-shop not fairly to be rendered the exclusive object of attack, until in connection with the classes who mostly made it their resort, the temptations that led to it, physical and moral, should have been more bravely dealt with. Among the former he counted foul smells, disgusting habitations, bad workshops and workshop customs, scarcity of light, air, and water, in short the absence of all means of decency and health, and among the latter the mental weariness and languor so induced, *the desire of wholesome relaxation*, the craving for some stimulus, and last and inclusive of all the rest, ignorance and the want of rational mental training generally applied. This was consistently Dickens's 'platform' throughout the years he was known to me."

That, of course, is quite a different attitude to that of the Puritan. And holding these views as to the terrifying and malignant disease of intemperance, he yet did not preach the sombre doctrine of closing down all the public-houses in the land. He never forgot that day when as a little lad he bravely marched into a public-house in Parliament Street and asked the man behind the bar, "What is your very best—the VERY Best ale a glass?" The man replied, "Twopence." "Then," said the solemn little figure, "just draw me a glass of that, if you please, with a good head to it." "The

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

landlord," says Dickens, in telling the story, "looked at me in return over the bar from head to foot, with a strange smile on his face, and instead of drawing the beer looked round the screen and said something to his wife, who came out from behind it with her work in her hand and joined him in surveying me. . . . They asked me a good many questions as to what my name was, how old I was, where I lived, how I was employed, etc., etc., to all of which, that I might commit nobody, I invented appropriate answers. They served me with the ale, though I suspect it was not the strongest on the premises, and the landlord's wife, opening the little half door and bending down, gave me a kiss."

Undoubtedly there is a lot of drinking in Dickens's pages, but it is always jolly, healthy, and harmless, and even Bob Sawyers' many beers and brandies cannot efface that picture.

Dickens wanted not to destroy the public-house, but to improve it. Witness his letter to Macready where he discussed "the saloon" which attached to Drury Lane Theatre. It had become perverted and degraded. Dickens wanted to remodel and improve it, and make it fit for the people. So he gives his friend advice and protests that the refreshments are too dear and that they were served by the wrong sort of people.

This, then, was Dickens's view of the people's pleasures. "Do not," he says in a letter to Mr. Edmund Ollier, "let them (the workmen) be afraid or ashamed of wanting to be amused and pleased. Encourage them to declare to themselves and their fellow working men that they want social rest and social recreation for themselves and their families." And again, "Show that trustfulness

THE PEOPLE'S PLEASURES

is at the bottom of all social institutions, and that to trust a man as one of a body of men is to place him under wholesome restraint of social opinion and is a very much better thing than to make a baby of him."

That is the true note—"Trust them." Dickens trusted men and believed that they would always rise to the height of their responsibilities and privileges.

As he told his son Henry on one occasion, he had put all his philosophy with regard to these things into the mouth of Sleary, who remarked to Gradgrind, "Thquire, thake hands, firth and latht! Don't be cross with us poor vagabundth. People mutht be amuthed! They can't be alwayth a-learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they ain't made for it. You *mutht* have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the beth of uth; not the wortht."

Perhaps in the whole of fiction there is no more dramatic contrast than is presented by these two sons of Adam. The one, as he describes himself, a vagabond, a poor nomad with no address, save where his circus happens to be pitched, with no prospects worth speaking of, and, as the world would judge him, without any settled position in life; but, be it noted, with the resilience, the cheery, keen reliance of a really self-made man. The other rich, respectable, prosperous, an M.P., a captain of industry, but yet driven in the crisis of his life, when he stands helpless and abject, to turn to poor Sleary for aid and counsel. And Sleary, who is saving the rich man's son from jail, asks for himself no recognition, but only puts in a plea for his profession that Gradgrind's heart may be softened towards his fellow-artists!

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

It was because he knew the charm of such a man that Dickens was an anti-Puritan. He realized that joy is an indispensable part of full human existence. He saw that the man who radiates happiness is rendering a service to mankind, that life at best is but a short and fleeting thing, that there is no time for wastage on miseries of our own inflicting, that in the brief space which is our heritage men are called upon to exult in fellowship and joyous service. Charles Dickens preached that message always, because he was passionate in his conviction that next to God Himself there is nothing conceivably nobler or grander than this race of sinning, erring, suffering, toiling, but regal and sublime humanity

CHAPTER VIII

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

“ . . . *Our* Public, reflecting deeply on these materials for cogitation, will henceforth hold fast by the truth that the system of administering their affairs is innately bad ; that classes and families and interests have brought them to a very low pass ; that the intelligence, steadfastness, foresight and wonderful power of resource which in private undertakings distinguished England from all other countries, have no vitality in its public business ; that while every merchant and trader has enlarged his grasp and quickened his faculties, the Public Departments have been drearily lying in state, a mere stupid pageant of gorgeous coffins and feebly-burning lights ; and that the windows must now be opened wide and the candles put out and the coffins buried and the daylight freely admitted and the furniture made firewood and the dirt clean swept away.”—“ That other Public : ” *Household Words*, February 3rd, 1855.

IN nothing is Dickens's extraordinary insight into modern England more remarkable than in his exposures of those organized political hypocrisies and factional shams, which have become familiar to us under the generic description of the “ Party System.” In this matter, as in so many others, Dickens speaks, not only for his own age, but for ours. And he speaks, too, not for the *intellectuals* and the super-refined, so much as for the common, the normal man—that is to say, for the man who really matters. To-day, the feeling is growing

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

throughout all classes of society, that party politics has degenerated into a mere game, into which conviction enters but furtively and on rare occasions between two opposing sets of politicians, practically indistinguishable except for their respective labels whose objective is the emoluments, the perquisites and pickings of office. It is true that this view finds no expression in the party press, but we have only to listen to the casual remarks and to the conversation of the "man in the street" or his brother of the clubs, to gather that they both despair of party politics and that the great dialectic duels, which their journals love to depict, with the exciting scenes in the House and the important divisions, impress them as part and parcel of an artistically staged sham-fight, in which they have no real concern, and which will result in little else but loud shouting and exciting sensational head-lines. "Can any good come out of Westminster?" they ask. "A plague on both your houses," others more emphatically cry. Individual measures like Home Rule or Insurance may provoke a passing spasm of interest. For the most part, however, they follow politics with cynical reservations, and little zest. That, no doubt, is a deplorable state of affairs. It becomes even more regrettable when we remember that among those who have been driven to adopt this attitude of indifference and unconcern are men with a genuine regard for the public welfare, keen, many of them, on social reforms, but who despair of obtaining anything more practical from the Parliamentary machine than empty rhetoric or unfulfilled pledges.

If we want to understand this feeling on the part of the average man towards politics we must go to

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

Dickens, who interprets him faithfully for us. We shall realize, first of all, that the ordinary Englishman has ceased to be interested in politics, save when compelled, not because he is not a democrat, but because he is, and because he realizes that politics is still a matter of conflict between the great families of the land, between the Bigwigs and the Stiltstalkers, the Coodles and the Doodles, their retinues and retainers, all of whom he leaves to their own devices, going stolidly about his own business the while.

Dickens has admirably expressed his feeling :—

“ England has been in a dreadful state for some weeks,” he writes in *Bleak House*, “ Lord Coodle would go out, Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn’t come in, and there being nobody in Great Britain (to speak of) except Coodle and Doodle, there has been no Government. It is a mercy that the hostile meeting between these two great men, which at one time seemed inevitable, did not come off ; because if both pistols had taken effect, and Coodle and Doodle had killed each other, it is to be presumed that England must have waited to be governed until young Coodle and young Doodle, now in frocks and long stockings, were grown up. This stupendous national calamity, however, was averted by Lord Coodle’s making the timely discovery, that if in the heat of debate he had said that he scorned the whole ignoble career of Sir Thomas Doodle, he had merely meant to say that party difference should never induce him to withhold from it the tribute of his warmest admiration ; while it as opportunely turned out, on the other hand, that Sir Thomas Doodle had in his own bosom expressly booked Lord Coodle to go down to

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

posterity as a mirror of virtue and honour. Still England has been for some weeks in the dismal strait of having no pilot (as was well observed by Sir Leicester Dedlock) to weather the storm ; and the marvellous part of the matter is, that England has not appeared to care very much about it, but has gone on eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, as the old world did in the days before the flood. But Coodle knew the danger, and Doodle knew the danger, and all their followers and hangers-on had the clearest possible perception of the danger. At last Sir Thomas Doodle has not only condescended to come in, but has done it handsomely, bringing in with him all his nephews, all his male cousins, and all his brothers-in-law. So there is hope for the old ship yet.

“ Doodle has found that he must throw himself upon the country chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer. In this metamorphosed state he is available in a good many places simultaneously, and can throw himself upon a considerable portion of the country at one time. Britannia being much occupied in pocketting Doodle in the form of sovereigns and swallowing Doodle in the form of beer, and in swearing herself black in the face that she does neither—plainly to the advancement of her glory and morality—the London season comes to a sudden end, through all the Doodleites and Coodleites dispersing to assist Britannia in those religious exercises.”

In this passage Dickens puts his finger on the weak spot of the party system. Let no one suppose that politics have been so changed by the extension of the suffrage that England is governed otherwise than by an oligarchy of the narrowest limits, confined practically

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

to a few rich or well-born families, and as absolutely untouched by democracy, by the great masses of the people, as were the governing classes before the Reform Bill. That the *personnel* of the House of Commons has altered considerably is, of course, undeniable. But the destinies of the country are controlled, not so much by the Commons, as by the Cabinet, and if we contrast the *personnel*, say, of the present Cabinet with the Cabinet that had office when Dickens wrote, or when the Reform Bill was passed, we still find that they show no substantially marked difference. There are in this Cabinet, as in the last one, just as many and no more lords, just as many and no more lawyers, just as many and no more rich manufacturers. There is, it is true, one member, Mr. John Burns, who comes from a class not formerly represented in the Cabinet, but he is alone. As it was when Dickens wrote, so now. Politics, Cabinet politics, had then its Churchills and its Lytteltons, its Wyndhams and its Gladstones, its Cecils and its Buxtons. It has them now. True, there are upon both front benches men of exceptional ability, who have risen from comparatively unimportant spheres, but English politics has always attracted these. The point is that the mass of the people are as much divorced from the executive of Government as ever they were, and their view of politics, and of the machinations of the wire-pullers, who still control them, is roughly the view of Charles Dickens. England, in politics, is still the great houses, as it was when Dickens wrote :—

“ Mrs. Gowan with a gentle melancholy upon her, occasioned by her son’s being reduced to court the swinish public as a follower of the low Arts, instead of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

asserting his birthright and putting a ring through its nose as an acknowledged Barnacle, headed the conversation at dinner on the evil of the days. It was then that Clennam learned for the first time what little pivots this great world goes round upon.

“ ‘ If John Barnacle,’ said Mrs. Gowan, after the degeneracy of the times had been fully ascertained, ‘ if John Barnacle had but abandoned his most unfortunate idea of conciliating the mob, all would have been well, and I think the country would have been preserved.’

“ The old lady with the high nose assented ; but added that if Augustus Stiltstalking had in a general way ordered the cavalry out with instructions to charge she thought the country would have been preserved.

“ The noble Refrigerator assented ; but added that if William Barnacle and Tudor Stiltstalking, when they came over to one another and formed that ever-memorable coalition, had boldly muzzled the newspapers, and rendered it penal for any editor-person to presume to discuss the conduct of any appointed authority abroad or at home, he thought the country would have been preserved.

“ It was agreed that the country (another word for the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings) wanted preserving, but how it came to want preserving was not so clear. It was only clear that the question was all about John Barnacle, Augustus Stiltstalking, William Barnacle, and Tudor Stiltstalking, Tom, Dick, or Harry Barnacle or Stiltstalking, because there was nobody else but mob. And this was the feature of the conversation which impressed Clennam, as a man not used to it, very

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

disagreeably : making him doubt if it were quite right to sit there, silently hearing a great nation narrowed to such little bounds. Remembering, however, that the Parliamentary debates, whether on the life of that nation's body or the life of its soul, the question was usually about and between John Barnacle, Augustus Stiltstalking, William Barnacle and Tudor Stiltstalking, and nobody else ; he said nothing on the part of mob, bethinking himself that mob was used to it."

That is the point. They are used to it—so used to it that they automatically submit to the Stiltstalkers and the Barnacles, to the Coodles and the Doodles, and leave politics to them—to the oligarchy, that is to say, who in our own time, as in Dickens', rule the roost, divide the loaves and fishes among their respective groups, and part the spoils at their pleasure.

It costs them—the Coodles and Doodles—comparatively little, but it costs them something. Let Dickens show us how much.

It is in the middle of the great election and Sir Leicester Dedlock is taking counsel with his supporter, the fair Volumina.

" ' How are we getting on ? ' says Miss Volumina, clasping her hands. ' Are we safe ? ' "

" The mighty business is nearly over by this time, and Doodle will throw himself off the country in a few days more. Sir Leicester has just appeared in the drawing-room after dinner ; a bright particular star, surrounded by clouds of cousins.

" ' Volumina,' replies Sir Leicester, who has a list in his hand, ' we are doing tolerably.' "

" ' Only tolerably ! ' "

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ Although it is summer weather, Sir Leicester always has his own particular fire in the evening. He takes his usual screened seat near it, and repeats, with much firmness and a little displeasure, as who should say, I am not a common man, and when I say tolerably, it must not be understood as a common expression ; ‘ Volumina, we are doing tolerably.’ ”

“ ‘ At least there is no opposition to *you*,’ Volumina asserts with confidence.

“ ‘ No, Volumina. This distracted country has lost its senses in many respects, I grieve to say, but—— ’ ”

“ ‘ It is not so mad as that. I am glad to hear it ! ’ ”

“ Volumina’s finishing sentence restores her to favour. Sir Leicester, with a gracious inclination of his head, seems to say to himself, ‘ A sensible woman this, on the whole, though occasionally precipitate.’ ”

“ In fact, as to this question of opposition, the fair Dedlock’s observation was superfluous : Sir Leicester, on these occasions, always delivering in his own candidness as a kind of handsome wholesale order to be promptly executed. Two other little seats that belong to him, he treats as retail orders of less importance ; merely sending down the men, and signifying to the tradespeople, ‘ You will have the goodness to make these materials into two members of parliament, and to send them home when done.’ ”

“ ‘ I regret to say, Volumina, that in many places the people have shown a bad spirit, and that this opposition to the Government has been of a most determined and most implacable description.’ ”

“ ‘ W—r—retches ! ’ says Volumina.

“ ‘ Even,’ proceeds Sir Leicester, glancing at the

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

circumjacent cousins on sofas and ottomans, 'even in many—in fact, in most of those places in which the Government has carried it against a faction——'

"(Note, by the way, that the Coodleites are always a faction with the Doodleites, and that the Doodleites occupy exactly the same position towards the Coodleites.)

"'Even in them I am shocked, for the credit of Englishmen, to be constrained to inform you that the Party has not triumphed without being put to an enormous expense. Hundreds,' says Sir Leicester, eyeing the cousins with increasing dignity and swelling indignation, 'hundreds of thousands of pounds!'

"If Volumina has a fault, it is the fault of being a trifle too innocent; seeing that the innocence which would go extremely well with a sash and tucker, is a little out of keeping with rouge and a pearl necklace. Howbeit, impelled by innocence, she asks,

"'What for?'

"'Volumina,' remonstrates Sir Leicester, with his utmost severity, 'Volumina!'

"'No, no, I don't mean what for,' eries Volumina, with her favourite little scream. 'How stupid I am. I mean what a pity.'

"'I am glad, Volumina,' returns Sir Leicester, 'that you do mean what a pity.'

"Volumina hastens to express her opinion that the shocking people ought to be tried as traitors, and made to support the Party.

"'I am glad, Volumina,' repeats Sir Leicester, unmindful of these mollifying sentiments, 'that you do mean what a pity. It is disgraceful to the electors.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

But as you, though inadvertently, and without intending so unreasonable a question, asked me "what for?" let me reply to you. For necessary expenses. And I trust to your good sense, Volumina, not to pursue the subject, here or elsewhere.'

"Sir Leicester feels it incumbent on him to observe a crushing aspect towards Volumina, because it is whispered abroad that these necessary expenses will, in some two hundred election petitions, be unpleasantly connected with the word bribery; and because some graceless jokers have consequently suggested the omission from the Church service of the ordinary supplication in behalf of the High Court of Parliament, and have recommended instead that the prayers of the congregation be requested for six hundred and fifty-eight gentlemen in a very unhealthy state."

"Who," says Gogol, the Russian writer, "may be permitted to tell the truth if not a novelist?" And in this matter the novelist tells us truths that nowhere else find expression, for the simple and sufficient reason that they are too unpalatable, the truth in this particular instance being the large and nefarious part that secret party funds played then, and play to-day, in English politics. Forty years ago Dickens laid bare the evil:—

"Britannia, sitting meditating one fine day (perhaps in the attitude in which she is presented on the copper coinage), discovers all of a sudden that she wants Veneering in Parliament. It occurs to her that Veneering is a 'representative man,' which cannot in these times be doubted and that Her Majesty's faithful Commons are incomplete without him. So Britannia

190

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

mentions to a legal gentleman of her acquaintance that if Veneering will 'put down' five thousand pounds he may write a couple of initial letters after his name at the extremely cheap rate of two thousand five hundred per letter. It is clearly understood between Britannia and the legal gentleman that nobody is to take up the five thousand pounds, but that being put down they will disappear by magical conjuration and enchantment.

"The legal gentlemen in Britannia's confidence going straight from that lady to Veneering, thus commissioned, Veneering declares himself highly flattered, but requires breathing time to ascertain 'whether his friends will rally round him.' Above all things, he says it behoves him to be clear, at a crisis of this importance, 'whether his friends will rally round him.' The legal gentleman, in the interests of his client, cannot allow much time for this purpose, as the lady rather thinks she knows some one prepared to put down six thousand pounds, but he says he will give Veneering four hours.

"Veneering then says to Mrs. Veneering, 'We must work,' and throws himself into a Hansom cab. Mrs. Veneering in the same moment relinquishes baby to Nurse; presses her aquiline hands upon her brow, to arrange the throbbing intellect within; orders out the carriage; and repeats in a distracted and devoted manner, compounded of Ophelia and any self-immolating female of antiquity you may prefer, 'We must work.'

"Veneering having instructed his driver to charge at the Public in the streets, like the Life Guards at Waterloo, is driven furiously to Duke Street, St. James's. There, he finds Twemlow in his lodgings, fresh from the hands of a secret artist who has been doing something

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

to his hair with yolks of eggs. The process requiring that Twemlow shall, for two hours after the application, allow his hair to stick upright and dry gradually, he is in an inappropriate state for the receipt of startling intelligence; looking equally like the Monument on Fish Street Hill, and King Priam on a certain incendiary occasion not wholly unknown as a neat point for the classics.

“ ‘My dear Twemlow,’ says Veneering, grasping both his hands, ‘as the dearest and oldest of my friends——’

“ (‘Then there can be no more doubt about it in future,’ thinks Twemlow, ‘and I AM!’)

“ ‘Are you of opinion that your cousin, Lord Snigsworth, would give his name as a Member of my Committee? I don’t go so far as to ask his lordship; I only ask for his name. Do you think he would give me his name?’

“ In sudden low spirits, Twemlow replies, ‘I don’t think he would.’

“ ‘My political opinions,’ says Veneering, not previously aware of having any, ‘are identical with those of Lord Snigsworth, and perhaps as a matter of public feeling and public principle, Lord Snigsworth would give me his name.’

“ ‘It might be so,’ says Twemlow; ‘but——’ And perplexedly scratching his head, forgetful of the yolks of eggs, is the more discomfited at being reminded how stieky he is.

“ ‘Between such old and intimate friends as ourselves,’ pursues Veneering, ‘there should in such a case be no reserve. Promise me that if I ask you to do

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

anything for me that you don't like to do, or feel the slightest difficulty in doing, you will freely tell me so.'

"This Twemlow is so kind as to promise, with every appearance of most heartily intending to keep his word.

" 'Would you have any objection to write down to Snigsworthy Park, and ask this favour of Lord Snigsworth? Of course if it were granted I should know that I owed it solely to you; while at the same time you would put it to Lord Snigsworth entirely upon public grounds. Would you have any objection?'

"Says Twemlow, with his hand to his forehead, 'You have exacted a promise from me.'

" 'I have, my dear Twemlow.'

" 'And you expect me to keep it honourably.'

" 'I do, my dear Twemlow.'

" 'On the whole then;—observe me,' urges Twemlow with great nicety, as if, in the case of its having been off the whole, he would have done it directly—'on the whole, I must beg you to excuse me from addressing any communication to Lord Snigsworth.'

" 'Bless you, bless you!' says Veneering; horribly disappointed, but grasping him by both hands again, in a particularly fervent manner.

"It is not to be wondered at that poor Twemlow should decline to inflict a letter on his noble cousin (who has gout in the temper), inasmuch as his noble cousin, who allows him a small annuity on which he lives, takes it out of him, as the phrase goes, in extreme severity; putting him, when he visits at Snigsworthy Park, under a kind of martial law; ordaining that he shall hang his hat on a particular peg, sit on a particular chair, talk

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

on particular subjects to particular people, and perform particular exercises ; such as sounding the praises of the Family Varnish (not to say Pictures) ; and abstaining from the choicest of the Family Wines unless expressly invited to partake.

“ ‘ One thing, however, I can do for you,’ says Twemlow, ‘ and that is, work for you.’ ”

“ Veneering blesses him again.

“ ‘ I’ll go,’ says Twemlow, in a rising hurry of spirits, ‘ to the club ; let us see now ; what o’clock is it ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Twenty minutes to eleven.’ ”

“ ‘ I’ll be,’ says Twemlow, ‘ at the club by ten minutes to twelve, and I’ll never leave it all day.’ ”

“ Veneering feels that his friends are rallying round him, and says, ‘ Thank you, thank you. I knew I could rely upon you. I said to Anastatia before leaving home just now to come to you of course the first friend I have seen on a subject so momentous to me, my dear Twemlow, I said to Anastatia, “ We must work ! ” ’ ”

“ ‘ You were right, you were right,’ replies Twemlow. ‘ Tell me. Is *she* working ? ’ ”

“ ‘ She is,’ says Veneering.

“ ‘ Good,’ cries Twemlow, polite little gentleman that he is. ‘ A woman’s tact is invaluable. To have the dear sex with us is to have everything with us.’ ”

“ ‘ But you have not imparted to me,’ remarks Veneering, ‘ what you think of my entering the House of Commons.’ ”

“ ‘ I think,’ rejoins Twemlow, feelingly, ‘ that it is the best club in London.’ ”

Later Veneering repairs to “ the legal gentleman in Britannia’s confidence, and with him transacts some

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

delicate affairs of business, and issues an address to the independent electors of Pocket-Breaches," and a little later Veneering is made an M.P. Thus were the mystic letters acquired in the days of Dickens! Is there any difference, any cardinal difference, in the process now? In all this Dickens was merely anticipating the disgust and the boredom with which the ordinary man regards political manœuvres, and giving point to the demand, that has become insistent in our time, for the publication of the names of the subscribers to those mammoth funds to which Veneering contributed. Dickens, in fact, realized that the oligarchy rested on the purse and on a corrupt obscurantism. Instinctively he grasped the fact that while politics remained a matter of a few rich men buying themselves into Parliament, so long would politics remain the close corporation of the wealthy classes, that they would no more form a reflex of the national life than Veneering constituted the real choice of the free and independent electors of Pocket-Breaches. For a House of Commons so constituted, Dickens had the most profound contempt, and he never tired of pouring out the vials of his scorn and irony upon those who comprised it.

What a vein of exquisite satire, for example, runs through that little sketch which he calls "Our Honourable Friend"—"the member for Verbosity!"

"In electing him," he says, "they (the Electors) have covered themselves with glory and England has been true to herself."

All the stilted phrases, all the hoary quotations which have done duty on political platforms for generations are adroitly used by Dickens to get the laugh of intelligent

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

people against the amazing bombast and the ridiculous pretensions of the hack parliamentarian. How many of us who have attended provincial political gatherings have failed to have inflicted upon us sentiments expressed in terms not unlike those of Dickens's "honourable friend"?

" 'He might be asked,' he observed in a peroration of great power, 'what were his principles? His principles were what they had always been. His principles were written in the countenances of the lion and the unicorn; were stamped indelibly upon the royal shield which those grand animals supported, and upon the free words of fire which that shield bore. His principles were, Britannia and her sea-king trident! His principles were commercial prosperity co-existently with perfect and profound agricultural contentment; but short of this he would never stop. His principles were, these—with the addition of his colours nailed to the mast, every man's heart in the right place, every man's eye open, every man's hand ready, every man's mind on the alert. His principles were these, concurrently with a general revision of something—speaking generally—and a possible readjustment of something else, not to be mentioned more particularly. His principles, to sum up all in a word, were Hearths and Altars, Labour and Capital, Crown and Sceptre, Elephant and Castle.' "

Our honourable friend, it will be remembered, had a heckler in his audience, a man called Tipkisson, who apparently did not find this stately exposition of principles sufficiently illuminating, and he therefore wanted to know "what our honourable friend and the dozen noblemen and gentlemen were driving at?"

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

Our honourable friend immediately replied " At the illimitable perspective ! "

" It was considered by the whole assembly that this happy statement of our honourable friend's political views, ought, immediately to have settled Tipkisson's business and covered him with confusion ; but that implacable person, regardless of the execrations that were heaped upon him from all sides (by which we mean of course from our honourable friend's side), persisted in retaining an unmoved countenance and obstinately retorted that if our honourable friend meant that, he wished to know what *that* meant ?

" It was in repelling this most objectionable and indecent opposition that our honourable friend displayed his highest qualifications for the representation of Verbosity. His warmest supporters present and those who were best acquainted with his generalship, supposed that the moment was come when he would fall back upon the sacred bulwarks of our nationality. No such thing. He replied thus, ' My good friend, Tipkisson, gentlemen, wishes to know what I mean when he asks me what we are driving at, and when I candidly tell him, at the illimitable perspective, he wishes (if I understand him) to know what I mean ? ' ' I do ! ' says Tipkisson, amid cries of ' Shame, ' and ' Down with him. ' ' Gentlemen, ' says our honourable friend, ' I will indulge my good friend Tipkisson by telling him both what I mean and what I don't mean (cheers and cries of ' Give it him ! '). Be it known to him then and to all whom it may concern, that I do mean altars, hearths and homes, and that I don't mean mosques and mohammedanism ! ' The effect of this home thrust was

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

terrific. Tipkisson (who is a Baptist) was hooted down and hustled out, and has ever since been regarded as a Turkish Renegade who contemplates an early pilgrimage to Mecca. Nor was he the only discomfited man. The charge while it stuck to him, was magically transferred to our honourable friend's opponent, who was represented in an immense variety of placards as a believer in Mahomet; and the men of Verbosity were asked to choose between our honourable friend and the Bible, and our honourable friend's opponent and the Koran. They decided for our honourable friend and rallied round the illimitable perspective."

In this wise did Dickens jeer at the hollow sham of the politics of his day, mock at their attitudinizings and flaunt their vulgar affectations before the gaze of the world. That trick of labelling your opponent with an epithet of your own inventing, with fastening upon him without a scintilla of justification, views and opinions which you know are or will be unpopular, was a device of politicians of Dickens' day and is also one of ours as well. Intelligent men are to-day leaving political life because the slightest independence of thought is immediately met, not only with criticism, but by the offensive affront of finding themselves ticketed with an opprobrious appellation which will promptly excite popular reproach. Indeed it is scarcely too much to say that many men seeking earnestly and intelligently to discover solutions for social and industrial problems, are perforce compelled to relinquish party membership. The mutations of the caucuses are so many, the twistings of policies so perpetual, the nostrums offered so varied, that principles cannot and do not

198

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

abide. The man of conviction, cherishing certain definite and carefully considered ideas of good government and the things necessary to the well-ordering of the State, finds himself constantly at issue with his political associates, whose notion of what is required of them appears to be, to mouth ephemeral shibboleths, high-sounding, if almost meaningless "cries," to denounce in terms of blatant vulgarity their opponents and to procure or retain office. It is this kind of *jeu de théâtre* in politics, which either drives out, or keeps out, of public life some of the wisest and sanest intellects of our time.

Well might Dickens declare, as he did in his letter to Bulwer Lytton, that there was "something horribly rotten in the system of it." Well might he revel, as he did in his letter to James T. Fields, at his own iconoclasm:—"I hope you may have met with the little touch of Radicalism I gave them at Birmingham in the words of Buckle? With pride I observe that it makes *the regular political traders of all sorts* perfectly mad. Such was my intentions, as a grateful acknowledgment of being misrepresented." Would the following pen picture not perfectly describe the political game as it is being played to-day?

"Down at Westminster, night after night, the Rt. Hon. Gentleman, the Member for Somewhere, and the Rt. Hon. Gentleman the Member for Somewhere else, badger one another to the infinite delight of the adherents in the cockpit; and when the Prime Minister has relieved his noble bosom of its personal injuries and has made his jokes and retorts for the evening and has said little, and done less, he winds up all with a standard form of words and they all go home to bed."

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

The mockery of it all was apparent to Dickens fifty-eight years ago as witness :—

“ I have not the least hesitation in saying that I have the smallest amount of faith in the House of Commons at present existing, and that I consider the exercise of such influence highly necessary to the welfare and honour of this country. I was reading no later than yesterday the book of Mr. Pepys, which is rather a favourite of mine, in which he, two hundred years ago, writing of the House of Commons, says :—

“ ‘ My cousin, Roger Pepys, tells me that it is matter of the greatest grief to him in the world that he should be put upon this trust of being a Parliament man ; because he says nothing is done, that he can see, out of any truth and sincerity, but mere envy and design.’

“ Now, how it comes to pass that after two hundred years, and many years after a Reform Bill, the House of Commons is so little changed, I will not stop to inquire. I will not ask how it happens that bills which cramp and worry the people, and restrict their scant enjoyments, are so easily passed, and how it happens that measures for their real interest are so very difficult to be got through Parliament.

“ I will not analyze the confined air of the lobby, or reduce to their primitive gases its deadening influences on the memory of the Honourable Member who was once a candidate for the honour of your and my independent vote and interest. I will not ask what is that Sectarian figure, full of blandishments, standing on the threshold, with its finger on its lips. I will not ask how it comes that those personal altercations, involving

200

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

all the removes and definitions of Shakespeare's Touchstone, the retort courteous—the quip modest—the reply churlish—the reproof valiant—the counter-check quarrelsome—the lie circumstantial and the lie direct—are of immeasurably greater interest in the House of Commons than the health, the taxation, and the education, of a whole people. I will not penetrate into the mysteries of that secret chamber in which the Bluebeard of Party keeps his strangled public questions, and with regard to which, when he gives the key to his wife, the new comer, he strictly charges her on no account to open the door. I will merely put it to the experience of everybody here, whether the House of Commons is not occasionally a little hard of hearing, a little dim of sight, a little slow of understanding, and whether, in short, it is not in a sufficiently invalidated state to require close watching, and the occasional application of sharp stimulants; and whether it is not capable of considerable improvement? I believe, that, in order to preserve it in a state of real usefulness and independence, the people must be very watchful and very jealous of it; and it must have its memory jogged; and be kept awake when it happens to have taken too much Ministerial narcotic; it must be trotted about, and must be hustled and pinched in a friendly way, as is the usage in such cases. I hold that no power can deprive us of the right to administer our functions as a body comprising electors from all parts of the country, associated together because their country is dearer to them than drowsy twaddle, unmeaning routine or worn-out conventionalities.”

Then too there is that inimitable squib which

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

appeared in *Household Words* on the 23rd July, 1853, under the title of *A Haunted House*. In it Dickens viewed with a clear and sane outlook, the madness of the parliamentary game. Having described in terms of simple allegory the confusion into which John Bull's house at Westminster had been thrown, he tells how it occurred to him to send the members of his family into the country, and he accordingly sent them down to various boroughs and counties. But it seems these members "carried the most terrific plagues of the house" with them and "seemed to let loose a legion of devils wheresoever they went." For example:—

"A member of Mr. Bull's family went down to Burningshame with the intention—perfectly innocent in itself—of taking a pleasant walk over the course there, and getting his friends to return him by an easy conveyance to Mr. Bull. But, no sooner had this gentleman arrived in Burningshame, than the voice and words broke out in every room and balcony of his hotel with a vehemence and recklessness indescribably awful. They made the wildest statements; they swore to the most impossible promises; they said and unsaid fifty things in an hour; they declared black to be white, and white to be black, without the least appearance of any sense or responsibility; and made the hair of the better part of the population stand on end. All this time the dirtiest mud in the streets was found to be flying about and bespattering people at a great distance. This, however, was not the worst; would that it had been! It was but the beginning of the horrors. Scarcely was the town of Burningshame aware of its deplorable condition, when the Member of Mr. Bull's family was

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

discovered to be haunted, night and day, by two evil spirits who had come down with him (they being usually prowling about the lobbies and passages of the house, and other dry places), and who, under the names of an Attorney and a Parliamentary Agent, committed ravages truly diabolical. The first act of this infernal pair was, to throw open all the public-houses, and invite the people of Burningshame to drink themselves raving mad. They then compelled them with banners and with instruments of brass, and big drums, idiotically to parade the town and fall foul of all other banners, instruments of brass, big drums, that they met. In the meantime, they tortured and terrified all the small tradesmen, buzzed in their ears, dazzled their eyes, nipped their pockets, pinched their children, appeared to their wives (many of them in the family way), broke the rest of whole families, and filled them with anxiety and dread. Not content with this, they tempted the entire town, got the people to sell their precious souls, put red-hot money into their hands while they were looking another way, made them foreswear themselves, set father against son, brother against brother, friend against friend; and made the whole of Burningshame one sty of gluttony, drunkenness, avarice, lying false-swearing, waste, want, ill-will, contention, and depravity. In short if the member's visit had lasted very long (which happily it did not) the place must have become a hell upon earth for several generations. And all this, these spirits did, with a wickedness peculiar to their accursed state: perpetually howling that it was pure and glorious, that it was free and independent, that it was Old England for ever, and other scraps of malignant mockery.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“Matters had arrived at this pitch, not only in Burningshame, but, as already observed, in an infinite variety of other places, when Mr. Bull—having heard, perhaps, some rumours of these disasters—recalled the various members of his family to his home in town. They were no sooner assembled, than all the old noises broke out with redoubled violence ; the same extraordinary confusion prevailed among the furniture ; the cobweb and fungus thickened with greater fecundity than before ; the multitude of spirits in the lobbies and passages bellowed and yelled, and made a dismal noise—described to be like the opening and shutting up of heavy cases—for weeks together.

“But this was not the worst, Mr. Bull now found on questioning his family, that those evil spirits, the Attorneys and the Parliamentary Agents, had obtained such strong possession of many Members that they (those Members of Mr. Bull’s family) stood in awe of the said spirits, and even while they pretended to have been no parties to what the spirits had done constantly defended and sided with them, and said among themselves that if they carried the spirits over this bad job, the spirits would return the compliment by and by. This discovery, as may readily be believed, occasioned Mr. Bull the most poignant anguish and he distractedly looked about him for any means of relieving his haunted house of their dreadful presence. An implement called a ballot box (much used by Mr. Bull for domestic purposes) being recommended as efficacious, Mr. Bull suggested to his family the expediency of trying it, but, as many of the Members roared out “Un-English !” and were echoed in such fearful tones, and with such great

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

gnashing of teeth by the whole of the spirits in the passages and the lobbies, that Mr. Bull (who is in some things of a timid disposition) abandoned the idea for the time without at all knowing what the cry meant.

“The house is still in the fearful condition described, and the question with Mr. Bull is, What is to be done with it? Instead of getting better it gets worse, if possible, every night. Fevered by want of rest, confused by the perpetual gush of words, and dragging of weights; blinded by the tossing from side to side; bewildered by the clamour of the spirits; and infected by the doings at Burningshame and elsewhere; too many of the members of Mr. Bull’s family (as Mr. Bull perceives with infinite regret) are beginning to conceive that what is truth and honour out of Mr. Bull’s house, is not truth and honour in it. That within those haunted precincts a gentleman may deem words all sufficient, and become a miserable quibbler. That the whole world is comprised within the haunted house of Mr. Bull, and that there is nothing outside to find him out, or call him to account. But this, as Mr. Bull remarks, is a delusion of a haunted mind, there being within his experience (which is pretty large) a good deal outside—Mr. Bull thinks, quite enough to pull his house about his family’s ears, as soon as it ceases to be respected.

“This is the present state of the haunted house. Mr. Bull has a fine Indian property, which has fallen into some confusion and requires good management and just stewardship: but, as he says himself, how can he properly attend to his affairs in such an uproar? His younger children stand in great need of education, and

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

must be sent to school somewhere ; but how can he clear his mind to balance the different prospectuses of rival establishments in this perturbed condition ? Holy water has been tried—a pretty large supply having been brought from Ireland—but it has not the least effect though it is spouted over the floor, in profusion, every night. ‘Then,’ says Mr. Bull, naturally much distressed in his mind, ‘what am I to do, Sir, with this house of mine ? I can’t go on in this way. All about Burningshame and those other places is well known. It won’t do. I must not allow the Members of my family to bring disease upon the country on which they should bring health ; to load it with disgrace instead of honour ; with their dirty hands to soil the national character on the most serious occasions when they come in contact with it ; and with their big talk to set up one standard of morality for themselves and another for the multitude. Nor must I be put off in this matter for it presses. Then what am I to do, Sir, with this house of mine ? ’ ”

Twice he gave utterance to the despair which he entertained of making the House of Commons a really effective body, without the very sternest measures being taken with it. In his letter to Macready indeed, while affirming his retention of strong views against the people’s wrongs he confessed that he had “no present political faith or hope—not a grain ”—on the other hand his idea was that if he could engender a pretty universal resentment against it, as it was then constituted, there was perchance some possibility of re-forming it on such practical lines as would render it serviceable to the mass of English citizens.

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

“ I declare that as to all matters on the face of this teeming earth, it appears to me that the House of Commons, and Parliament altogether, is become just the dreariest failure and nuisance that ever bothered this much-bothered world. I have given up my hope to have made every man in England feel something of the contempt for the House of Commons that I have. We shall never begin to do anything until the sentiment is universal.”

Why had Parliament become a dreary failure and a nuisance but for the reason that it was more concerned with sanctifying the red tape procedure of its Departments than in applying itself to social legislation ?

His mind on this point was clearly revealed in “ the old indisputable, very well-known story with a pointed moral at the end of it,” which he related. “ Ages ago a savage mode of keeping accounts on notched sticks was introduced into the Court of Exchequer, and the accounts were kept, much as Robinson Crusoe kept his calendar on the desert island. In the course of considerable revolutions of time, the celebrated Cocker was born, and died : Walkinghame, of the Tutor’s Assistant, and well versed in figures, was also born, and died ; a multitude of accountants, book-keepers, and actuaries, were born, and died. Still official routine inclined to these notched sticks, as if they were pillars of the constitution, and still the Exchequer accounts continued to be kept on certain splints of elmwood called ‘ tallies.’ In the reign of George III. an enquiry was made by some revolutionary spirit, whether pens, ink, and paper, slates and pencils, being in existence, this obstinate adherence to an obsolete custom ought to be

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

continued, and whether a change ought not to be effected.

“All the red tape in the country grew redder at the bare mention of this bold and original conception, and it took till 1826 to get these sticks abolished. In 1834 it was found that there was a considerable accumulation of them ; and the question then arose, what was to be done with such worn-out, worm-eaten, rotten old bits of wood ? I daresay there was a vast amount of minuting, memorandumizing, and despatch-boxing, on this mighty subject. The sticks were housed at Westminster, and it would naturally occur to any intelligent person that nothing could be easier than to allow them to be carried away for fire-wood by the miserable people who live in that neighbourhood. However, they never had been useful, and official routine required that they never should be, and so the order went forth that they were to be privately and confidentially burnt. It came to pass that they were burnt in a stove in the House of Lords. The stove, overgorged with these preposterous sticks, set fire to the panelling ; the panelling set fire to the House of Lords ; the House of Lords set fire to the House of Commons ; the two houses were reduced to ashes ; architects were called in to build others ; we are now in the second million of the cost thereof ; the national pig is not nearly over the stile yet ; and the little old woman, Britannia, hasn't got home to-night.”

It was this gross and shocking administrative inefficiency, which more than anything else roused Dickens to take the field against the discredited oligarchy that, alas, to a large extent still remains. The one is of course the inevitable sequence of the other, and it was

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

Dickens's realization of this fact that made him insist over and over again on the supreme, the paramount necessity of such a real, such a drastic reform, not merely of the suffrages of the electors, but of the constitution of the realm as would render Government, no longer the prerogative of a favoured class, but the servant of the whole people, responsive to the nation's needs, freed from the fetters of red tape and routine, as from the mock heroics and meaningless recriminations of Party debate, intent on the long disregarded, the clamant needs of a neglected people. Without that, without the hold of the money-bags and the Bigwigs was shaken off the House of Commons, then no matter what Reform Bills were passed, the real evil of class government would remain untouched, and nothing approaching efficiency would be restored to the public services. "How not to do it" would remain the chief consideration in politics and the Circumlocution Office the typical institution.

"It is true that 'How not to do it' was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all round the Circumlocution Office." He says, "It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering 'How not to do it.' It is true that from the moment when a general election was over, every returned man who had been raving on hustings because it hadn't been done, and who had been asking the friends of the honourable gentleman in the opposite interest on pain of impeachment to tell him why it hadn't been done,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

and who had been asserting that it must be done, and who had been pledging himself that it should be done, began to devise, 'How it was not to be done.' It is true that the debates of both Houses of Parliament the whole session through, uniformly tended to the protracted deliberation, 'How not to do it.' It is true that the royal speech at the opening of such session virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have a considerable stroke of work to do, and you will please to retire to your respective chambers, and discuss, 'How not to do it.' It is true that the royal speech, at the close of such session, virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have through several laborious months been considering with great loyalty and patriotism, 'How not to do it,' and you have found out ; and with the blessing of Providence upon the harvest (natural, not political), I now dismiss you. All that is true, but the Circumlocution Office went beyond it.

"Because the Circumlocution Office went on mechanically, every day, keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship, 'How not to do it,' in motion. Because the Circumlocution Office was down upon any ill-advised public servant who was going to do it, or who appeared to be by any surprising accident in remote danger of doing it, with a minute and a memorandum, and a letter of instructions, that extinguished him. It was this spirit of national efficiency in the Circumlocution Office that had gradually led to its having something to do with everything. Mechanics, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners, memorialists, people with grievances, people who wanted to prevent grievances, jobbing people, jobbed people,

210

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

people who couldn't get rewarded for merit, and people who couldn't get punished for demerit, were all indiscriminately tucked up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office.

“Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office. Unfortunates with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare (and they had better have had wrongs at first, than have taken that bitter English recipe for certainly getting them), who in slow lapse of time and agony had passed safely through other public departments; who, according to rule, had been bullied in this, over-reached by that, and evaded by the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and never re-appeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked, and ticked them off, and they melted away. In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and *its* name was Legion.

“Sometimes, angry spirits attacked the Circumlocution Office. Sometimes, parliamentary questions were asked about it, and even parliamentary motions made or threatened about it, by demagogues so low and ignorant as to hold that the real recipe of government was, ‘How to do it.’ Then would the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, in whose department it was to defend the Circumlocution Office, put an orange in his pocket, and make a regular field-day of the occasion. Then would he come down to that House with a slap upon the table, and meet the honourable gentleman foot to foot. Then would he be there to tell

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

that honourable gentleman that the Circumlocution Office not only was blameless in this matter, but was commendable in this matter, was extollable to the skies in this matter. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman, that, although the Circumlocution Office was invariably right, and wholly right, it never was so right as in this matter. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that it would have been more to his honour, more to his credit, more to his good taste, more to his good sense, more to half the dictionary of commonplaces, if he had left the Circumlocution Office alone, and never approached this matter. Then would he keep one eye upon a coach or crammer from the Circumlocution Office sitting below the bar, and smash the honourable gentleman with the Circumlocution Office account of this matter. And although one of two things always happened ; namely, either that the Circumlocution Office had nothing to say and said it, or that it had something to say of which the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, blundered one half and forgot the other ; the Circumlocution Office was always voted immaculate by an accommodating majority.”

It is in that same Circumlocution Office that Arthur Clennam meets Daniel Doyce, the inventor, who is made to feel like a criminal and insulted by innumerable clerks on innumerable occasions because he wants to protect a useful invention—

“ ‘ Of great importance to his country and his fellow-creatures. I won’t say how much money it cost him, or how many years of his life he has been about it, but he brought it to perfection a dozen years ago. Wasn’t

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

it a dozen ?' said Mr. Meagles, addressing Doyce. 'He is the most exasperating man in the world ; he never complains.'

“ ‘ Yes. Rather better than twelve years ago.’ ”

“ ‘ Rather better ? ’ said Mr. Meagles, ‘ you mean rather worse. Well, Mr. Clennam. He addresses himself to the Government. The moment he addresses himself to the Government, he becomes a public offender ! Sir,’ said Mr. Meagles in danger of making himself excessively hot again, ‘ he ceases to be an innocent citizen, and becomes a culprit. He is treated, from that instant, as a man who has done some infernal action. He is a man to be shirked, put off, brow-beaten sneered at, handed over by this highly-connected young or old gentleman, to that highly-connected young or old gentleman, and dodged back again ; he is a man with no rights in his own time, or his own property ; a mere outlaw, whom it is justifiable to get rid of anyhow ; a man to be worn out by all possible means.’ ”

“ It was not so difficult to believe, after the morning’s experience, as Mr. Meagles supposed.

“ ‘ Don’t stand there, Doyce, turning your spectacle-case over and over,’ cried Mr. Meagles, ‘ but tell Mr. Clennam what you confessed to me.’ ”

“ ‘ I undoubtedly was made to feel,’ said the inventor ‘ as if I had committed an offence. In dancing attendance at various offices, I was always treated, more or less, as if it was a very bad offence. I have frequently found it necessary to reflect, for my own self-support, that I really had not done anything to bring myself into the Newgate Calender, but only wanted to effect a great saving and a great improvement.’ ”

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ ‘There!’ said Mr. Meagles, ‘judge whether I exaggerated! Now you’ll be able to believe me when I tell you the rest of the case.’

“ With this prelude, Mr. Meagles went through the narrative; the established narrative, which has become tiresome; the matter-of-course narrative, which we all know by heart. How, after interminable attendance and correspondence, after infinite impertinences, ignorances, and insults, my lords made a Minute, number three thousand four hundred and seventy-two, allowing the culprit to make certain trials of his invention at his own expense. How the trials were made in the presence of a board of six, of whom two ancient members were too blind to see it, two other ancient members too deaf to hear it, and one ancient member was too lame to get near it, and the final ancient member was too pig-headed to look at it. How there were more years, more impertinences, ignorances, and insults. How my lords then made a Minute, number five thousand one hundred and three, whereby they resigned the business to the Circumlocution Office. How the Circumlocution Office, in course of time, took up the business as if it were a brand new thing of yesterday which had never been heard of before; muddled the business, addled the business, tossed the business in a wet blanket. How the impertinences, ignorances, and insults went through the multiplication table. How there was a reference of the invention to three Barnacles and a Stiltstalking, who knew nothing about it; into whose heads nothing could be hammered about, who got bored about it, and reported physical impossibilities about it. How the Circumlocution Office, in a Minute, number eight

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

thousand seven hundred and forty, 'saw no reason to reverse the decision at which my lords had arrived.' How the Circumlocution Office, being reminded that my lords had arrived at no decision, shelved the business. How there had been a final interview with the head of the Circumlocution Office that very morning, and how the Brazen Head had spoken, and had been upon the whole, and under all the circumstances, and looking at it from the various points of view, of opinion that one of two courses was to be pursued in respect of the business; that was to say, either to leave it alone for ever more, or to begin it all over again.

"'Upon which,' said Mr. Meagles, 'as a practical man, I then and there, in that presence, took Doyce by the collar, and told him it was plain to me that he was an infamous rascal, and treasonable disturber of the Government peace, and took him away. I brought him out at the office door by the collar, that the very porter might know I was a practical man who appreciated the official estimate of such characters; and here we are!'

"If that airy young Barnacle had been there, he would have frankly told them perhaps that the Circumlocution Office had achieved its functions. That what the Barnacles had to do, was to stick on to the national ship as long as they could. That to trim the ship, lighten the ship, clean the ship, would be to knock them off; that they could but be knocked off once; and that if the ship went down with them sticking to it, that was the ship's look out, and not theirs.

"'There!' said Mr. Meagles, 'now you know all about Doyce. Except, which I own does not improve

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

my state of mind, that even now you don't hear him complain.'

" 'You must have great patience,' said Arthur Clennam, looking at him with some wonder, 'great forbearance.'

" 'No,' he returned, 'I don't know that I have more than another man.'

" 'By the Lord, you have more than I have thought !' cried Mr. Meagles.

" Doyce smiles, as he said to Clennam, 'You see, my experience of these things does not begin with myself. It has been in my way to know a little more about them, from time to time. Mine is not a particular case. I am not worse used than a hundred others, who have put themselves in the same position—than all the others, I was going to say.'

" 'I don't know that I should find that a consolation if it were my case ; but I am very glad that you do.'

" 'Understand me ! I don't say,' he replied, in his steady, planning way, and looking into the distance before him as if his grey eye were measuring it, 'that it's recompense for a man's toil and hope ; but it's a certain sort of relief to know that I might have counted on this.'

" He spoke in that quiet deliberate manner, and in that undertone, which is often observable in mechanics who consider and adjust with great nicety. It belonged to him like his suppleness of thumb, or his peculiar way of tilting up his hat at the back every now and then, as if he were contemplating some half-finished work of his hand, and thinking about it.

" 'Disappointed ?' he went on, as he walked between

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

them under the trees. 'Yes. No doubt I am disappointed. Hurt? Yes. No doubt I am hurt. That's only natural. But what I mean, when I say that people who put themselves in the same position are mostly used in the same way——'

" 'In England,' said Mr. Meagles.

" 'Oh! of course I mean England. When they take their inventions into foreign countries, that's quite different. And that's the reason why so many go there.'

" Again, in the same Circumlocution Office, is Arthur Clennam informed that :

" 'When this business is regularly before that Department, whatever it is,' pursued this bright young Barnacle, 'then we can watch it from time to time through that Department. When it comes regularly before this Department, then you must watch it from time to time through this Department. We shall have to refer it right and left; and when we refer it anywhere, then you'll have to look it up. When it comes back to us at any time, then you had better look *us* up. When it sticks anywhere, you'll have to try to give it a jog. When you write to another Department about it, and then to this Department about it, and don't hear anything satisfactory about it, why then you had better—keep on writing.' "

Let no one suppose that the nation to-day has its Civil Service free of Barnacles—free from inefficiency, from the insolence of office, or the nepotism of the rich, who now, as in the days of Dickens, control our politics. All these evils are present in our public services. The evidence given before many a Committee

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

has proved it to the hilt. The fearful administrative scandals of the South African War, where we paid thirty pounds for horses worth eight pounds—having first cabled to the Colonies “to send no mounted men”; the antiquated regulations of the Board of Trade that led to the sacrifice of the Titanic steerage; the fact—a minor one but most significant—that the War Office recently paid seven thousand pounds in law costs to acquire a piece of land for twenty thousand pounds; that more recently still one noble statesman had reduced the first line of defence to such a condition that in very terror his colleagues bundled him out of one office and bundled him into another, and that without any public discussion, explanation or debate; the fact it is possible to borrow millions at 3 per cent. and invest it in private loans at 2½ per cent.; that public money is now habitually voted away by the House of Commons at the rate of about a million a minute, and that, finally questions which that House has been pledged to deal with for decades are left absolutely alone; do not these things show that there has been no radical change, no cardinal improvement, since *Mr. Bull's Somnambulist*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Our Mutual Friend* revealed the canker at the root of our national life? One difference, indeed, there is. The hand that traced these evils, that riddled the Barnacles, and held the oligarchs up to ridicule, is at rest. The mighty voice of Dickens is hushed—and the nations' enemies go undenounced.

CHAPTER IX

POOR LAW REFORM

UNTIL within a comparatively few years poverty used to be punished, because those who administered the law created for its relief, were selected by reason of their remoteness from it. The less a man knew of the conditions which made poverty possible the greater his fitness to determine how it should be treated! Dickens was conscious in his time of this ironic paradox and he promptly set out to inflame public indignation against its cruelties and barbarities. He knew full well that the Poor Law in its inception was intended to relieve and diminish want; he saw that in practice it became an instrument of torture, humiliation and oppression to those who sought its aid. Until eighteen years ago, when the poor themselves were for the first time permitted to have a voice in the selection of the people who should mete out their relief or punishment, the only way in which Poor Law administrators from 1834 had attempted to abolish poverty was, by a monstrous system of increasing its miseries and degradations. Public relief was a by-word and a reproach; the recipient ceased to possess the rights of citizenship. The idea was not to save destitution, but to "save the rates." The cruel lunacy of the governing classes

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

permitted them to expend money in prosecuting a prisoner rather than in expending a less sum in relieving the same man's need! No distinction was made between the wastrel idler and the perpetually improvident and the hapless worker pursued by misfortune, overtaken by sickness, or rendered helpless by accident. The men who administered the Poor Law in Dickens's time saw no differences. To them there was one vagabond class, deserving of repression and punishment—the Poor. Old age was the sign manual of dishonour until within quite recent years. Destitute children, as we have already seen, were reared as criminals. The casual wards were hot-beds of vices which only habitual vagrancy and demoralized loafing can breed.

We have toned down some of the harshness and the acerbities, but even the so-called "humanized" Poor Law to-day stands condemned. We have no longer any use for it in an enlightened and civilized age. Our realization of our social duties and civic responsibilities clamours for its total extinction. So long as it remains it is an affront to our intelligence, a menace to our conscience, a reproach to our heads, an insult to our hearts, an outrage upon the decencies and amenities of our social organism. For years it has been a hollow mockery and a costly sham. To-day it has scarcely an apologist. It is an admitted failure. It must go. And when we take that next step in the sane rebuilding of our social life, let us not forget that the primary honour and the larger glory rightly belongs to Charles Dickens.

With a vivid conception of its intention and a clearer idea of its woeful misdirection, and its monstrous misapplication, Dickens found himself surrounded by the

POOR LAW REFORM

Podsnappery which regarded the Poor Law as a Heaven-sent institution. As certainly as it was anathema to the poor, it was nothing short of Providence to the *nouveau riche*, and the meretricious middle class. Witness that scene in which "a stray personage of meek demeanour" mentioned in Mr. Podsnap's hearing, the circumstance of some half-dozen people who "had lately died in the streets from starvation." Mr. Podsnap first of all didn't believe it, then averred it was their own faults, because "there is not a country in the world, sir, where so noble a provision is made for the poor."

That was the typical view of the Poor Law when Dickens wrote *Our Mutual Friend*. To-day, as I have said, the need for its reform is admitted on all sides by men of every shade of political feeling and for this, I repeat, we have to thank Dickens, for it was in *Our Mutual Friend* that he brought home to us the fact that the poor themselves hated and detested this particular enactment, its officers, regulations and equipment, as they have detested and hated nothing since the Enclosure Acts, drove them off the land to swarm into the cities, and there create an unemployed class to die in the fashion denounced by Podsnap. If we want to realize how fierce, and deep and passionate is the resentment of the poor against this doomed system, let us listen to the voice of Betty Higden—

"She was one of those old women, was Mrs. Betty Higden, who by dint of an indomitable purpose and a strong constitution fight out many years, though each year has come with its new knock-down blows fresh to the fight against her, wearied by it; an active old woman, with a bright dark eye and a resolute face, yet

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

quite a tender creature too ; not a logically reasoning woman, but God is good and hearts may count in Heaven as high as heads."

Betty it will be recalled, kept both a "minding-school" and a mangle. But she loved children and "minded them for fourpence a week," "Sloppy" was "a love-child" whose parents were never known. He was found in the street and—

" 'brought up in the '—with a shiver of repugnance—
' the House.'

" 'The Poor house ?' said the Secretary.

" Mrs. Higden set that resolute old face of hers, and darkly nodded yes.

" 'You dislike the mention of it ?'

" 'Dislike the mention of it ?' answered the old woman. 'Kill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart horses' feet and a loaded waggon, sooner than take me there. Come to us and find us all a-dying, and set a light to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there !' "

Then hearken to the master's satiric comment !

" 'A surprising spirit in this lonely woman after so many years of hard working and hard living, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards ! What is it that we call it in our grandiose speeches ? British independence, rather perverted ? Is that, or something like it, the ring of the cant.' "

But Betty continues—

" 'Do I never read in the newspapers,' said the dame, fondling the child—' God help me and the like of me !—how the worn-out people that do come down to that

POOR LAW REFORM

get driven from pillar to post, and post to pillar, a-purpose to tire them out ! Do I never read how they are put off, put off, put off—how they are grudged, grudged, grudged the shelter, or the doctor, or the drop of physic, or the bit of bread ? Do I never read how they grow heartsick of it and give it up, after having let themselves drop so low, and how they after all die out for want of help ? Then I say, I hope I can die as well as another, and I'll die without that disgrace.' ”

To Dickens this idea of the inevitable “disgrace” of it was always present. He had seen how all that was best and virile and reliant in the poor was sapped by this iniquitous system which in Betty's words “drove them from pillar to post.” He realized their heart sickness ; he knew how their souls were seared by contact with it. Sardonicly he laughs at “my lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards,” and tells them that it is absolutely impossible to set perverse people sharing such views right in their logic. Then mark the relentless swing of his arm as he gets in his cuts of truth as less irresistible because of their moving pathos—

“ ‘Johnny, my pretty,’ continued old Betty, caressing the child, and rather mourning over it than speaking to it, ‘your old Granny Betty is nigher four-score year than threescore and ten. She never begged nor had a penny of the Union money in her life. She paid scot and she paid lot when she had the money to pay ; she worked when she could, and she starved when she must. You pray that your Granny may have strength enough left to her at the last (she's strong for an old one, Johnny), to get up from her bed and run

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

and hide herself, and sworn to death in a hole, sooner than fall into the hands of those Cruel Jacks we read of, that dodge and drive, and worry and weary and scorn and shame, the decent poor.' ”

That striking protest came straight out of actual life. It bears the imprint of an actual history, multiplied again and again in the experience of all those who have studied the feelings and attitudes of the poor. Dickens's commentary on the system which has provoked this state of revolt is an indictment that can never be forgotten—

“ A brilliant success, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards, to have brought it to this in the minds of the best of the poor ! Under submission, might it be worth thinking of, at any odd time ? ”

“ . . . Yes, verily, my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards, adapting your catechism to the occasion, and by God's help so you must. For when we have got things to the pass that with an enormous sum at the disposal to relieve the poor, the best of the poor detest our mercies, hide their heads from us, and shame us by starving to death in the midst of us, it is a pass impossible of prosperity, impossible of continuance. It may not be so written in the Gospel according to the Podsnappery ; you may not ' find these words ' for the text of a sermon, in the Returns of the Board of Trade ; but they have been the truth since the foundations of the universe were laid ; and they will be the truth until the foundations of the universe are shaken by the Builder. This boastful handiwork of ours, which fails in its terrors for the professional pauper, the sturdy breaker of windows and the rampant tearer

POOR LAW REFORM

of clothes, strikes with a cruel and wicked stab at the Stricken sufferer, and is a horror to the deserving and unfortunate. We must mend it, Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards, or in its own evil hour it will mar every one of us."

In the incomparable description of Betty Higden's flight from the cursed clutches of the Poor Law, Dickens gives us one of the most poignant scenes of human frailty and terror that have ever been penned. "Patiently to earn a spare bare living, and quietly to die, untouched by workhouse hands—this was her highest sublunary hope!" In its pursuit it will be remembered that she struck the upward course of the river Thames as her general track, and there are wonderfully human pictures throughout of her plying her wares in the quaint old market-places of Chertsey, Walton, Kingston and Staines.

"In those pleasant little watering-towns on Thames, you may hear the fall of the water over the weirs, or even, in still weather, the rustle of the rushes, and from the bridge you may see the young river, dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course, and yet out of hearing of the deep summons of the sea. It were too much to pretend that Betty Higden made out such thoughts, no: but she heard the tender river whispering to many like herself, 'Come to me, come to me! When the cruel shame and terror you have so long fled from, most beset you, come to me! I am the Relieving Officer appointed by eternal ordinance to do my work; I am not held in estimation according as I shirk it. My breast is softer than the

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

pauper-nurse's; death in my arms is peacefuller than among the pauper wards. Come to me ! ”

As he traces her peregrinations Dickens tells us that :—

“ The old abhorrence grew stronger on her as she grew weaker, and it found more sustaining food than she did in her wanderings. Now, she would light upon the shameful spectacle of some desolute creature—or some wretched ragged groups of either sex, or of both sexes, with children among them, huddled together like the smaller vermin, for a little warmth—lingering and lingering on a doorstep, while the appointed evader of the public trust did his dirty office of trying to weary them out and so get rid of them. Now she would light upon some poor decent person, like herself, going afoot on a pilgrimage of many weary miles to see some worn-out relative or friend who had been charitably clutched off to a great barren Union House, as far from old home as the County Jail (the remoteness of which is always its worst punishment for small rural offenders), and in its dietary, and in its lodging, and in its tending of the sick, a much more penal establishment. Sometimes she would hear a newspaper read out, and would learn how the Registrar-General cast up the units that had within the last week died of want and of exposure to the weather ; for which that Recording Angel seemed to have a regular fixed place in his sum, as if they were its half-pence. All such things she would hear discussed, as we, my Lords and Gentlemen, and Honourable Boards, in our unapproachable magnificence never hear them, and from all such things she would fly with the wings of raging Despair.”

POOR LAW REFORM

This, said Dickens, is not to be received as a figure of speech.

“ Old Betty Higden, however tired, however footsore, would start up and be driven away by her awakened horror of falling into the hands of a Charity. It is a remarkable Christian improvement, to have made a pursuing Fury of the Good Samaritan; but it was so in this case, and it is a type of many, many, many.”

When later on with all energy gone and strength exhausted and with “ no fear that she would live through another night ” we find that :—

“ Sewn in the breast of her gown, the money to pay for her burial was still intact. If she could wear through the day, and then lie down and die under cover of the darkness, she would die independent. If she were captured previously, the money would be taken from her as a pauper who had no right to it, and she would be carried to the accursed workhouse. Gaining her end, the letter would be found in her breast, along with the money, and the gentlefolks would say, when it was given back to them ‘ She prized it, did old Betty Higden ; she was true to it ; and while she lived, she would never let it be disgraced by falling into the hands of those that she held in horror.’ Most illogical, inconsequential, and light-headed, this : but travellers in the valley of the shadow of death are apt to be light-headed ; and worn-out old people of low estate have a trick of reasoning as indifferently as they live, and doubtless would appreciate our Poor Law more philosophically on an income of ten thousand a year.”

The last sigh of the poor old soul was one of relief

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

at the promise that her letter should never be given to "the Parish."

If the tremendous indictment contained in this story which makes clear the hatred, aversion, and repugnance of the poor towards *their* law, had little effect it is only because the England of Dickens's time was accustomed to pay out scant regard to what the poor themselves thought of the matter. Podsnap reigned supreme and all that Podsnap cared about was the opinion of sleek, comfortable, respectable people, miles removed from poverty, and, of course, utterly unable to comprehend its existence or to think of it, except as I have said, as punishment devised by Providence for the undeserving. We have, thanks largely to Dickens, changed all that. No one worth counting nowadays believes that poverty is the effect of individual wrong-doing ; no one pretends that our society is so organized that, given an average standard of reliability and average good conduct, the individual is protected against the necessity of Poor Law relief.

Even the much discussed Insurance Act (the principles of which most parties acclaim, and the methods of which most parties denounce) is an evidence of the change which has come over public opinion, and an admission that the mass of working people are unable to provide against the countless contingencies of life, without some assistance from the State. We have to a large extent got rid of the notion that because a man in his old age receives state relief he is a conventional pauper. We have realized from year to year that there are hundreds and thousands of the highest amongst us who receive relief from the State in their youth as well

POOR LAW REFORM

as in their old age, without any sense of shame or taint of pauperism. Long ago some of us started asking "Why should the retired soldier, statesman, civil servant or court favourite, be honoured by the receipt of a State pension, and the disabled artisan be degraded by it? What is there in the payment of money from the same source that it acts so differently and carries with it such a varying sentiment according to the channel through which it flows?" We have conceived since, that it is *not* poor relief which makes pauperism, but the spirit in which relief is granted and received, and the scale upon which it is given. To-day poor old Betty Higden, at all events, would have been assured of her pension, and with her little remaining strength and her hoard of savings, would have managed to live without the spectre always before her, of the accursed work-house, and its dreaded officials. In this degree things have certainly progressed since Dickens wrote *Our Mutual Friend*. But can we say that they have advanced as regards other portions of his teaching? I think not. Turn to his *Instead of a Preface*, to the book which immortalizes Betty, and note Dickens's own direct and personal view of the administration of the Poor Law.

"In my social experiences, since Mrs. Betty Higden came upon the scene, and left it, I have found Circumlocutional champions disposed to be warm with me on the subject of my view of the Poor Law. My friend Mr. Bounderby could never see any difference between leaving the Coketown 'hands' exactly as they were, and requiring them to be fed with the turtle soup and venison out of gold spoons. Idiotic propositions of a

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

parallel nature have been freely offered for my acceptance, and I have been called upon to admit that I would give Poor Law relief to anybody, anywhere, anyhow. Putting this nonsense aside, I have observed a suspicious tendency in the champions to divide into two parties ; the one, contending that there are no deserving Poor who prefer death by slow starvation and bitter weather, to the mercies of some relieving officers and some Union Houses ; the other, admitting that there are such Poor, but denying that they have any cause or reason for what they do. The records in our newspapers, the late exposure by the *Lancet*, and the common sense and senses of common people, furnish too abundant evidence against both defences. But, that my view of the Poor Law may not be mistaken or misrepresented, I will state it. I believe there has been in England, since the days of the STUARTS, no law so often infamously administered, no law so often openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised. In the majority of the shameful cases of disease and death from destitution, that shock the Public and disgrace the country, the illegality is quite equal to the inhumanity—and known language could say no more of their lawlessness.”

That view we know was abundantly justified to the hilt then. Are we quite sure that all the harshness have now disappeared ? I have had the privilege of attempting to administer the law as a Poor Law Guardian, myself, and I know it is not so. Sometimes I have wondered why otherwise seemingly sane, intelligent men, with a due regard to the susceptibilities of their fellows, immediately they are called upon to deal or treat with the weakest and lowest in social life, take on

POOR LAW REFORM

or reveal a harshness, cruelty and cowardly bullying startling in its severity. As I write I recall the circumstances in which a Relieving Officer, in all outward respects an upright man of normal views and healthy considerations, pursued with malignant enmity and unbroken hostility a poor old spinster who some forty years previously had given birth to an illegitimate child ! And in his refusal to grant outdoor relief he had no more zealous supporters than the several representatives of the Church—those followers of the meek and lowly Christ—who sat upon the Board !

Quite recently too, the daily newspapers recorded facts brought to light in connection with the Camberwell Board of Guardians. In one instance a woman suffering from consumption, and living in a basement with three children, had applied, it is alleged, for two blankets for covering, which had been denied because the request had not been made through a relieving officer but by the lady visitor in the service of the guardians.

During last year there were, according to the Official Returns, one hundred deaths in England and Wales due to starvation or accelerated by privation, and in 82 out of these 100 cases no application had been made for poor relief, or application was only made when the victim was in a dying condition !

Dickens did not arrive at his conclusions, it should be noted, merely by way of negative criticism or vague generalization. He studied the system and its fruits at first hand, and brought them before the judgment bar of the conscience of the nation in language wonderfully arresting and succinct—

“ On the fifth of last November, I, the Conductor of

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

this journal, accompanied by a friend well known to the public, accidentally strayed into Whitechapel. It was a miserable evening; very dusk, very muddy, and raining hard.

“ We had forgotten the mud and rain in slowly walking along, and looking about us, when we found ourselves, at eight o'clock, before the Workhouse.

“ Crouched against the wall of the Workhouse, in the dark street, on the muddy pavement-stones, with the rain raining upon them, were five bundles of rags. They were motionless, and had no resemblance to the human form. Five great beehives, covered with rags—five dead bodies taken out of graves, tied neck and heels, and covered with rags—would have looked like those five bundles upon which the rain rained down in the public street.

“ ‘ What is this ! ’ said my companion. ‘ What is this ! ’

“ ‘ Some miserable people shut out of the Casual Ward, I think, ’ said I.

“ We had stopped before the five ragged mounds, and were quite rooted to the spot by their horrible appearance. Five awful Sphinxes by the wayside, crying to every passer-by ‘ Stop and guess ! What is to be the end of a state of society that leaves us here. ’

“ As we stood looking at them, a decent working-man, having the appearance of a stone-mason, touched me on the shoulder.

“ ‘ This is an awful sight, sir, ’ said he, ‘ in a Christian country. ’

“ ‘ God knows it is, my friend, ’ said I.

“ ‘ I have often seen it much worse than this, as I

POOR LAW REFORM

have been going home from my work. I have counted fifteen, twenty, five-and-twenty, many a time. It's a shocking thing to see.'

" 'A shocking thing, indeed,' said I and my companion together. The man lingered near us a little while, wished us good-night, and went on.

" We should have felt it brutal in us who had a better chance of being heard than the working-man, to leave the thing as it was, so we knocked at the Workhouse Gate. I undertook to be spokesman. The moment the gate was opened by an old pauper, I went in, followed close by my companion. I lost no time in passing the old porter, for I saw in his watery eye a disposition to shut us out.

" 'Be so good as to give that card to the master of the workhouse, and say I shall be glad to speak to him for a moment.'

" We were in a kind of covered gateway, and the old porter went across it with the card. Before he had got to the door on our left, a man in a cloak and hat bounced out of it very sharply, as if he were in the nightly habit of being bullied and of returning the compliment.

" 'Now gentlemen,' said he in a loud voice, 'what do you want here?'

" 'First,' said I, 'will you do me the favour to look at that card in your hand? Perhaps you may know my name.'

" 'Yes,' says he, looking at it. 'I know this name.'

" 'Good. I only want to ask you a plain question in a civil manner, and there is not the least occasion for either of us to be angry. It would be very foolish in me to blame you, and I don't blame you. I may

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

find fault with the system you administer, but pray understand that I know you are here to do a duty pointed out to you, and that I have no doubt you do it. Now, I hope you won't object to tell me what I want to know."

" 'No,' said he, quite mollified, and very reasonable, 'not at all. What is it?'

" 'Do you know that there are five wretched creatures outside?'

" 'I haven't seen them, but I dare say there are.'

" 'Do you doubt that there are?'

" 'No, not at all. There might be many more.'

" 'Are they men? Or women?'

" 'Women, I suppose. Very likely one or two of them were there last night, and the night before last.'

" 'There all night, do you mean?'

" 'Very likely.'

" My companion and I looked at one another, and the master of the Workhouse added quickly, 'Why, Lord bless my soul, what am I to do? What can I do? The place is full. The place is always full—every night. I must give the preference to women with children, mustn't I? You wouldn't have me not do that?'

" 'Surely not,' said I. 'It is a very humane principle, and quite right; and I am glad to hear of it. Don't forget that I don't blame *you*.'

" 'Well!' said he. And subdued himself again.

" 'What I want to ask you,' I went on, 'is whether you know anything against those five miserable beings outside?'

" 'Don't know anything about them,' said he, with a wave of his arm.

POOR LAW REFORM

“ ‘ I ask for this reason : that we mean to give them a trifle to get a lodging—if they are not shelterless because they are thieves for instance ? You don’t know them to be thieves ? ’

“ ‘ I don’t know anything about them,’ he repeated emphatically.

“ ‘ That is to say, they are shut out solely because the Ward is full ? ’

“ ‘ Because the Ward is full.’

“ ‘ And if they got in, they would only have a roof for the night and a bit of bread in the morning, I suppose ? ’

“ ‘ That’s all. You’ll use your own discretion about what you give them. Only understand that I don’t know anything about them beyond what I have told you.’

“ ‘ Just so. I wanted to know no more. You have answered my question civilly and readily, and I am much obliged to you. I have nothing to say against you, but quite the contrary. Good-night ! ’

“ ‘ Good-night, gentlemen ! ’ And out we came again.

“ We went to the ragged bundle nearest to the Workhouse door, and I touched it. No movement replying, I gently shook it. The rags began to be slowly stirred within, and by little and little a head was unshrouded. The head of a young woman of three or four-and-twenty, as I should judge ; gaunt with want, and foul with dirt ; but not naturally ugly.

“ ‘ Tell us,’ said I, stooping down. ‘ Why are you lying here ? ’

“ ‘ Because I can’t get into the Workhouse.’

“ She spoke in a faint, dull way, and had no curiosity

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

or interest left. She looked dreamily at the black sky and the falling rain, but never looked at me or my companion.

“ ‘Were you here last night ?’

“ ‘Yes. All last night. And the night afore too.’

“ ‘Do you know any of these others ?’

“ ‘I know her next but one. She was here last night, and she told me she come out of Essex. I don’t know no more of her.’

“ ‘You were here all last night, but you have not been here all day ?’

“ ‘No. Not all day.’

“ ‘Where have you been all day ?’

“ ‘About the streets.’

“ ‘What have you had to eat ?’

“ ‘Nothing.’

“ ‘Come !’ said I. ‘Think a little. You are tired and have been asleep, and don’t quite consider what you are saying to us. You have had something to eat to-day. Come ! Think of it !’

“ ‘No I haven’t. Nothing but such bits as I could pick up about the market. *Why look at me !*’

“ She bared her neck, and I covered it up again.

“ ‘If you had a shilling to get some supper and a lodging, should you know where to get it ?’

“ ‘Yes, I could do that.’

“ ‘For God’s sake get it then !’

“ I put the money into her hand, and she feebly rose up and went away. She never thanked me, never looked at me—melted away into the miserable night, in the strangest manner I ever saw. I have seen many strange things, but not one that has left a deeper

POOR LAW REFORM

impression on my memory than the dull impassive way in which that worn-out heap of misery took that piece of money, and was lost.

“ One by one I spoke to all the five. In every one, interest and curiosity were as extinct as in the first. They were all dull and languid. No one made any sort of profession or complaint ; no one cared to look at me ; no one thanked me. When I came to the third, I suppose she saw that my companion and I glanced with a new horror upon us, at the two last, who had dropped against each other in their sleep, and were lying like broken images. She said she believed they were young sisters. These were the only words that were originated among the five.

“ And now let me close this terrible account with a redeeming and beautiful trait of the poorest of the poor. When we came out of the Workhouse, we had gone across the road to a public house, finding ourselves without silver, to get change for a sovereign. I held the money in my hand while I was speaking to the five apparitions. Our being so engaged, attracted the attention of many people of the very poor sort usual to that place ; as we leaned over the mounds of rags, they eagerly leaned over us to see and hear ; what I had in my hand, and what I said, and what I did, must have been plain to nearly all the concourse. When the last of the five had got up and faded away, the spectators opened to let us pass ; and not one of them, by word, or look, or gesture, begged of us. Many of the observant faces were quick enough to know that it would have been a relief to us to have got rid of the rest of the money with any hope of doing good with it.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

But, there was a feeling among them all, that their necessities were not to be placed by the side of such a spectacle ; and they opened a way for us in profound silence, and let us go.

“ My companion wrote to me, next day, that the five ragged bundles had been upon his bed all night. I debated how to add our testimony to that of many other persons who from time to time are impelled to write to the newspapers, by having come upon some shameful and shocking sight of this description. I resolved to write in these pages an exact account of what we had seen, but to wait until after Christmas, in order that there might be no heat or haste. I know that the unreasonable disciples of a reasonable school, demented disciples who push arithmetic and political economy beyond all bounds of sense (not to speak of such a weakness as humanity), and hold them to be all-sufficient for every case, can easily prove that such things ought to be, and that no man has any business to mind them. Without disparaging those indispensable sciences in their sanity, I utterly renounce and abominate them in their insanity ; and I address people with a respect for the spirit of the New Testament, who do mind such things, and who think them infamous in our streets.”

Can we say with truth that all this is altered now ? During this very year of grace, nay, during this very month, the wretches herding o' nights on the seats along the Embankment are being “ Driven ” by the police—the expression is an official one—from casual ward to casual ward, to find that ward after ward is full, and that they must tramp on and on, further and

POOR LAW REFORM

further afield, outside the area of the City Police to cower down in some wretched makeshift of a shelter.

Dickens's observations were not restricted to the poor wretches shivering outside the Workhouse gates. With his usual thoroughness he pushed his researches further home. Some of his descriptions of workhouses from within remain the best that have been attempted. Take for example his visit to the Wapping Workhouse which he portrays thusly—

“A very bright and nimble little matron, with a bunch of keys in her hand, responded to my request to see the House. I began to doubt whether the police magistrate was quite right in his facts, when I noticed her quick active little figure and her intelligent eyes.

“The traveller (the matron intimated) should see the worst first. He was welcome to see everything. Such as it was, there it all was.

“This was the only preparation for our entering ‘the Foul Wards.’ They were in an old building squeezed away in a corner of a paved yard, quite detached from the more modern and spacious main body of the workhouse. They were in a building most monstrously behind the time—a mere series of garrets or lofts, with every inconvenient and objectionable circumstance in their construction, and only accessible by steep and narrow staircases, infamously ill-adapted for the passage upstairs of the sick, or downstairs of the dead.

“Abed in these miserable rooms, here on bedsteads, there (for a change, as I understood it) on the floor, were women in every stage of distress and disease.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

None but those who have attentively observed such scenes can conceive the extraordinary variety of expression still latent under the general monotony and uniformity of colour, attitude and condition. The form a little coiled up and turned away, as though it had turned its back on this world for ever ; the uninterested face, at once lead-coloured and yellow, looking passively upward from the pillow ; the haggard mouth a little dropped, the hand outside the coverlet, so dull and indifferent, so light, and yet so heavy, these were on every pallet ; but when I stopped beside a bed, and said ever so slight a word to the figure lying there, the ghost of the old character came into the face, and made the Foul ward as various as the fair world. No one appeared to care to live, but no one complained ; all who could speak said that as much was done for them as could be done there, that the attendance was kind and patient, that their suffering was very heavy, but they had nothing to ask for. The wretched rooms were as clean and sweet as it is possible for such rooms to be ; they would become a pest-house in a single week, if they were ill kept. . . .”

It is remarkable to note how over fifty years ago Dickens seized almost intuitively upon the very point that reformers have been and are now labouring at, albeit with all the sickness of hope deferred :—

“ Now I reasoned with myself, as I made my journey home again, concerning those Foul wards. They ought not to exist ; no person of common decency and humanity can see them and doubt it. But what is this Union to do ? The necessary alteration would cost several thousands of pounds ; it has already to support three

POOR LAW REFORM

workhouses ; its inhabitants work hard for their bare lives, and are already rated for the relief of the Poor to the utmost extent of reasonable endurance. One poor parish in this very Union is rated to the amount of FIVE AND SIXPENCE in the pound, at the very same time when the rich parish of St. George's, Hanover Square, is rated at about SEVENPENCE in the Pound, Paddington at about FOURPENCE, St. James's, Westminster, at about TENPENCE ! It is only through the equalization of Poor Rates that what is left undone in this wise can be done. Much more is left undone, or is ill done, than I have space to suggest in these notes of a single uncommercial journey ; but, the wise men of the East, before they can reasonably hold forth about it, must look to the North and South and West ; let them also, any morning before taking the seat of Solomon, look into the shops and dwellings all around the Temple, and first ask themselves, ' How much more can these poor people—many of whom keep themselves with difficulty enough out of the workhouse—bear ? ' ”

The worst horrors of the Inferno which Dickens depicted have been for some years obliterated. The movement which set in about the time that he then wrote, largely as a result of his own and Miss Twining's activities, changed very much that was repellant and cruel in workhouse administration. Unhappily, the soul-destroying curse of the system still remains. The deadening, paralysing blighting influence which it has always exerted is still with us. The buildings are finer ; the accommodation is more adequate ; there is better lighting, more efficient management, greater care,

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

cleanliness and brightness. But, the souls of the inmates what of them ? Look in their faces.

Their names are " Might have been "
They are also called " Farewell," " Too Late " !

A dreadful inertia seems to have fallen upon them. They are like ghosts, stripped of dignity and fearfulness, dead shadows of the men who were once themselves. In this respect they are but a trifle different to the people whom Dickens described :—

" In all of these long walks of aged and infirm some old people were bedridden, and had been for a long time ; some were sitting on their beds half-naked ; some dying in their beds ; some out of bed, and sitting at a table near the fire. A sullen or lethargic indifference to what was asked, a blunted sensibility to everything but warmth and food, a moody absence of complaint as being of no use, a dogged silence and resentful desire to be left alone again, I thought were generally apparent. On our walking into the midst of one of these dreary perspectives of old men, nearly the following little dialogue took place, the nurse not being immediately at hand—

" ' All well here ? ' "

" No answer. An old man in a Scotch cap sitting among others on a form at the table, eating out of a tin porringer, pushes back his cap a little to look at us, claps it down on his forehead again with the palm of his hand, and goes on eating.

" ' All well here ? ' (repeated).

" No answer. Another old man sitting on his bed, paralytically peeling a boiled potato, lifts his head and stares.

POOR LAW REFORM

“ ‘ Enough to eat ? ’

“ No answer. Another old man, in bed turns himself and coughs.

“ ‘ How are *you* to-day ? ’ To the last old man.

“ That old man says nothing ; but another old man, a tall, old man of very good address, speaking with perfect correctness, comes forward from somewhere, and volunteers an answer. The reply almost always proceeds from a volunteer, and not from the person looked at or spoken to.

“ ‘ We are very old, sir,’ in a mild, distinct voice. ‘ We can’t expect to be well, most of us.’

“ ‘ Are you comfortable ? ’

“ ‘ I have no complaint to make, sir.’ With a half shake of his head, a half shrug of his shoulders, and a kind of apologetic smile.

“ ‘ Enough to eat ? ’

“ ‘ Why, sir, I have but a poor appetite,’ with the same air as before ; ‘ and yet I get through my allowance very easily.’

“ ‘ But,’ showing a porringer with a Sunday dinner in it ; ‘ here is a portion of mutton, and three potatoes. You can’t starve on that ? ’

“ ‘ Oh dear, no, sir,’ with the same apologetic air. ‘ Not starve.’

“ ‘ What do you want ? ’

“ ‘ We have very little bread, sir. It’s an exceedingly small quantity of bread.’

“ The nurse, who is now rubbing her hands at the questioner’s elbow, interferes with, ‘ It ain’t much raly, sir. You see, they’ve only six ounces a day, and when

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

they've took their breakfast, there *can* only be a little left for night, sir.'

"Another old man, hitherto invisible, rises out of his bed-clothes, as out of a grave, and looks on.

"'You have tea at night?' The questioner is still addressing the well-spoken old man.

"'Yes, sir, we have tea at night.'

"'And you save what bread you can from the morning, to eat with it?'

"'Yes, sir, if we can save any.'

"'And you want more to eat with it?'

"'Yes, sir.' With a very anxious face.

"The questioner, in the kindness of his heart, appears a little discomposed, and changes the subject.

"'What has become of the old man who used to lie in that bed in the corner?'

"The nurse don't remember what old man is referred to. There has been such a many old men. The well-spoken old man is doubtful. The spectral old man who has come to life in bed, says, 'Billy Stevens.' Another old man who has previously had his head in the fire-place, pipes out—

"'Charley Walters.'

"Something like a feeble interest is awakened. I suppose Charley Walters had conversation in him.

"'He's dead,' says the piping old man.

"Another old man, with one eye screwed up, hastily displaces the piping old man, and says—

"'Yes! Charley Walters died in that bed, and—and——'

"'Billy Stevens,' persists the spectral old man.

"'No, no! and Johnny Rogers died in that bed,

POOR LAW REFORM

and—and—they're both on 'em dead—and Sam'l Bowyer ;' this seems very extraordinary to him ; ' he went out ! '

“ With this he subsides, and all the old men (having had quite enough of it) subside, and the spectral old man goes into his grave again, and takes the shade of Billy Stevens with him.

“ As we turn to go out at the door, another previously invisible old man, a hoarse old man in a flannel gown, is standing there, as if he had just come up through the floor.

“ ‘ I beg your pardon, sir, could I take the liberty of saying a word ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, what is it ? ’ ”

“ ‘ I am greatly better in my health, sir ; but what I want, to get me quite round, ’ with his hand on his throat, ‘ is a little fresh air, sir. It has always done my complaint so much good, sir. The regular leave for going out, comes round so seldom that if the gentlemen, next Friday, would give me leave to go out walking, now and again—for only an hour or so, sir !—— ’

“ Who could wonder, looking through those weary vistas of bed and infirmity, that it should do him good to meet with some other scenes, and assure himself that there was something else on earth ? Who could help wondering why the old men lived on as they did ; what grasp they had on life ; what crumbs of interest or occupation they could pick up from its bare board ; whether Charley Walters had ever described to them the days when he kept company with some old pauper woman in the bud, or Billy Stevens ever told them of the time when he was a dweller in the far-off foreign land called Home !

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ The morsel of burnt child, lying in another room so patiently in bed, wrapped in lint, and looking steadfastly at us with his bright, quiet eyes when we spoke to him kindly, looked as if the knowledge of these things, and of all the tender things there are to think about, might have been in his mind—as if he thought, with us, that there was a fellow-feeling in the pauper nurses which appeared to make them more kind to their charges than the race of common nurses in the hospitals—as if he mused upon the future of some older children lying around him in the same place, and thought it best, perhaps, all things considered, that he should die—as if he knew, without fear, of those many coffins, made and unmade, piled up in the store below—and of his unknown friend, ‘ the dropped child,’ calm upon the box-lid covered with a cloth. But there was something wistful and appealing, too, in his tiny face, as if, in the midst of all the hard necessities and incongruities he pondered on, he pleaded, in behalf of the helpless and the aged poor, for a little more liberty—and a little more bread.”

It is when we come to the re-reading of passages like these that we apprehend how similar is the spirit of the system to the day when Dickens thundered against it in his righteous wrath. Some of its barbarities, as I have said, have been softened, some of its anomalies removed. But the spirit is essentially what it was when Bumble extolled its indignities to the sympathetic Mrs. Corney. “ The great principle of . . . relief is, to give the paupers exactly what they don't want ; and then they get tired of coming.” The poor to the Bumble-class are always “ obstinate ” in their miseries.

POOR LAW REFORM

There is one respect, however, in which the administration of the Poor Law has made enormous strides. The new feeling towards childhood and children that Dickens conjured up in his dreams, has passed into national life and become part of our social consciousness. The little one no longer suffers under the great *damnosa hereditas*. We no longer inflict the same stupid cruelties upon the child for the economic and other sins of its parents. The Boarding out and Scattered Homes systems we still have. But the former is no longer the pitiless menace that threatened Oliver Twist or evolved Noah Claypole. To-day it is tinged with a new and sweeter spirit, and touched to a finer issue. The callous profiteer, the grasping tradesman, who would give a child "his chance in life" for "three pounds ten" by making him a rat-catcher or a sweep; the merciless sweater who found in the little ones the cheapest of cheap labour—these no longer beg or buy children from "the Guardians of the Poor." "Mr. Drouet's Farming Establishment for Pauper children," with which he dealt so mercilessly in *Household Words*, is no longer possible at Tooting or elsewhere. In this age an altogether different type of men and women crave to have the care of the innocents. The young widow in her grief, the childless wife, the solitary man, who like Silas Marner learns to count a baby's golden locks as more precious than sovereigns, these are they who take the child of the State to their lonely hearths, who learn to listen with loving ears to its pretty prattle, to revel in its innocent mirth and to find perpetually in its welcome, a real recompense for the long day's work.

CHAPTER X

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

“ But you shall know that I am something more than a maze of tortuous ins and outs . . . For Beast of Prey, above the perplexed letter of all Law that has any might in it, goes the spirit. If I be, as I claim to be, the child of Justice and not the offspring of the Artful Dodger, that spirit shall, before I gabble through one legal argument more, provide for you . . . as you deserve. . . . But I will not remain here, a spectacle and a scandal to those who are the breath of my nostrils, with your dirty hands clinging to my robe, your brazen lungs misrepresenting me, your shameless face beslaving me in my prostitution.”
“ Things That Cannot Be Done.”—*Household Words*, October 8th, 1853.

PERHAPS of all the reform movements that drew their strength so largely from the magic well of Dickens's genius, with its exhaustless springs of buoyant vitality, none did more for the poor than that which abolished once and for ever the hideous system whereby men suffered imprisonment, often lifelong in its duration, for the crime of owing money.

I may be told, indeed it is quite certain that I shall be, that men are sent to jail still for that very offence. That is true. But the objection only serves to show what enormous strides we have made, at any rate in one direction, since the days when Dickens marshalled his heavy artillery against those Citadels of misery—the

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

Debtor's Prisons. To-day, indeed, debtors suffer imprisonment—perhaps for a week or ten days; at most for a month or six weeks. In Dickens's time they went there, sometimes, for life, for, if the debtor was penniless and friendless and the creditor obdurate, then the months would pass into years, and the years into decades, till the strength and the courage and the resolution of the poor wretch had ebbed away. We quite rightly hear a good deal in our own time of the inequalities and severities of our laws, but let us rejoice that, at least, this fearful, soul-destroying ordeal, this horror of making a man pay forfeit with his life—for that is what it came to—is gone for ever. There is a dreadful picture, perhaps at once the most pathetic and the most awful that the Master ever drew, of a man whose life has passed in the horrible environment of a debtor's jail, the same jail that entertains Mr. Pickwick when he goes there to avoid paying Dodson and Fogg their costs.

“ ‘I'm sorry to say that your landlord's very bad to-night, sir,’ said Roker, setting down the glass, and inspecting the lining of his hat preparatory to putting it on again.

“ ‘What! The Chancery prisoner!’ exclaimed Mr. Pickwick.

“ ‘He won't be a Chancery prisoner very long, sir,’ replied Roker, turning his hat round so as to get the maker's name right side upwards as he looked into it.

“ ‘You make my blood run cold,’ said Mr. Pickwick. ‘What do you mean?’

“ ‘He's been consumptive for a long time past,’ said Mr. Roker, ‘and he's taken very bad in the breath

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

to-night. The doctor said, six months ago, that nothing but change of air could save him.'

" 'Great Heaven !' exclaimed Mr. Pickwick ; ' has this man been slowly murdered by the law for six months ! '

" ' I don't know about that,' replied Roker, weighing the hat by the brim in both hands. ' I suppose he'd have been took the same, wherever he was. He went into the infirmary this morning ; the doctor says his strength is to be kept up as much as possible ; and the warden's sent him wine and broth and that, from his own house. It's not the warden's fault, you know, sir.'

" ' Of course not,' replied Mr. Pickwick, hastily.

" ' I'm afraid, however,' said Roker, shaking his head, ' that it's all up with him. I offered Neddy two six penn'orths to one upon it just now, but he wouldn't take it, and quite right. Thankee, sir. Good-night, sir.'

" ' Stay,' said Mr. Pickwick, earnestly. ' Where is this infirmary ? '

" ' Just over where you slept, sir,' replied Roker. ' I'll show you if you like to come.' Mr. Pickwick snatched up his hat without speaking, and followed at once.

" The turnkey led the way in silence ; and gently raising the latch of the room door, motioned Mr. Pickwick to enter. It was a large, bare, desolate room, with a number of stump bedsteads made of iron ; on one of which lay stretched the shadow of a man : wan, pale, and ghastly. His breathing was hard and thick, and he moaned painfully as it came and went. At the bedside sat a short man in a cobbler's apron, who, by the aid

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

of a pair of horn spectacles, was reading from the Bible aloud. It was the fortunate legatee.

“The sick man laid his hand upon his attendant’s arm, and motioned him to stop. He closed the book, and laid it on the bed.

“‘Open the window,’ said the sick man.

“He did so. The noise of carriages and carts, the cries of men and boys, all the busy sounds of a busy multitude instinct with life and occupation, blended into one deep murmur, floated into the room. Above the hoarse loud hum arose, from time to time, a boisterous laugh; or a scrap of some jingling song, shouted forth by one of the giddy crowd, would strike upon the ear for an instant, and then be lost amidst the roar of voices and the tramp of footsteps; the breaking of the billows and the restless sea of life that rolled heavily on without. Melancholy sounds to a quiet listener at any time; how melancholy to the watcher by the bed of death!

“‘There is no air here,’ said the sick man, faintly. ‘The place pollutes it. It was fresh round about, when I walked there, years ago; but it grows hot and heavy in passing these walls. I cannot breathe it.’

“‘We have breathed it together for a long time,’ said the old man. ‘Come, come.’

“There was a short silence, during which the two spectators approached the bed. The sick man drew a hand of his fellow-prisoner towards him, and pressing it affectionately between his own, retained it in his grasp.

“‘I hope,’ he gasped, after a little while; so faintly that they bent their ears close over the bed to catch the half-formed sounds his pale lips gave vent to, ‘I hope my merciful Judge will bear in mind my heavy

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

punishment on earth. Twenty years, my friend, twenty years in this hideous grave ! My heart broke when my child died, and I could not even kiss him in his little coffin. My loneliness since then, in all this noise and riot, has been very dreadful. May God forgive me ! He has seen my solitary, lingering death ! ’

“ He folded his hands, and murmuring something more that they could not hear, fell into a sleep—only a sleep at first, for they saw him smile !

“ They whispered together for a little time, and the turnkey, stooping over the pillow, drew hastily back.

“ ‘ He has got his discharge, by G— ! ’ said the man.

“ He had. But he had grown so like death in life that they knew not when he died.”

This was not exceptional, it was not even an unusual case. “ Not a week passes over our heads,” says Dickens, “ but in every one of our prisons for debt, some of these men must inevitably expire in the slow agonies of want, if they were not relieved by their fellow prisoners.” Let us recall the enormity of the vile conditions under which Dickens himself first came to see these ghastly institutions—

“ The poor side of a debtor’s prison is, as its name imports, that in which the most miserable and abject class of debtors are confined. A prisoner having declared upon the poor side, pays neither rent nor chummage. His fees upon entering and leaving the jail are reduced in amount, and he becomes entitled to a share of some small quantities of food ; to provide which, a few charitable persons have, from time to time, left trifling legacies in their wills. Most of our readers will remember that, until within a very few years past, there was a

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

kind of iron cage in the wall of the Fleet Prison, within which was posted some man of hungry looks, who, from time to time, rattled a money-box, and exclaimed in a mournful voice, 'Pray remember the poor debtors; pray remember the poor debtors.' The receipts of this box, when there were any, were divided among the poor prisoners; and the men on the poor side relieved each other in this degrading office.

"Although this custom has been abolished, and the cage is now boarded up, the miserable and destitute condition of these unhappy persons remains the same. We no longer suffer them to appeal at the prison gates to the charity and compassion of the passers-by; but we still leave unblotted in the leaves of our statute book, for the reverence and admiration of the succeeding ages, the just and wholesome law which declares that the sturdy felon shall be fed and clothed, and that the penniless debtor shall be left to die of starvation and nakedness."

Charles Dickens, as I have shown in my first chapter, had known that side when, but a little child, he had borrowed Captain Porter's knife and fork for his father, what time "the family encamped, as it were, in the two parlours of the emptied house in Windsor Terrace, and while that father was himself in the Debtor's Jail."

There, too, as I have previously indicated, the boy met the original of "Little Dorrit," the child-mother of the Marshalsea, battling with cares far beyond her strength, but growing up with her freshness and tenderness unspoilt even in that noisome poisoned place, where :—

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

“ . . . wistful and wondering, she would sit in summer weather by the high fender in the lodge, looking up at the sky through the barred window, until bars of light would arise, when she turned her eyes away, between her and her friends, and she would see him through a grating too.

“ ‘Thinking of the fields,’ the turnkey said once, after watching her, ‘ain’t you?’

“ ‘Where are they?’ she inquired.

“ ‘Why, they’re over there, my dear,’ said the Turnkey, with a vague flourish of his key. ‘Just about there.’

“ ‘Does anybody open them, and shut them? Are they locked?’

“ The turnkey was discomfited. ‘Well! Not in general.’

“ ‘Are they very pretty, Bob?’ She called him Bob, by his own particular request and instruction.

“ ‘Lovely. Full of flowers. There’s buttercups, and there’s daisies, and there’s’—the turnkey hesitated, being short of floral nomenclature—‘There’s dandelions, and all manner of games.’

“ ‘Is it very pleasant to be there, Bob?’

“ ‘Prime,’ said the turnkey.

“ ‘Was father ever there?’

“ ‘Hem!’ coughed the turnkey. ‘O yes, he was there, sometimes.’

“ ‘Is he sorry not to be there now?’

“ ‘N—not particular,’ said the turnkey.

“ ‘Nor any of the people?’ she asked, glancing at the listless crowd within. ‘O are you quite sure and certain, Bob?’ . . .

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

“ With no earthly friend to help her, or so much as to see her, but the one so strangely assorted ; with no knowledge of the common daily tone and habits of the common members of a free community who are not shut in prisons ; born and bred, in a social condition, false even with a reference to the falsest condition outside the walls ; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar stain, their own unwholesome and unnatural taste ; the Child of the Marshalsea began her womanly life.”

Let us rejoice that, to-day, amid a thousand prevailing injustices, cruelties and oppressions, no child grows up as did Little Dorrit to see “ with a pitiful look ” its father, mother, brother and sister in jail, and to be brought up itself inside the same living tomb. From that black shadow and reproach we and our children are free—so free that the Debtor’s Prison seems almost incredible.

A few decades back it broke many a heart and ruined many a young life. Do not let us forget that it was Dickens whose energy and courage ended it and its horrors for ever. It is not too much to say, that this was one of the finest achievements of his genius. Certainly in the sphere of legal reform, a sphere in which he worked incessantly, he won no greater triumph. Indeed, his truly titanic efforts to set straight the crooked paths of the law, to end the intolerable delays and the heart-breaking absurdities that have corroded its machinery were largely made in vain. But this triumph at all events he achieved, and it was a victory splendid enough to compensate him for all his other disappointments. We can still see, as he described it in *A December*

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Vision, " a great library of laws and law proceedings so complicated, costly and unintelligible that, although numbers of lawyers united in a public fiction that these were wonderfully just and equal, there was (and is) scarcely an honest man among them but who said to his friend, privately consulting him, ' Better put up with a fraud or other injury than grope for redress through the manifold blind turnings and strange chances of this system.' " The system does to this day " ruin suitors, ruin property " and prove " a shield for wrongdoers having money and a rack for rightdoers having none " ; a byword for delay, slow agony of mind, despair, impoverishment, trickery, confusion, insupportable injustice. But we cannot see, as Dickens could, " prisoners wasting in gaol, suicides chronicled in the yearly records " for the crime of debt.

One other partial victory that his writings helped to compass after his death, is, it seems to me, well worth recording. We hear much to-day of the need of such a re-adjustment of the marriage laws as shall make divorce possible for the poor as well as for the rich. It was Dickens who first made us realize this aspect of the problem, who first brought it home to us that, whereas for the rich man who can afford to make " suitable arrangements " divorce may be a luxury, for the poor man it is often the grimmest, the sternest of necessities. Who does not remember the tragic case of Stephen Blackpool ? Is there in the whole of fiction a more dreadful fate than his ?

" His home, in such another street as the first, saving that it was narrower, was over a little shop. How it came to pass that any people found it worth

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

their while to sell or buy the wretched little toys mixed up in its window with cheap newspapers and pork (there was a leg to be raffled for to-morrow night), matters not here. He took his end of candle from a shelf, lighted it at another candle at the counter, without disturbing the mistress of the shop, who was asleep in her little room, and went upstairs into his lodging.

“ It was a room not unacquainted with the black ladder under various tenants ; but as neat, at present, as such a room could be. A few books and writings were on an old bureau in a corner, the furniture was decent and sufficient, and, though the atmosphere was tainted, the room was clean.

“ Going to the hearth to set the candle down upon a round, three-legged table standing there, he stumbled against something. As he recoiled, looking down at it, it raised itself up into the form of a woman in a sitting attitude.

“ ‘ Heaven’s mercy, woman ! ’ he cried, falling farther off from the figure. ‘ Hast thou come back again ? ’

“ Such a woman ! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve her sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains, and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her.

“ After an impatient oath or two, and some stupid clawing of herself with the hand not necessary to her

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

support, she got her hair away from her eyes sufficiently to obtain a sight of him. Then she sat swaying her body to and fro, and making gestures with her unnerved arm, which seemed intended as the accompaniment to a fit of laughter, though her face was stolid and drowsy.

“ ‘Eigh, lad? What, Yo’r there?’ Some hoarse sounds, meant for this, came mockingly out of her at last; and her head dropped forward on her breast.

“ ‘Back agen?’ she screeched after some minutes, as if he had that moment said it. ‘Yes! And back agen. Back agen ever and ever so often. Back? Yes back. Why not?’

“ Roused by the unmeaning violence with which she cried it out, she scrambled up, and stood supporting herself with her shoulders against the wall; dangling in one hand by the string, a dunghill fragment of a bonnet, and trying to look scornfully at him.

“ ‘I’ll sell thee off agen, and I’ll sell thee off agen, and I’ll sell thee off a score of times!’ she cried, with something between a furious menace and an effort at a defiant glance. ‘Come awa’ from th’ bed!’ He was sitting on the side of it, with his face hidden in his hands. ‘Come awa’ from ’t. ’Tis mine, and I’ve a right to ’t.’

“ As she staggered to it, he avoided her with a shudder, and passed—his face still hidden—to the opposite end of the room. She threw herself upon the bed heavily, and soon was snoring hard. He sunk into a chair, and moved but once all that night. It was to throw a covering over her; as if his hands were not enough to hide her, even in the darkness.”

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

What should Stephen Blackpool have done? One recalls the famous address of Mr. Justice Maule to a working man convicted of bigamy, in which the Judge with grave irony told him that having a faithless wife, he should have obtained a decree in the Ecclesiastical Court, should then have brought an action in the common law courts against the lover, and should next have obtained an Act of Parliament, the whole costing hundreds of pounds! The Judge sentenced the offender to a day's imprisonment. But alas, in the absence of bigamy poor Stephen was sentenced to something worse than imprisonment for life! Even the Divorce Act of 1857, which followed soon afterwards, left the case of men like Stephen Blackpool practically unchanged. The difference between the process described by Mr. Justice Maule and of an action in the Divorce Court may be most important as regards the middle or upper class husband or wife. But to the workman—*both* are prohibitive. Dickens was almost alone in all England in thinking of the question from the workman's point of view, when it was raised some sixty years ago. His was the only voice that pleaded for the poor artizan, and his the only hand that sketched the unspeakable tragedy of the workman with the drunken wife. And yet, of the thousands of aggrieved husbands, whose feelings are expressed by fluent K.C.'s in the Divorce Court to a sympathetic Judge and an indignant jury, is there one in ten who had to endure and suffer what fate dealt out to Stephen Blackpool; sitting in the corner of his darkened room while his drunkard of a wife mocked at him from the bed? Perhaps some echo of that tragedy reached the ears of the writers of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

the Majority Report when they sat down to sign a document that, for the first time, has officially recognized the fact that the poor, as well as the rich, have their tragedies in marriage—the bond which often condones and, indeed, frequently inflicts and perpetuates the grossest and most flagrant immorality by rendering inseparable lives without love and temperaments without sympathy or affinity.

So much for the remarkable victories, one of them signal and complete, that Charles Dickens won for the poor, when brushing aside the special pleaders, with their endless futilities, and sophistries and delays, he entered the arena, strong in the belief that law was meant for the people and not people for the law.

Success, however, in that cause was more particular than general. Indeed, as regards his great frontal attack upon the law, can we say that it succeeded at all? We are told that *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* would to-day be an impossibility. It may be so. But the difference between that and other cases in our Courts is one only of degree. Dickens would have had the law prompt, effective, certain, readily accessible to the poor man, freed from the fetters of out-of-date procedure, and ready to move immediately for the instant redress of injustice. And who in the world was there to oppose that view? I am afraid that the answer is—the lawyers themselves. They had a very lively sense, indeed, of the significance of the changes he proposed, and, on the whole, we may take it that they were not and are not, very keen on promptitude and certainty. The law's delays, its complex, almost baffling uncertainties, its contradictions and its procrastinations,

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

what is the use of hiding the fact that it is upon these that the lawyers live? So far as the men of law go, these things are admirable. So far as the nation is concerned, they are damnable.

Is it not a fact that existing practice involves months of dreary attitudinizings, irritating delays, torturing reservations and senseless restrictions, and so far as the poor themselves are concerned, implying a disability so marked that so-called "justice" is impotent? And is it not equally a fact that, a man occupying any position of trust, is under a system of legalised blackmail, known as smart "cross-examination as to credibility," frequently deprived of his common rights as a citizen? He may have sustained damage by negligence on the part of some other person. He exhausts every effort of conciliation, and in the end seeks redress in the Courts. It may be a plain and simple matter, in which the only question is for the jury to determine how much is due to him. But does the law provide him with simple relief? Not at all. The offender relies, not upon the facts, but upon his ability to rake the gutters for calumnies; upon the capacity of his Counsel to frame purely fictitious but damaging questions, in the hope that if enough mud is thrown some of it will stick. Frequently the man who sues for a hundred pounds or so leaves the box with his character besmirched and his reputation impaired by baseless innuendoes and unscrupulous suggestions, which are the blackest of lies, because they are but half-truths. So prolific has this evil grown, that many men to-day elect to suffer injustice rather than invoke the aid of the law. There is not a pleader of any eminence, who in this age of grotesquely

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

swollen values and exaggerated importance, will go into Court for a fee which even a reasonably comfortable middle-class man can afford. To the poor man these exigent and monstrous demands for services—sometimes not even rendered—are positively prohibitive.

Without desiring in any way to reflect upon an honourable profession, I do not hesitate to say that a very great number of them are rather keener about fees than about such recondite physiological subjects. Accordingly they do not so very fiercely resent such a picture as this :—

“ When we came to the Court, there was the Lord Chancellor—the same whom I had seen in his private room in Lincoln’s Inn—sitting in great state and gravity on the bench ; with the mace and seals on a red table below him, and an immense flat nosegay, like a little garden, which scented the whole court. Below the table, again, was a long row of solicitors, with bundles of papers on the matting at their feet ; and then there were the gentlemen of the bar in wigs and gowns—some awake and some asleep, and one talking, and nobody paying much attention to what he said. The Lord Chancellor leaned back in his very easy chair, with his elbow on the cushioned arm, and his forehead resting on his hand ; some of those who were present, dozed ; some read the newspapers ; some walked about, or whispered in groups : all seemed perfectly at their ease, by no means in a hurry, very unconcerned, and extremely comfortable.

“ To see everything going on so smoothly, and to think of the roughness of the suitors’ lives and deaths ; to see all that full dress and ceremony, and to think of the

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

waste, and want, and beggared misery it represented ; to consider that, while the sickness of hope deferred was raging in so many hearts, this polite show went calmly on from day to day, and year to year, in such good order and composure ; to behold the Lord Chancellor, and the whole array of practitioners under him, looking at one another and at the spectators, as if nobody had ever heard that all over England the name in which they were assembled was a bitter jest ; was held in universal horror, contempt, and indignation ; was known for something so flagrant and bad, that little short of a miracle could bring any good out of it to any one : this was so curious and self-contradictory to me, who had no experience of it, that it was at first incredible, and I could not comprehend it. I sat where Richard put me, and tried to listen, and looked about me ; but there seemed to be no reality in the whole scene, except poor little Miss Flite, the madwoman, standing on a bench, and nodding at it. . . .

“ When we had been there half an hour or so, the case in progress—if I may use a phrase so ridiculous in such a connection—seemed to die out of its own vapidty, without coming, or being by anybody expected to come, to any result. The Lord Chancellor then threw down a bundle of papers from his desk to the gentlemen below him, and somebody said, ‘ JARNDYCE AND JARNDYCE.’ Upon this there was a buzz, and a laugh, and a general withdrawal of the bystanders, and a bringing in of great heaps, and piles, and bags and bags-full of papers.

“ I think it came on ‘ for further directions,’ about some bill of costs, to the best of my understanding, which was confused enough. But I counted twenty-

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

three gentlemen in wigs, who said they were 'in it'; and none of them appeared to understand it much better than I. They chatted about it with the Lord Chancellor, and contradicted and explained among themselves, and some of them said it was this way, and some of them said it was that way, and some of them jocosely proposed to read huge volumes of affidavits, and there was more buzzing and laughing, and everybody concerned was in a state of idle entertainment, and nothing could be made of it by anybody. After an hour or so of this, and a good many speeches being begun and cut short, it was 'referred back for the present,' as Mr. Kenge said, and the papers were bundled up again, before the clerks had finished bringing them in.

"I glanced at Richard, on the termination of these hopeless proceedings, and was shocked to see the worn look of his handsome young face. 'It can't last for ever, Dame Durden. Better luck next time!' was all he said."

But let us look at the end of it all—of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce* and of Richard. His friends have gone down to Westminster Hall to see what has happened in the famous suit—

"We asked a gentleman by us, if he knew what cause was on? He told us *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*. We asked him if he knew what was doing in it? He said, really no he did not, nobody ever did; but as well as he could make out, it was over. Over for the day? we asked him. No, he said; over for good.

"Over for good!"

"When we heard this unaccountable answer, we looked at one another, quite lost in amazement. Could

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

it be possible that the Will had set things right at last, and that Richard and Ada were going to be rich? It seemed too good to be true. Alas, it was!

“Our suspense was short; for a break-up soon took place in the crowd, and the people came streaming out looking flushed and hot, and bringing a quantity of bad air with them. Still they were all exceedingly amused, and were more like people coming out from a Farce or a Juggler than from a court of Justice. We stood aside, watching for any countenance we knew; and presently great bundles of paper began to be carried out—bundles in bags, bundles too large to be got into any bags, immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes, which the bearers staggered under, and threw down for the time being, anyhow, on the Hall pavement, while they went back to bring out more. Even these clerks were laughing. We glanced at these papers, and seeing Jarndyce and Jarndyce everywhere, asked an official-looking person who was standing in the midst of them, whether the cause was over. ‘Yes,’ he said; ‘It was all up with it at last!’ and burst out laughing too.

“At this juncture we perceived Mr. Kenge coming out of court with an affable dignity upon him, listening to Mr. Vholes, who was deferential, and carried his own bag. Mr. Vholes was the first to see us. ‘Here is Miss Summerson, sir,’ he said. ‘And Mr. Woodcourt.’

“‘Oh indeed! Yes. Truly!’ said Mr. Kenge, raising his hat to me with polished politeness. ‘How do you do? Glad to see you. Mr. Jarndyce is not here?’

“No. He never came there, I reminded him.

“‘Really,’ returned Mr. Kenge, ‘it is as well that he is *not* here to-day, for his—shall I say, in my good

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

friend's absence, his indomitable singularity of opinion—might have been strengthened, perhaps ; not reasonably, but might have been strengthened.'

“ ‘Pray what has been done to-day ?’ asked Allan.

“ ‘I beg your pardon ?’ said Mr. Kenge, with excessive urbanity.

“ ‘What has been done to-day ?’

“ ‘What has been done,’ repeated Mr. Kenge. ‘Quite so. Yes. Why, not much has been done ; not much. We have been checked—brought up suddenly, I would say—upon the—shall I term it threshold ?’

“ ‘Is this Will considered a genuine document, sir ?’ said Allan ; ‘will you tell us that ?’

“ ‘Most certainly, if I could,’ said Mr. Kenge ; ‘but we have not gone into that, we have not gone into that.’

“ ‘We have not gone into that,’ repeated Mr. Vholes, as if his low inward voice were an echo.

“ ‘You are to reflect, Mr. Woodcourt,’ observed Mr. Kenge, using his silver trowel, persuasively and smoothly, ‘that this has been a great cause, that this has been a protracted cause, that this has been a complex cause. Jarndyce and Jarndyce has been termed, not inaptly, a monument of Chancery practice.’

“ ‘And Patience has sat upon it a long time,’ said Allan.

“ ‘Very well indeed, sir,’ returned Mr. Kenge, with a certain condescending laugh he had. ‘Very well ! You are further to reflect, Mr. Woodcourt,’ becoming dignified almost to severity, ‘that on the numerous difficulties, contingencies, masterly fictions, and forms of procedure in this great cause, there has been extended study, ability, many years, the—a—I would say the

266

SOME PRISON AND LEGAL REFORMS

flower of the Bar, and the—a—I would presume to add, the matured autumnal fruits of the Woolsack—have been lavished upon Jarndyce and Jarndyce. If the public have the benefit, and if the country have the adornment, of this great Grasp, it must be paid for in money or money's worth, sir.'

“ ‘Mr. Kenge,’ said Allan, appearing enlightened all in a moment. ‘Excuse me, but time presses. Do I understand that the whole estate is found to have been absorbed in costs?’

“ ‘Hem! I believe so,’ returned Mr. Kenge. ‘Mr. Vholes, what do *you* say?’

“ ‘I believe so,’ said Mr. Vholes.

“ ‘And that thus the suit lapses and melts away?’

“ ‘Probably,’ returned Mr. Kenge. ‘Mr. Vholes?’

“ ‘Probably,’ said Mr. Vholes.

“And Richard, that night, when poor crazed Miss Flite gave her birds their liberty—‘began the world with one parting sob. Not this world, oh, not this! The world that sets this right.’”

CHAPTER XI

THE CURSE OF USURY

OF the social curses that dogged the footsteps of his long-suffering fellow-countrymen not one moved the soul of the master to more sorrow, or stirred more profoundly his vivid sense of indignation, than the unspeakable crime of usury—the horror which brings in its train evils comparable only to those of famine or war, without offering any such swift recovery as these scourges allow. There is something peculiarly detestable in a practice, whose victims seem destined to be men and women of a certain guilelessness of nature, and whose tormentors almost invariably are so tainted, so foul, so repellent that, to use the phrase of Junius, “Even treachery shrinks from them.” Never was the contrast made clearer than by Dickens when he drew Sergeant George and Grandfather Smallweed. The Sergeant, in his shooting range one morning, is mightily perplexed by the following letter : —

“SIR, Allow me to remind you (though there is no legal necessity for my doing so, as you are aware) that the bill at two months date, drawn on yourself by Mr. Matthew Bagnet, and by you accepted, for the sum of ninety-seven pounds, four shillings and

268

THE CURSE OF USURY

ninepence, will become due to-morrow, when you will please be prepared to take up the same on presentation.

“ ‘ Yours,

“ ‘ JOSHUA SMALLWEED.’ ”

Mr. Matthew is George's old friend, Trooper Bagnet, who has “ backed ” the bill for him, and together they go to the usurer, Smallweed :

“ ‘ The door is opened by the perennial Judy, who, having surveyed them from top to toe, with no particular favour, but indeed with a malignant sneer, leaves them standing there, while she consults the oracle as to their admission. The oracle may be inferred to give consent, from the circumstance of her returning with the words on her honey lips ‘ that they can come in if they want to.’ Thus privileged they come in, and find Mr. Smallweed with his feet in the drawer of his chair as if it were a paper foot-bath, and Mrs. Smallweed obscured with the cushion like a bird that is not to sing.

“ ‘ My dear friend,’ says Grandfather Smallweed, with those two lean affectionate hands of his stretched forth. ‘ How de do ? Who is our friend, my dear friend ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Why this,’ returns George, not able to be very conciliatory at first, ‘ is Matthew Bagnet, who has obliged me in that matter of ours, you know.’

“ ‘ Oh ! Mr. Bagnet ? Surely ! ’ The old man looks at him under his hand. ‘ Hope you're well, Mr. Bagnet ? Fine man, Mr. George ! Military air, sir ! ’

“ No chairs being offered, Mr. George brings one forward for Bagnet, and one for himself. They sit

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

down ; Mr. Bagnet as if he had no power of bending himself, except at the hips, for that purpose.

“ ‘Judy,’ says Mr. Smallweed, ‘bring the pipe.’ ”

“ ‘Why I don’t know,’ Mr. George interposes, ‘that the young woman need give herself that trouble, for to tell you the truth, I am not inclined to smoke it to-day.’ ”

“ ‘Ain’t you ?’ returns the old man. ‘Judy, bring the pipe.’ ”

“ ‘The fact is, Mr. Smallweed,’ proceeds George, ‘that I find myself in rather an unpleasant state of mind. It appears to me, sir, that your friend in the city has been playing tricks.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, dear no !’ says Grandfather Smallweed. ‘He never does that !’ ”

“ ‘Don’t he ? Well I am glad to hear it, because I thought it might be *his* doing. This, you know, I am speaking of. This letter.’ ”

“ Grandfather Smallweed smiled in a very ugly way, in recognition of the letter.

“ ‘What does it mean ?’ asks Mr. George.

“ ‘Judy,’ says the old man, ‘have you got the pipe ? Give it to me. Did you say what does it mean, my good friend ?’ ”

“ ‘Ay ! Now come, come, you know, Mr. Smallweed,’ urges the trooper, constraining himself to speak as smoothly and confidentially as he can, holding the open letter in one hand, and resting the broad knuckles of the other on his thigh ; ‘a good lot of money has passed between us, and we are face to face at the present moment, and are both well aware of the understanding there has always been. I am prepared to do the usual thing which I have done regularly, and to

THE CURSE OF USURY

keep this matter going. I never got a letter like this from you before, and I have been a little put about by it this morning; because here's my friend, Matthew Bagnet, who, you know, had none of the money——'

“‘I *don't* know it, you know,’ says the old man, quietly.

“‘Why, confound you—it, I mean—I tell you so; don't I?’

“‘Oh, yes, you tell me so,’ returns Grandfather Smallweed. ‘But I don't know it.’

“‘Well,’ says the trooper, swallowing his fire, ‘I know it.’

“Mr. Smallweed replies with excellent temper, ‘Ah! that's quite another thing!’ And adds, ‘but it don't matter. Mr. Bagnet's situation is all one, whether or no.’

“The unfortunate George makes a great effort to arrange the affair comfortably, and to propitiate Mr. Smallweed by taking him upon his own terms.

“‘That's just what I mean. As you say, Mr. Smallweed, here's Matthew Bagnet liable to be fixed whether or no. Now, you see, that makes his good lady very uneasy in her mind, and me too; for, whereas I'm a harum scarum sort of good-for-naught, that more kicks than half-pence come natural to, why he's a steady family man, don't you see? Now, Mr. Smallweed,’ says the trooper, gaining confidence as he proceeds in this soldierly mode of doing business; ‘although you and I are good friends enough in a certain sort of way, I am well aware that I can't ask you to let my friend Bagnet off entirely.’

“‘Oh, dear, you are too modest. You can *ask* me

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

anything, Mr. George.' (There is an Ogreish kind of jocularity in Grandfather Smallweed to-day.)

" 'And you can refuse, you mean, eh? Or not you so much, perhaps, as your friend in the city? Ha, ha, ha!'

" 'Ha, ha, ha!' echoes Grandfather Smallweed. In such a very hard manner, and with eyes so particularly green, that Mr. Bagnet's natural gravity is much deepened by the contemplation of that venerable man.

" 'Come!' says the sanguine George, 'I am glad to find that we can be pleasant, because I want to arrange this pleasantly. Here's my friend Bagnet, and here am I. We'll settle the matter on the spot, if you please, Mr. Smallweed, in the usual way. And you'll ease my friend Bagnet's mind, and his family's mind a good deal, if you'll just mention to him what our understanding is.'

" Here some shrill spectre cries out in a mocking manner, 'Oh, good gracious! Oh!' unless, indeed, it be the sportive Judy, who is found to be silent when the startled visitors look round, but whose chin has received a recent toss, expressive of derision and contempt. Mr. Bagnet's gravity becomes yet more profound.

" 'But I think you asked me, Mr. George;' old Smallweed, who all this time has had the pipe in his hand, is the speaker now; 'I think you asked me, what did the letter mean?'

" 'Why, yes, I did,' returns the trooper, in his off-hand way: 'but I don't care to know particularly, if it's all correct and pleasant.'

" Mr. Smallweed, purposely baulking himself in an

THE CURSE OF USURY

aim at the trooper's head, throws the pipe to the ground and breaks it to pieces.

“ ‘That's what it means, my dear friend. I'll smash you. I'll crumble you. I'll powder you. Go to the devil!’ ”

“The two friends rise and look at one another. Mr. Bagnet's gravity has now attained its profoundest point.

“ ‘Go to the devil!’ repeats the old man. ‘I'll have no more of your pipe-smokings and swaggerings. What? You're an independent dragoon, too! Go to my lawyer (you remember where; you have been there before), and show your impudence now, will you? Come, my dear friend, there's a chance for you. Open the street door, Judy; put these blusters out! Call in help if they don't go. Put 'em out!’ ”

To-day, of course, the Sergeant and his friend would have had a defence at law unavailing to them then—that the interest was extortionate and for that we must thank the Creator of Grandfather Smallweed and Fascination Fledgby. The latter, indeed, is closely associated with another reform of the law in regard to money lending that has proved even more remarkable and far-reaching. Who does not remember, who can ever forget Fascination Fledgby; known to society only as a *gay flaneur*, and fashionable butterfly, but in reality a money-lender as merciless as Smallweed?

“Fascination Fledgby left alone in the counting house, strolled about with his hat on one side, whistling, and investigating the drawers, and prying here and there for any small evidences of his being cheated, but could find none. ‘Not his merit that he don't cheat

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

me,' was Mr. Fledgby's commentary delivered with a wink, 'but my precaution.' He then with a lazy grandeur asserted his rights as Lord of Pubsey and Co. by poking his cane at the stools and boxes, and spitting in the fireplace, and so loitered royally to the window and looked out into the narrow street, with his small eyes just peering over the top of Pubsey and Co.'s blind. As a blind in more senses than one, it reminded him that he was alone in the counting-house, with the front door open. He was moving away to shut it, lest he should be injudiciously identified with the establishment, when he was stopped by some one coming to the door.

"That someone was the doll's dressmaker, Miss Jenny Wren.

"Shortly after another visitor enters.

"'Mr. Riah?' said this visitor, very politely.

"'I am waiting for him, sir,' returned Mr Fledgby. 'He went out and left me here. I expect him back every minute. Perhaps you had better take a chair.'

"The gentleman took a chair, and put his hand to his forehead, as if he were in a melancholy frame of mind. Mr. Fledgby eyed him aside, and seemed to relish his attitude.

"'A fine day, sir,' remarked Fledgby.

"The little dried gentleman was so occupied with his own depressed reflections that he did not notice the remark until the sound of Mr. Fledgby's voice had died out of the counting-house. Then he started and said : 'I beg your pardon, sir. I fear you spoke to me?'

"'I said,' remarked Fledgby, a little louder than before, 'it was a fine day.'

THE CURSE OF USURY

“ ‘ I beg your pardon. I beg your pardon. Yes.’

“ Again the little dried gentleman put his hand to his forehead, and again Mr. Fledgby seemed to enjoy his doing it. When the gentleman changed his attitude with a sign, Fledgby spoke with a grin.

“ ‘ Mr. Twemlow, I think ? ’

“ The dried gentleman seemed much surprised.

“ ‘ Had the pleasure of dining with you at Lammle’s,’ said Fledgby. ‘ Even have the honour of being a connection of yours. An unexpected sort of place this to meet in ; but one never knows, when one gets into the city, what people one may knock up against. I hope you have your health, and are enjoying yourself.’

“ There might be a touch of impertinence in the last words : on the other hand, it might have been but the native grace of Mr. Fledgby’s manner. Mr. Fledgby sat on a stool with a foot on the rail of another stool, and his hat on. Mr. Twemlow had uncovered on looking in at the door, and remained so.

“ Now the conscientious Twemlow, knowing what he had done to thwart the gracious Fledgby, was particularly disconcerted by this encounter. He was ill at ease as a gentleman well could be. He felt himself bound to conduct himself stiffly towards Fledgby, and he made a distant bow. Fledgby made his small eyes smaller in taking special note of his manner. The doll’s dressmaker sat in her corner behind the door, with her eyes on the ground and her hands folded on her basket, holding her crutch-stick between them, and appearing to take no heed of anything.

“ ‘ He’s a long time,’ muttered Mr. Fledgby, looking

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

at his watch. 'What time may you make it, Mr. Twemlow?'

" 'Mr. Twemlow made it ten minutes past twelve, sir.'

" 'As near as a toucher,' assented Fledgby. 'I hope, Mr. Twemlow, your business here may be of a more agreeable character than mine.'

" 'Thank you, sir,' said Mr. Twemlow.

" Fledgby again made his small eyes smaller, as he glanced with great complacency at Twemlow, who was timorously tapping the table with a folded letter.

" 'What I know of Mr. Riah,' said Fledgby, with a very disparaging utterance of his name, 'leads me to believe that this is about the shop for disagreeable business. I have always found him the bitingest and tightest screw in London.'

" Mr. Twemlow acknowledged this remark with a little distant bow. It evidently made him nervous.

" 'So much so,' pursued Fledgby, 'that if it wasn't to be true to a friend, nobody should catch me waiting here a single minute. But if you have friends in adversity, stand by them. That's what I say and act up to.'

" The equitable Twemlow felt that this sentiment, irrespective of the utterer, demanded his cordial assent. 'You are very right, sir,' he rejoined with spirit. 'You indicate the generous and manly course.'

" 'Glad to have your approbation,' returned Fledgby. 'It's a coincidence, Mr. Twemlow'; here he descended from his perch, and sauntered towards him; 'that the friends I am standing by to-day are the friends at whose

THE CURSE OF USURY

house I met you ! The Lammles. She's a very taking and agreeable woman ?'

"Conscience smote the gentle Twemlow pale. 'Yes,' he said, 'she is.'

"'And when she appealed to me this morning, to come and try what I could do to pacify their creditor, this Mr. Riah, that I certainly have gained some little influence with in transacting business for another friend, but nothing like so much as she supposes, and when a woman like that spoke to me as her dearest Mr. Fledgby, and shed tears, why what could I do, you know ?'

"Twemlow gasped, 'Nothing but come.'

"'Nothing but come. And so I came. But why,' said Fledgby, putting his hands in his pockets and counterfeiting deep meditation, 'why Riah should have started up, when I told him that the Lammles entreated him to hold over a Bill of Sale he has on all their effects ; and why he should have cut out, saying he would be back directly ; and why he should have left me here alone so long ; I cannot understand.'

"The chivalrous Twemlow, Knight of the Simple Heart, was not in a condition to offer any suggestion. He was too penitent, too remorseful. For the first time in his life he had done an underhand action, and he had done wrong. He had secretly interposed against this confiding young man, for no better real reason than because this young man's ways were not his ways.

"But the confiding young man proceeded to heap coals of fire on his sensitive head.

"'I beg your pardon, Mr. Twemlow ; you see I am acquainted with the nature of the affairs that are transacted here. Is there anything I can do for you

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

here ? You have always been brought up as a gentleman, and never as a man of business ; ' another touch of possible impertinence in this place ; ' and perhaps you are but a poor man of business. What else is to be expected ? '

" ' I am even a poorer man of business than I am a man, sir,' returned Twemlow, ' and I could hardly express my deficiency in a stronger way. I really do not so much as clearly understand my position in the matter on which I am brought here. But there are reasons which make me very delicate of accepting your assistance. I am greatly, greatly disinclined to profit by it. I don't deserve it.'

" ' Good childish creature ! Condemned to a passage through the world by such narrow dimly-lighted ways, and picking up a few specks or spots on the road !

" ' Perhaps,' said Fledgby, ' you may be a little proud of entering on the topic, having been brought up as a gentleman.'

" ' It's not that, sir,' returned Twemlow, ' it's not that. I hope I distinguish between true pride and false pride.'

" ' I have no pride at all, myself,' said Fledgby, ' and perhaps I don't cut things so fine as to know one from t'other. But I know this is a place where even a man of business needs his wits about him ; and if mine can be of any use to you here, you're welcome to them.'

" ' You are very good,' said Twemlow faltering. ' But I am most unwilling——'

" ' I don't, you know,' proceeded Fledgby, with an ill-favoured glance, ' entertain the vanity of

THE CURSE OF USURY

supposing that my wits could be of any use to you in society, but they might be here. You cultivate society, and society cultivates you, but Mr. Riah's not society. In society, Mr. Riah is kept dark ; eh, Mr. Twemlow ?'

" Twemlow, much disturbed, and with his hands fluttering about his forehead, replied : ' Quite true.'

" The confiding young man besought him to state his case. The innocent Twemlow expecting Fledgby to be astounded by what he should unfold, and not for an instant conceiving the possibility of its happening every day, but treating of it as a terrible phenomenon occurring in the course of ages, relating how that he had a deceased friend, a married civil officer with a family, who had wanted money for change of place on change of post, and how he, Twemlow, had ' given him his name,' with the usual, but in the eyes of Twemlow almost incredible result that he had been left to repay what he had never had. How, in the course of years, he had reduced the principal by trifling sums, ' having,' said Twemlow, ' always to observe great economy, being in the enjoyment of a fixed income limited in extent, and that depending on the munificence of a certain nobleman,' and had always pinched the full interest out of himself with punctual pinches. How he had come, in course of time, to look upon this one only debt of his life as a regular quarterly drawback, and no worse, when ' his name ' had some way fallen into the possession of Mr. Riah, who had sent him notice to redeem it by paying up in full, in one plump sum, or take tremendous consequences. This, with hazy remembrances of how he had been carried to some office to ' confess judgment ' (as he recollected the phrase)

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

and how he had been carried to another office where his life was assured for somebody not wholly unconnected with the sherry trade whom he remembered by the remarkable circumstance that he had a Stradivarius violin to dispose of, and also a Madonna, formed the sum and substance of Mr. Twemlow's narrative. Through which stalked the shadow of the awful Snigsworth, eyed afar off by money-lenders as Security in the Mist, and menacing Twemlow with his baronial truncheon.

“ To all Mr. Fledgby listened with the modest gravity becoming a confiding young man who knew it all beforehand, and, when it was finished, seriously shook his head. ‘ I don't like, Mr. Twemlow,’ said Fledgby, ‘ I don't like Riah's calling in the principal. If he's determined to call it in, it must come.’

“ ‘ But supposing, sir,’ said Twemlow, downcast, ‘ that it can't come ?’

“ ‘ Then,’ retorted Fledgby, ‘ you must go, you know.’

“ ‘ Where ?’ asked Twemlow, faintly.

“ ‘ To prison,’ returned Fledgby. Whereat Mr. Twemlow leaned his innocent head upon his hand, and moaned a little moan of distress and disgrace.

“ ‘ However,’ said Fledgby, appearing to pluck up his spirits, ‘ we'll hope it's not so bad as that comes to. If you'll allow me I'll mention to Mr. Riah, when he comes in, who you are, and I'll tell him you're my friend, and I'll say my say for you, instead of your saying it for yourself ; I may be able to do it in a more business-like way. You won't consider it a liberty ?’

“ ‘ I thank you again and again, sir,’ said Twemlow. ‘ I am strong, strongly disinclined to avail myself of

THE CURSE OF USURY

your generosity, though my helplessness yields. For I cannot but feel that I—to put it in the mildest form of speech—that I have done nothing to deserve it.’

“ ‘Where *can* he be?’ muttered Fledgby, referring to his watch again. ‘What *can* he have gone out for? Did you ever see him, Mr. Twemlow?’

“ ‘Never.’

“ ‘He is a thorough Jew to look at, but he is a more thorough Jew to deal with. He’s worse when he’s quiet. If he’s quiet, I shall take it as a very bad sign. Keep your eye upon him when he comes in, and, if he’s quiet, don’t be hopeful. Here he is!—he looks quiet.’

“ With these words, which had the effect of causing the harmless Twemlow painful agitation, Mr. Fledgby withdrew to his former post, and the old man entered the counting-house.

“ ‘Why, Mr. Riah,’ said Fledgby, ‘I thought you were lost.’

“ The old man, glancing at the stranger, stood stock-still. He perceived that his master was leading up to the orders he was to take, and he waited to understand them.

“ ‘I really thought,’ repeated Fledgby, slowly, ‘that you were lost, Mr. Riah. Why, now I look at you—but oh, you can’t have done it; no, you can’t have done it.’

“ Hat in hand, the old man lifted his head and looked distressfully at Fledgby, as seeking to know what new moral burden he was to bear.

“ ‘You can’t have rushed out to get the start of everybody else, and put in that bill of sale at Lammle’s,’ said Fledgby. ‘Say you haven’t, Mr. Riah.’

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ ‘ Sir, I have,’ replied the old man in a low voice.

“ ‘ Oh, my eye!’ cried Fledgby. ‘ Tut, tut, tut ! Dear, dear, dear ! Well ! I knew you were a hard customer, Mr. Riah, but I never thought you were as hard as that.’

“ ‘ Sir,’ said the old man with great uneasiness, ‘ I do as I am directed. I am not the principal here. I am but the agent of a superior, and I have no choice, no power.’

“ ‘ Don’t say so,’ returned Fledgby, secretly exultant as the old man stretched out his hands, with a shrinking action of defending himself against the sharp construction of the two observers. ‘ Don’t play the tune of the trade, Mr. Riah. You’ve a right to get in your debts, if you’re determined to do it, but don’t pretend what every one in your line regularly pretends. At least, don’t do it to me. Why should you, Mr. Riah ? You know I know all about you.’

“ The old man clasped the skirt of his long coat with his disengaged hand, and directed a wistful look at Fledgby.

“ ‘ And don’t,’ said Fledgby, ‘ don’t I entreat you as a favour, Mr. Riah, be so devilish meek, for I know what’ll follow if you are. Look here, Mr. Riah. This gentleman is Mr. Twemlow.’

“ The Jew turned to him and bowed. That poor lamb bowed in return ; polite and terrified.

“ ‘ I have made such a failure,’ proceeded Fledgby, ‘ in trying to do anything with you for my friend Lammle, that I’ve hardly a hope of doing anything with you for my friend (and connexion indeed) Mr. Twemlow. But I do think that if you would do a favour for anybody, you would for me, and I won’t fail for want of trying,

THE CURSE OF USURY

and I've passed my promise to Mr. Twemlow besides. Now, Mr. Riah, here is Mr. Twemlow. Always good for his interest, always coming up to time, always paying his little way. Now why should you press Mr. Twemlow? You can't have any spite against Mr. Twemlow! Why not be easy with Mr. Twemlow?'

"The old man looked into Fledgby's little eyes for any sign of leave to be easy with Mr. Twemlow; but there was no sign in them.

"'Mr. Twemlow is no connexion of yours, Mr. Riah,' said Fledgby; 'you can't want to be even with him for having through life gone in for a gentleman and hung on to his Family. If Mr. Twemlow has a contempt for business, what can it matter to you?'

"'But pardon me,' interposed the gentle victim, 'I have not. I should consider it presumption.'

"'There, Mr. Riah!' said Fledgby; 'isn't that handsomely said? Come! Make terms with me for Mr. Twemlow.'

"The old man looked again for any sign of permission to spare the poor little gentleman. No. Mr. Fledgby meant him to be racked.

"'I am sorry, Mr. Twemlow,' said Riah, 'I have my instructions. I am invested with no authority for diverging from them. The money must be paid.'

"'In full, and slap down, do you mean, Mr. Riah?' asked Fledgby, to make things quite explicit.

"'In full, sir, and at once,' was Riah's answer.

"Mr. Fledgby shook his head deplorably at Twemlow, and mutely expressed in reference to the venerable figure standing before him with eyes upon the ground: 'What a monster of an Israelite this is!'

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ ‘ Mr. Riah,’ said Fledgby.

“ The old man lifted up his eyes once more to the little eyes in Mr. Fledgby’s head, with some reviving hope that the sign might be coming yet.

“ ‘ Mr. Riah, it’s of no use my holding back the fact. There’s a certain great party in the background in Mr. Twemlow’s case, and you know it.’

“ ‘ I know it,’ the old man admitted.

“ ‘ Now I’ll put it as a plain point of business, Mr. Riah. Are you fully determined (as a plain point of business), either to have that said great party’s security or that said great party’s money ? ’

“ ‘ Fully determined,’ answered Riah, as he read his master’s face, and learnt the book.

“ ‘ Not at all caring for, and indeed, as it seems to me, rather enjoying,’ said Fledgby, with peculiar unction, ‘ the precious kick-up and row that will come off between Mr. Twemlow and the said great party ? ’

“ This required no answer, and received none. Poor Mr. Twemlow, who had betrayed the keenest mental terrors since his noble kinsman loomed in the perspective, rose with a sigh to take his departure. ‘ I thank you very much, sir,’ he said, offering Fledgby his feverish hand. ‘ You have done me an unmerited service. Thank you, thank you ! ’

“ ‘ Don’t mention it,’ answered Fledgby. ‘ It’s a failure so far, but I’ll stay behind, and take another touch at Mr. Riah.’

“ ‘ Do not deceive yourself, Mr. Twemlow,’ said the Jew, then addressing him directly for the first time. ‘ There is no hope for you. You must expect no leniency here. You must pay in full, and you cannot pay too

THE CURSE OF USURY

promptly, or you will be put to heavy charges. Trust nothing to me, sir. Money, money, money.' When he had said these words in an emphatic manner, he acknowledged Mr. Twemlow's still polite motion of his head, and that amiable little worthy took his departure in the lowest spirits.

"Fascination Fledgby was in such a merry vein when the counting-house was cleared of him, that he had nothing for it but to go to the window, and lean his arms on the frame of the blind, and have his silent laugh out, with his back to his subordinate. When he turned round again with a composed countenance, his subordinate still stood in the same place, and the doll's dressmaker sat behind the door with a look of horror.

"'Halloa!' cried Mr. Fledgby, 'you're forgetting this young lady, Mr. Riah, and she has been waiting long enough too. Sell her her waste, please, and give her good measure if you can make up your mind to do the liberal thing for once.'

"He looked on for a time, as the Jew filled her little basket with such scraps as she was used to buy; but, his merry vein coming on again, he was obliged to turn round to the window once more, and lean his arms on the blind.

"'There, my Cinderella dear,' said the old man in a whisper, and with a worn-out look, 'the basket's full now. Bless you! And get you gone!'

"'Don't call me your Cinderella dear,' returned Miss Wren. 'O, you cruel godmother!'

"She shook that emphatic little forefinger of hers in his face at parting, as earnestly and reproachfully

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

as she had ever shaken it at her grim old child at home."

The quite recent Moneylenders Acts have changed all that. To-day Fledgby would have to lend *quâ* Fledgby, or not at all, and so he would lend on something like decent terms, or his chance of dining with the Veneerings and hobnobbing with Lord Snigsworth, in a word his chance of getting into Society would be *nil*. So far as money-lending goes, the mask is off for ever, and it was Dickens, who compelled us to know the identity of and look into the face of our Shylocks. And yet, and yet—does not this scene go a little beyond money lending? Is there not after all so much in modern England that, like Fledgby, is covert, furtive, irresponsible, elusive but all powerful; so much that like Riah is dignified, smooth, formal, but yet stooping to dirty work; so much that is like Twemlow, honest and candid, but led by the nose?

Let us, each of us, look steadily at our country from this standpoint, if only for a moment, for that, depend upon it, is what Dickens would have enjoined us to do were he with us in the flesh. He would have told us to clear our minds of cant; to be no longer the victims of Podsnappery, of the fatuous and insane complacency that cries peace where there is no peace, and sees honour where all is rank corruption. He would have told us, what is sadly obvious to all who are not obsessed by party or intoxicated by pride, that the nation never stood in greater danger of the corruption and jobbery in high places than now, when those who denounce them are as voices crying in the wilderness, when those who fatten and batten on the pickings and perquisites

286

THE CURSE OF USURY

of office, were never more easy or more impudent, never more self-assured, or less deserving of respect. If Dickens has one message for us it is this: that as patriots our first duty is to rouse our fellow-countrymen to some sense of the evil, all the more insidious because, like Fledgby, it is masked, all the more dangerous because, like Riah, it is within the letter of the law.

CHAPTER XII

A SANE PATRIOTISM.

“It is more or less the habit of every country . . . to exalt itself and its institutions above every other country and be vain-glorious. Out of the partialities thus engendered and maintained, there has arisen a great deal of patriotism and a great deal of public spirit. On the other hand it is of paramount importance to every nation that its boastfulness should not generate prejudice, conventionality and a cherishing of unreasonable ways of acting and thinking which have nothing in them deserving of respect, but are ridiculous or wrong.” “Insularities”: *Household Words*, January 19th, 1856.

It is always difficult to classify genius and its work. With Dickens it is impossible. That wonderful vivacity, which, touching life at a thousand points, suffused it with a sympathy as catholic as suffering itself, or at one stroke raised it from gloom to laughter, refuses to be catalogued and the effort becomes indeed a weariness to the flesh. Hitherto, following Dickens over the battlegrounds of his struggles for the people we have, in taking stock of his exploits, sought to relate each one of them to some particular mental impulse re-acting on the spirit of the age, and thus we have covered most of his work. But, we are still left with an abundance of achievements in the direction of Social Reform, on which we may draw at random.

A SANE PATRIOTISM

Let us take first, one of the most notable, if one of the least appreciated. Dickens, when we come to consider it, was the father of the present *entente* between us and that great country, our nearest neighbour, from whom we were until recently estranged by centuries of smouldering war, cloudy misunderstanding, and conflicts of interest. If we examine the dates involved, we shall find that, almost simultaneously with the rise of Dickens's influence in England, opinion, and especially Liberal opinion, swung round to the *entente*, which Lord Palmerston cemented in the days of our grandfathers, when Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort were the guests of Louis Napoleon at the Tuilleries, and the strains of the "Marseillaise" were heard for the first time on the barrel organs of London. True, that *entente* faded after years and so did the influence of Dickens. But, strange to relate, the extraordinary revival of enthusiasm for the works of the Master that marked the opening of the present century has been followed by an *entente* destined, let us hope, to last as long as the works of Dickens remain with us, as long, that is, as the English language is spoken.

This correspondence of the dates involved, is no mere accident, and no casual coincidence. Primarily let us remember that Dickens was the first great writer to bring home to the "Man in the street" the real significance of that stupendous event, the French Revolution, from which the whole of our modern world really springs. The view of the Revolution current in the "dark ages" of early Victorian prejudice and insularity was practically identical with that of the Birmingham mob who tried to lynch Dr. Priestly, because he sympathized with the

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

National Convention ; or with that of the fanatics who used to assault the poet Shelley in the streets. To the mass of our people the Revolution was "the work of devils possessed of devils." It was a gratuitous, utterly unjustifiable, insane and delirious orgy, whose only human interest lay in indicating the bloodthirsty ferocity and cruel capriciousness of the French people ! There was no recognition of the causes that impelled that terrific upheaval. There was then no apprehension of the stupendous benefits it bestowed upon Europe and mankind, and the Englishman of that period, in his horror of the excesses of the mob, was altogether unmindful of the fact that, whereas France before the Revolution was bankrupt, and disgraced, a fallen nation, she rose, after the "tumult and the shouting" had died down, to a position of wonderful eminence among the world-powers. The John Bull of the forties put all that on one side. To him the Frenchman was volatile, irresponsible, and at times cruel, and he dreaded that "The Terror" might be repeated at any moment. It was, in fact, "The Terror," with its nameless horrors and apparently reasonless brutalities, that poisoned opinion against the French. On the whole this is not surprising. One recalls the fact that Mary Godwin, a democrat of democrats, who was in Paris at the time of the worst excesses, returned to England with all her sympathy for the Revolution frozen. The cheering of the mobs as the heads fell into the basket under the guillotine, the fury and rage of the populace, their disregard of the most elementary fairness in their trials, their untamed fierceness and hideous savagery—all these remained photographed upon her brain to the day

A SANE PATRIOTISM

of her death. They were indelibly impressed also upon the stolid consciousness and outraged humanity of the ordinary, sober Englishman of the generation who came after, and it was Dickens who blotted out the record !

Dickens's triumph in this respect was perhaps the most remarkable vindication of courage in a publicist that has ever taken place. An ordinary journalist of our period, setting out to defend, or palliate, the "regrettable proceedings" of the mob, would now, of course, dwell at length on the extent to which they had been exaggerated. He would point out—as he might with perfect truth—that the numbers of persons executed were after all trifling, some 150 a day at most, compared to the thousands of the inhabitants of Paris : that these "regrettable incidents" were customary with revolutions, that nevertheless some of them were condemned by the "responsible leaders," and that only a section of the populace attended to applaud the decapitations. All this is quite true—and would convince nobody ! Not so did Dickens set to work. Not thus did he shake his fellow countrymen's confidence in their blind, indiscriminating, but still honest rejection of the Revolution and all its works. He did not gloss over the guillotine. He did not seek to soften the rapacity of the mob. He painted the people as they were, fierce, revengeful, repellent, but, using with unerring skill the material Carlyle had given him ; he presented also, in convincing colours, the causes that had produced the "Vengeance" and the "Terror," the tumbril and the National Convention. For the first time since it had happened, the Englishman had made clear to him in the statement of "Alexander Manette, unfortunate physician, native of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

Beauvais, and afterwards resident in Paris," who writes, "this melancholy paper in my doleful cell in the Bastille during the last month of the year 1757," the real cause of the great event. Witness the passage when the poor physician relates how he has listened to the peasant lad who lay dying upon the bed of straw.

" ' Doctor, they are very proud, these Nobles ; but we common dogs are proud too, sometimes. They plunder us, outrage us, beat us, kill us ; but we have a little pride left, sometimes. She——Have you seen her, Doctor ? ' "

" The shrieks and the cries were audible there though subdued by the distance. He referred to them as though she were lying in our presence.

" I said, ' I have seen her. ' "

" ' She is my sister, Doctor. They have had their shameful rights, these Nobles, in the modesty and virtue of our sisters, many years, but we have had good girls among us. I know it, and have heard my father say so. She was a good girl. She was betrothed to a good young man, too ; a tenant of his. We were all tenants of his—that man's who stands there. The other is his brother, the worst of a bad race. ' "

" It was with the greatest difficulty that the boy gathered bodily force to speak ; but, his spirit spoke with a dreadful emphasis.

" ' We were so robbed by that man who stands there, as all we common dogs are by those superior Beings—taxed by him without mercy, obliged to work for him without pay, obliged to grind our corn at his mill, obliged to feed scores of his tame birds on our wretched crops, and forbidden for our lives to keep a single tame

A SANE PATRIOTISM

bird of our own, pillaged and plundered to that degree that when we chanced to have a bit of meat, we ate it in fear, with the door barred and the shutters closed, that his people should not see it and take it from us—I say, we were so robbed, and hunted, and were made so poor, that our father told us it was a dreadful thing to bring a child into the world, and what we should most pray for was, that our women might be barren and our miserable race die out ! ’

“ I have never before seen the sense of being oppressed bursting forth like a fire. I had supposed that it must be latent in the people somewhere ; but, I had never seen it break out until I saw it in the dying boy.

“ ‘ Nevertheless, Doctor, my sister married. He was ailing at that time, poor fellow, and she married her lover that she might tend and comfort him in our cottage—our dog hut, as that man would call it. She had not been married many weeks when that man’s brother saw her and admired her, and asked that man to lend her to him, for what are husbands among us. He was willing enough, but my sister was strong and virtuous, and hated his brother with a hatred as strong as mine. What did the two then, to persuade her husband to use his influence with her, to make her willing ? ’

“ The boy’s eyes, which had been fixed on mine, slowly turned to the looker-on, and I saw in the two faces that all he said was true. The two opposing kinds of pride confronting one another, I can see, even in this Bastille ; the gentleman’s, all negligent indifference ; the peasant’s, all downtrodden sentiment and passionate revenge.

“ ‘ You know, Doctor, that it is among the Rights of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

these Nobles to harness us common dogs to carts, and drive us. They so harnessed him and drove him. You know that it is among their Rights to keep us in their grounds all night, quieting the frogs, in order that their noble sleep may not be disturbed. They kept him out in the unwholesome mists, and ordered him back into his harness during the day. But he was not persuaded. **NO!** Taken out of harness one day at noon, to feed—if he could find food, he sobbed twelve times, once for every stroke of the bell, and died on her bosom.’

“Nothing human could have held life in the boy but his determination to tell all the wrong. He forced back the gathering shadows of death, as he forced his clenched right hand to remain clenched and to cover his wound.

“ ‘Then, with that man’s permission, and even with his aid, his brother took her away; in spite of what I know she must have told his brother—and what that is will not be long unknown to you, Doctor, if it is now—his brother took her away—for his pleasure and diversion, for a little while. I saw her passing on the road. When I took the tidings home, our father’s heart burst; he never spoke one of the words that filled it. I took my young sister (for I have another) to a place beyond the reach of this man, and where, at least, she will never be *his* vassal. Then, I tracked the brother here, and I climbed in, a common dog, but sword in hand, where is the loft window? It was somewhere here.’

“The room was darkening to his sight; the world was narrowing around him. I glanced about me, and saw that the hay and straw were trampled over the floor, as if there had been a struggle.

A SANE PATRIOTISM

“ ‘ She heard me and ran in. I told her not to come near us till he was dead. He came in, and first tossed me some pieces of money ; then struck at me with a whip. But I, though a common dog, so struck at him as to make him draw. Let him break into as many pieces as he will the sword that he stained with my common blood ; he drew to defend himself—thrust at me with all his skill for his life.’

“ My glance had fallen, but a few minutes before, on the fragments of a broken sword lying among the hay. That weapon was a gentleman’s. In another place lay an old sword that seemed to have been a soldier’s.

“ ‘ Now lift me up, Doctor ; lift me up. Where is he ? ’

“ ‘ He is not here,’ I said, supporting the boy, and thinking that he referred to the brother.

“ ‘ He ! Proud as these Nobles are, he is afraid to see me. Where is the man who was here ? Turn my face to him.’

“ I did so, raising the boy’s head against my knee. But, invested for the moment with extraordinary power, he raised himself completely ; obliging me to rise too, or I could not have still supported him.

“ ‘ Marquis,’ said the boy, turning to him with his eyes open wide, and his right hand raised, ‘ in the days when all these things are to be answered for, I summon you and yours, to the last of your bad race, to answer for them. I mark this cross of blood upon you, as a sign that I do it. In the days when all these things are to be answered for, I summon your brother, the worst of the bad race, to answer for them separately.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

I mark this cross of blood upon him as a sign that I do it.'

"Twice he put his hand to the wound in his breast, and with his forefinger drew a cross in the air. He stood for an instant with his finger yet raised, and, as it dropped he dropped with it, and I laid him down dead. . . ."

In that passage and one other we have the key to all the excesses, all the horrors that caused the streets of Paris to run with blood. That other passage is when years later the sister of the dead boy speaks :—

" 'Defarge, I was brought up among the fishermen on the seashore, and that peasant family so injured by the two Evrémonde brothers, as that Bastille paper describes, is my family. Defarge, that sister of the mortally wounded boy upon the ground is my sister, that husband was my sister's husband, the unborn child was their child, that brother was my brother, that father was my father, those dead are my dead, and that summons to answer for those things descends to me ! Ask him is that so ?'

" 'It is so,' assented Defarge once more.

" 'Then tell Wind and Fire where to stop,' returned Madame ; 'but don't tell me.'"

Thus was the Terror made understandable, and as the French say, "to understand is to forgive."

Again let us take the passage when the Marquis drives over the child—

"Its owner went downstairs into the courtyard, got into his carriage, and drove away. Not many people had talked with him at the reception ; he had stood in a little space apart, Monseigneur might have been

A SANE PATRIOTISM

warmer in his manner. It appeared, under the circumstances, rather agreeable to him to see the common people disperse before his horses and often barely escaping from being run down. His man drove as if he were charging an enemy, and the furious recklessness of the man brought no check into the face, or to the lips of the master. The complaint had sometimes made itself audible, even in that deaf city and dumb age, that, in the narrow streets without footways, the fierce patrician custom of hard driving endangered and maimed the mere vulgar in a barbarous manner. But, few cared enough for that to think of it a second time, and in this matter, as in all others, the common wretches were left to get out of their difficulties as best they could.

“With a wild rattle and clatter, and an inhuman abandonment of consideration not easy to be understood in these days, the carriage dashed through streets and swept around corners, with women screaming before it, and men clutching each other and clutching children out of its way. At last, swooping at a street corner by a fountain, one of its wheels came to a sickening little jolt, and there was a loud cry from a number of voices, and the horses reared and plunged.

“But for the latter inconvenience, the carriage would not have stopped; carriages were often known to drive on, and leave their wounded behind, and why not? But, the frightened valet had jumped down in a hurry, and there were twenty hands at the horses’ bridles.

“‘What has gone wrong?’ said Monsieur, calmly looking out.

“A tall man in a nightcap had caught up a bundle

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

from among the feet of the horses, and laid it on the basement of the fountain, and was down in the mud and wet, howling over it like a wild animal.

“ ‘ Pardon, Monsieur the Marquis ! ’ said a ragged and submissive man, ‘ it is a child. ’

“ ‘ Why does he make that abominable noise ? Is it his child ? ’

“ ‘ Excuse me, Monsieur the Marquis—it is a pity—yes. ’

“ The fountain was a little removed ; for the street opened, where it was, into a space some ten or twelve yards square. As the tall man suddenly got up from the ground, and came running at the carriage, Monsieur the Marquis clapped his hand for an instant on his sword hilt.

“ ‘ Killed ! ’ shrieked the man in wild desperation, extending both arms at their length above his head and staring at him. ‘ Dead ! ’

“ The people closed round, and looked at Monsieur the Marquis. There was nothing revealed by the many eyes that looked at him, but watchfulness and eagerness ; there was no visible menacing or anger. Neither did the people say anything ; after the first cry, they had been silent, and they remained so. The voice of the submissive man who had spoken was flat and tame in its extreme submission. Monsieur the Marquis ran his eyes over them all, as if they had been mere rats come out of their holes. He took out his purse.

“ ‘ It is extraordinary to me, ’ said he, ‘ that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children. One or the other of you is for ever in the way. How do I know what injury you have done my horses ? See ! Give him that. ’

A SANE PATRIOTISM

“ He threw out a gold coin to the valet to pick up, and all the heads craned forward that all the eyes might look down at it as it fell. The tall man called out again with a most unearthly cry, ‘ Dead.’ ”

“ He was arrested by the quick arrival of another man for whom the rest made way. On seeing him the miserable creature fell upon his shoulder, sobbing and crying, and pointing to the fountain, where some women were stooping over the motionless bundle, and moving gently about it. They were as silent, however, as the men.

“ ‘ I know all, I know all,’ said the last comer. ‘ Be a brave man, my Gaspard ! It is better for the poor little plaything to die so than to live, it has died in a moment without pain. Could it have lived an hour as happily.’ ”

“ ‘ You are a philosopher, you there,’ said the Marquis, smiling. ‘ How do they call you ? ’ ”

“ ‘ They call me Defarge.’ ”

“ ‘ Of what trade ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Monsieur the Marquis, vendor of wine.’ ”

“ ‘ Pick up that, philosopher and vendor of wine,’ said the Marquis, throwing him another gold coin, ‘ and spend it as you will. The horses there ; are they right ? ’ ”

“ Without deigning to look at the assembly the second time, Monsieur the Marquis leaned back in his seat and was just being driven away with the air of a gentleman who had accidentally broken some common thing, and had paid for it, and could afford to pay for it ; when his ease was suddenly disturbed by a coin flying into his carriage, and ringing on its floor—

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ ‘ Hold ! ’ said Monsieur the Marquis. ‘ Hold the horses. Who threw that ? ’

“ He looked to the spot where Defarge, the vendor of wine, had stood a moment before ; but the wretched father was grovelling on his face on the pavement on that spot, and the figure that stood beside him was the figure of a dark stout woman, knitting.

“ ‘ You dogs ! ’ said the Marquis, but smoothly, and with an unchanged front, except as to the spots on his nose ; ‘ I would ride over any of you very willingly, and exterminate you from the earth. If I knew which rascal threw at the carriage, and if that brigand were sufficiently near it, he should be crushed under the wheels.’ ”

Recall, too, how Dickens chastised “ Mr. Baron Alderson,” who, “ we regret to observe, opened the late special commission for the county of Chester with a kind of judicial special-constableism by no means edifying. In sporting phrase he ‘ went in ’ upon the general subject of Revolution with a determination to win.”

Mr. Baron Alderson, it appears, told the grand jury that “ previous to the Revolution in France of 1790, the physical comforts possessed by the poor greatly exceeded those possessed by them subsequent to that event.” Dickens tears that assertion to tatters. He had no misconceptions now as to the great upheaval, and he demands to be informed “ whether at this time of day, any rational man supposes that the first Revolution in France was an event that could have been avoided, or that it is difficult to be accounted for, on looking back ? Whether it was not the horrible

A SANE PATRIOTISM

catastrophe of a drama, which had already passed through every scene and shade of progress, inevitably leading on to that fearful conclusion? Whether there is any record in the world's history of a people among whom the arts and sciences and the refinements of civilized life existed, so oppressed, degraded and utterly miserable as the mass of the French population were before that Revolution? Physical comforts! no such thing was known among the French people—among the *people*—for years before the Revolution. They had died of sheer want and famine in numbers. The hunting-trains of their kings had ridden over their bodies in the royal forests. Multitudes had gone about crying and howling for bread in the streets of Paris. The line of road from Versailles to the capital had been blocked up by starvation and nakedness pouring in from the departments. The tables spread by Egalité Orleans in the public streets had been besieged by the foremost stragglers of a whole nation of paupers, on the face of every one of whom the shadow of the coming guillotine was black. An infamous feudality and a corrupt government had plundered and ground them down, year after year, until they were reduced to a condition of distress which has no parallel. As their wretchedness deepened, the wantonness and luxury of their oppressors heightened until the very fashions and customs of the upper classes ran mad from being unrestrained and became monstrous.

“ ‘ All,’ says Thiers, ‘ was monopolized by a few hands and the burdens bore upon a single class. The nobility and the clergy possessed nearly two-thirds of the landed property. The other third, belonging to the

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

people, paid taxes to the King, a multitude of feudal dues to the nobility, the tithe to the clergy and was, moreover, liable to the devastations of noble sportsmen and their game. The taxes on consumption weighed heavily on the great mass, and consequently on the people. The mode in which they were levied was vexatious. The gentry might be in arrears with impunity; the people, on the other hand, illtreated and imprisoned, were doomed to suffer in body, in default of goods. They defended with their blood the upper classes of society without being able to subsist themselves.' ”

Then Dickens observes that bad as the state of things was which succeeded to the Revolution, and must always follow any such dire convulsion, “ if there be anything in history that is certain, it is certain that the French people had *no* physical comforts when the Revolution occurred.” Then he turns on Mr. Baron Alderson, and tells him frankly that “ when he talked to the grand jury of that Revolution being ‘ a mere struggle for political rights,’ he talked nonsense.” Here is his summary of the significance and causes of the great cataclysm: “ It was a struggle on the part of them for social recognition and existence. It was a struggle for vengeance against intolerable oppressors. It was a struggle for the overthrow of a system of oppression, which in its contempt of all humanity, decency and national rights, and in its systematic degradation of the people had trained them to be the demons they showed themselves when they rose up and cast it down for ever.”

In the same article which he calls *Judicial Special Pleading*, Dickens reveals something of the fascination

A SANE PATRIOTISM

which the Revolution had for him, and gives us delightful little pen-pictures of the time.

Once the real significance of the great event in their history was grasped, the Englishman was not slow to respond to all that Dickens had to tell him concerning the splendid qualities that lay behind the Frenchman's excitability and temperamental excess. By a master stroke Dickens placed his revelations in the mouth of a typical Englishwoman kind, though bigoted, energetic and discerning enough when faced with real facts, but easily captured by prejudice, one Mrs. Lirriper, whom Dickens converts by taking her to France where "its town and country both in one, and carved stone and long streets of high houses and gardens and fountains and statues and trees and gold, and immensely big soldiers and immensely little soldiers and the pleasantest nurses with the whitest caps a-playing at skipping-rope, with the bunchiest babies in the flattest caps, and clean table-cloths spread everywhere for dinner, and people sitting out-of-doors smoking and sipping all day long, and little plays being acted in the open air for little people, and every shop a complete and elegant room, and everybody seeming to play at everything in this world. And as to the sparkling lights, my dear, after dark, glittering high up and low down, and on before and on behind and all around, and the crowd of theatres and the crowd of people and the crowd of all of us, its pure enchantment."

No doubt the instinctive recognition on the part of Dickens of the many admirable qualities that the two people had in common, their fundamental belief in the seriousness of life, their immense appreciation of

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

orderliness, and discipline, their love of the home, and of the family, no doubt Dickens realized that these counted for more than all the thousand and one accidental differences that the stolidity of the Englishman and the excitability of the French, had hitherto caused to divide them. This appreciation of the characteristics common to both is rendered the more interesting and remarkable in view of the fact that Dickens was a profound and ardent believer in the destinies of the British people, in their strong common sense, their genius for government, their capacity for administration, their splendid stamina as shown in their unshaken fortitude under adversity and their dogged resistance against odds. Dickens, in fact, was the first of the new Imperialists.

Once it is true, in the face of all the neglect of our Imperial interests which Dickens saw only too clearly, he seemed to grow despairing and dejected, and he utters his fierce resentment at the condition of things in a virile letter to Macready, It is dated, Folkestone, 4th October, 1855. He says—

“What with teaching people to ‘keep in their stations,’ what with bringing up the soul and body of the land to be a good child, or to go to the beershop, to go a-poaching and to go to the devil; what with having no such thing as a middle-class (for though we are perpetually bragging of it as our safety, it is nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper); what with flunkyism, toadyism, letting the most contemptible lords come in for all manner of places, reading *The Court Circular* for the New Testament, I do reluctantly believe that the English people are habitually

A SANE PATRIOTISM

consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen *and never will help themselves out of it*. Who is to do it, if anybody is, God knows. But at present we are on the downhill road to being conquered and the people *will* be content to bear it, sing 'Rule Britannia' and *will not* be saved."

He had a healthy, deep-rooted distrust and contempt for the timid and pedantic "Little Englander" official, bound hand and foot with red tape and shrinking from the opportunities and responsibilities of Empire; just as he had an unconquerable aversion to the backers of those officials at home, philanthropists like Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, people whose prototypes are still very much with us, and who, whilst exalting the "noble savage," even when he is dirty, treacherous and a cannibal, refuse to see the nobility of the common soldier, such a man for instance, as Private Gills, whom he immortalized thus in the *Perils of Certain English Prisoners*:—

"The sun went down, after appearing to be a long time about it, and the assembly was called. Every man answered to his name, of course, and was at his post. It was not yet black dark, and the roll was only just gone through, when up comes Mr. Commissioner Pordage with his Diplomatic coat on.

"'Captain Carton,' says he, 'Sir, what is this?'

"'This, Mr. Commissioner' (he was very short with him), 'is an expedition against the Pirates. It is a secret expedition, so please to keep it a secret.'

"'Sir,' says Commissioner Pordage, 'I trust there is going to be no unnecessary cruelty committed?'

"'Sir,' returns the officer, 'I trust not.'

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“ ‘That is not enough, sir,’ cries Commissioner Pordage, getting wroth. ‘Captain Carton, I give you notice. Government requires you to treat the enemy with great delicacy, consideration, clemency, and forbearance.’

“ ‘Sir,’ says Captain Carton, ‘I am an English officer, commanding English Men, and I hope I am not likely to disappoint the Government’s just expectations. But, I presume that you know that these villains under their black flag have despoiled our country—men of their property, burnt their homes, barbarously murdered them and their little children, and worse than murdered their wives and daughters?’

“ ‘Perhaps I do, Captain Carton,’ answers Pordage, waving his hand with dignity; ‘perhaps I do not. It is not customary, sir, for Government to commit itself.’

“ ‘It matters very little, Mr. Pordage, whether or no. Believing that I hold my commission by the allowance of God, and not that I have received it from the Devil, I shall certainly use it, with all avoidance of unnecessary suffering, and with all merciful swiftness of execution, to exterminate these people from the face of the earth. Let me recommend you to go home, sir, and keep out of the night air.’

“ Never another syllable did that officer say to the Commissioner, but turned away to his men. The Commissioner buttoned his diplomatic coat to the chin, said, ‘Mr. Kitten, attend me!’ gasped, half choked himself, and took himself off.”

Every one remembers the scene that follows; the treachery of the native Christian George King: how the

A SANE PATRIOTISM

main force is turned away : how the English prisoners are surrounded and how—

“ All this time, Mr. Commissioner Pordage had been waiting to make a Proclamation to the Pirates to lay down their arms and go away ; and everybody had been hustling him about and tumbling over him, while he was calling for pen and ink to write it with, Mrs. Pordage, too, had some curious ideas about the British respectability of her nightcap (which had as many frills to it, growing in layers one inside another, as if it was a white vegetable of the artichoke sort), and she wouldn't take the nightcap off, and would be angry when it got crushed by the other ladies who were handing things about, and, in short, she gave as much trouble as her husband did. But, as we were now forming for the defence of the place, they were both poked out of the way with no ceremony. The children and ladies were got into the little trench which surrounded the silver-house (we were afraid of leaving them in any of the light buildings, lest they should be set on fire), and we made the best disposition we could. There was a pretty store, in point of amount, of tolerable swords and cutlasses. Those were issued. There were also, perhaps a score or so of spare muskets. Those were brought out. To my astonishment, little Mrs. Fisher, that I had taken for a doll and a baby, was not only active in that service, but volunteered to load the spare arms.

“ ‘ For, I understand it well,’ says she cheerfully, without a shake in her voice.

“ ‘ I am a soldier's daughter and a sailor's sister, and I understand it too,’ says Miss Maryon, just in the same way.

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

“Steady and busy behind where I stood, these two beautiful and delicate young women fell to handling the guns, hammering the flints, looking to the locks, and quietly directing others to pass up powder and bullets from hand to hand as unflinching as the best of tried soldiers.

“Sergeant Drooce had brought in word that the Pirates were very strong in numbers, over a hundred was his estimate, and that they were not, even then, all landed ; for he had seen them in a very good position on the further side of the Signal Hill, evidently waiting for the rest of their men to come up. In the present pause, the first we had had since the alarm, he was telling this over to Mr. Macey, when Mr. Macey suddenly cried out : ‘The Signal ! Nobody has thought of the signal !’

“We knew of no signal, so we could not have thought of it.

“‘What signal may you mean, sir ?’ says Sergeant Drooce, looking sharp at him.

“‘There is a pile of wood upon the Signal Hill. If it could be lighted, which never has been done yet, it would be a signal of distress to the mainland.’

“Charker cries, directly : ‘Sergeant Drooce, despatch me on that duty. Give me the two men who were on guard with me to-night, and I’ll light the fire if it can be done.’

“‘And if it can’t, Corporal——’ Mr. Macey strikes in.

“‘Look at these ladies and children, sir !’ says Charker. ‘I’d sooner *light myself* than not try any chance to save them.’

A SANE PATRIOTISM

“ We gave him a Hurrah !—it burst from us come of it what might—and he got his two men, and was let out at the gate, and crept away. I had no sooner come back to my place from being one of the party to handle the gate, than Miss Maryon said in a low voice behind me :

“ ‘ Davis, will you look at this powder ? This is not right.’ ”

“ I turned my head. Christian George King again, and treachery again ! Sea-water had been conveyed into the magazine, and every grain of powder was spoiled !

“ ‘ Stay a moment,’ said Sergeant Drooce, when I had told him, without causing a movement in a muscle of his face : ‘ look to your pouch, my lad. You, Tom Packer, look to your pouch, confound you ! Look to your pouches, all you Marines.’ ”

“ The same artful savage had got at them, somehow or another, and the cartridges were all unserviceable. ‘ Hum ! ’ says the Sergeant. ‘ Look to your loading, men. You are right so far ? ’ ”

“ Yes ; we were right so far.

“ ‘ Well, my lads, and gentlemen all,’ says the sergeant, ‘ this will be a hand-to-hand affair, and so much the better ! ’ ”

“ He treated himself to a pinch of snuff, and stood up, square-shouldered and broad-chested, in the light of the moon—which was now very bright—as cool as if he was waiting for a play to begin. He stood quiet, and we all stood quiet, for a matter of something like half an hour. I took notice from such whispered talk as there was, how little we, that the silver did not belong

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

to, thought about it, and how much the people that it did belong to, thought about it. At the end of half an hour, it was reported from the gate that Charker and the two were falling back on us, pursued by about a dozen.

“ ‘Sally! Gate-party, under Gill Davis,’ says the Sergeant, ‘and bring ’em in! Like men, now!’ ”

“ ‘We were not long about it, and we brought them in.’ ”

“ ‘Don’t take me,’ says Charker, holding me round the neck, and stumbling down at my feet when the gate was fast, ‘don’t take me near the ladies or the children, Gill. They had better not see Death, till it can’t be helped. They’ll see it soon enough.’ ”

“ ‘Harry!’ I answered, holding up his head. ‘Comrade!’ ”

“ ‘He was cut to pieces. The signal had been secured by the first pirate party that landed; his hair was all singed off, and his face was blackened with the running pitch from a torch.’ ”

“ ‘He made no complaint of pain, or of anything. ‘Good-bye, old chap,’ was all he said, with a smile. ‘I’ve got my death. And death ain’t life. Is it, Gill?’ ”

“ ‘Having helped to lay his poor body on one side, I went back to my post. Sergeant Drooce looked at me with his eyebrows a little lifted. I nodded. ‘Close up here, men and gentlemen all!’ said the Sergeant. ‘A place too many, in the line.’ ”

Here we have glimpsed for us the best qualities of our breed personified in the quiet, steady, unpretentious but withal heroic common man, who despite Mr. Commissioner Pordage, and Lord Stiltstalker, Mr. Coodle and Lord Noodle, despite the impotence of politicians,

A SANE PATRIOTISM

and the corrupt selfishness of officials, the timorous scepticism of Whitehall, and the fruitless verbosity of Westminster has yet contrived to build up the most splendid achievement of our race, the greatest and the freest Empire the world has ever known.

Had Dickens lived to-day, in fact, he would have been calling for recruits for the territorials. One is not so very certain, indeed, that he would not have been advocating something like the Citizen Army, for he had an abounding faith in the patriotism, the valour and the soldierly qualities of the poor. In "Our Commission"—the Commission *Household Words* held to inquire into the "adulteration of certain articles which it is of the last importance that the country possess in a genuine state,"—Bishops, Public Offices, Parliament, all are condemned—all except the rank and file of the British people.

"There were then placed upon the table, several samples of the British Peasant, to which Mr. Bull expressed himself as particularly solicitous to draw the attention of the Commission, with one plain object: the good of his beloved country. He remarked that with that object before him, he would not inquire into the general condition, whether perfectly healthy or otherwise, of any of the samples now produced. He would not ask, whether this specimen or that specimen might have been stronger, larger, better fitted for wear and tear, and less liable to early decay, if the human creature were reared with a little more of such care, study, and attention, as were rightfully bestowed on the vegetable world around it. But, the samples before the Commission had been obtained from every county in

CHARLES DICKENS: SOCIAL REFORMER

England, and, though brought from opposite parts of the kingdom, were alike deficient in the ability to defend their country by handling a gun or a sword, or by uniting in any mode of action, as a disciplined body. It was said in a breath, that the English were not a military people, and that they made (equally on the testimony of their friends and enemies) the best soldiers in the world. He hoped that in a time of war and common danger he might take the liberty of putting these opposite assertions into the crucible of Common Sense, consuming the Humbug and producing the Truth—at any rate he would, whether or no. Now, he begged to inform the Commission that, in the samples before them and thousands of others, he had carefully analysed and tested the British Peasant, and had found him to hold in combination, just the same qualities that he always had possessed. Analysing and testing, however, as a part of the inquiry, certain other matters not fairly to be separated from it, he (Mr. Bull) had found the said Peasant to have been some time ago disarmed by Lords and gentlemen who were jealous of their game, and by administrations—hirers of spies and suborners of false witnesses—who were jealous of their power. ‘So, if you wish to restore to these samples,’ said Mr. Bull, ‘the serviceable quality that I find to be wanting in them, and the absence of which so much surprises you, be a little more patriotic and a little less timorously selfish; trust your Peasant a little more; instruct him a little better in a freeman’s knowledge—not in a good child’s merely; and you will soon have your Saxon Bowmen with percussion rifles, and may save the charges of your Foreign Legion.’ ”

A SANE PATRIOTISM

To Dickens, in fact, Imperialism spelt democracy and efficiency at the same time. He realized clearly that the bureaucracy—the stolid, unintelligent, irresponsible bureaucracy of the Circumlocution Office—stood between the English people and their destiny; that once his fellow countrymen could shake off the Coodles and Noodles, the Stiltstalkers and the Barnacles, then indeed they might fulfil the destiny of their race and achieve the heritage that was theirs by right; that the Englishman was, in fact, “bluffed,” and tricked into accepting the leadership of a decadent, unpatriotic class—a class that was bound to bring him to ruin if he did not free himself from the incubus—a class that had hampered his development, lowered his prestige and betrayed his interests. “Prince Bull,” he wrote in his fairy tale of that name:—

“had two sharp thorns in his pillow, two hard knobs in his crown, two heavy loads on his mind, two unbridled nightmares in his sleep, two rocks ahead in his course. He could not by any means get servants to suit him, and he had a tyrannical old godmother, whose name was Tape.

“She was a fairy, this Tape, and was a bright red all over. She was disgustingly prim and formal, and could never bend herself a hair’s-breadth this way or that way, out of her naturally crooked shape. But she was very potent in her wicked art. She could stop the fastest thing in the world, change the strongest thing into the weakest, and the most useful into the most useless. To do this she had only to put her cold hand upon it, and repeat her own name, Tape. Then it withered away.

“At the court of Prince Bull—at least I don’t mean

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

literally at his court, because he was a very genteel prince, and readily yielded to his godmother when she always reserved that for his hereditary lords and ladies—in the dominions of Prince Bull, among the great mass of the community who were called in the language of that polite country the mobs and the snobs, were a number of very ingenious men, who were always busy with some invention or other, for promoting the prosperity of the prince's subjects, and augmenting the prince's power. But, whenever they submitted their models for the prince's approval, his godmother stepped forward, laid her hand upon them, and said 'Tape.' Hence it came to pass, that when any particularly good discovery was made, the discoverer usually carried it off to some other prince in foreign parts, who had no old godmother who said Tape. This was not on the whole an advantageous state of things for Prince Bull, to the best of my understanding.

“ The worst of it was that Prince Bull had, in course of years, lapsed into such a state of subjection to this unlucky godmother that he never made any serious effort to rid himself of her tyranny. I have said this was the worst of it, but there I was wrong, because there is a worse consequence still, behind. The prince's numerous family became so downright sick and tired of Tape that, when they should have helped the prince out of the difficulties into which that evil creature led him, they fell into a dangerous habit of moodily keeping away from him in an impassive and indifferent manner, as though they had quite forgotten that no harm could happen to the prince their father, without its inevitably affecting themselves.

A SANE PATRIOTISM

“ Such was the aspect of affairs at the court of Prince Bull, when this great prince found it necessary to go to war with Prince Bear. He had been, for some time, very doubtful of his servants, who, besides being indolent and addicted to enriching their families at his expense, domineered over him dreadfully; threatening to discharge themselves if they were found the least fault with, pretending that they had done a wonderful amount of work when they had done nothing, making the most unmeaning speeches that ever were heard in the prince’s name, and uniformly showing themselves to be very inefficient indeed; though, that some of them had excellent characters from previous situations is not to be denied. Well, Prince Bull called all his servants together, and said to them one and all, ‘ Send out an army against Prince Bear. Clothe it, arm it, feed it, provide it with all necessaries and contingencies, and I will pay the piper! Do your duty by my brave troops,’ said the prince, ‘ and do it well, and I will pour my treasure out like water, to defray the cost. Who ever heard *me* complain of money well laid out!’ Which, indeed, he had reason for saying, inasmuch as he was well known to be a truly generous and munificent prince.

“ When the servants heard these words, they sent out the army against Prince Bear, and they set the army tailors to work, and the army provision merchants, and the makers of guns both great and small, and the gunpowder makers, and the makers of ball, shell, and shot; and they bought up all manner of stores and ships, without troubling their heads about the price, and appeared to be so busy that the good prince rubbed his

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

hands, and (using a favourite expression of his) said, 'It's all right !' But, while they were thus employed, the prince's godmother, who was a great favourite with those servants, looked in upon them continually all day long, and whenever she popped her head in at the door said, 'How do you do, my children ? What are you doing here ?' 'Official business, godmother.' 'Oho !' says this wicked fairy, 'Tape !' And then the business all went wrong, whatever it was, and the servants' heads became so addled and muddled that they thought they were doing wonders.

"Now, this was very bad conduct on the part of the vicious old nuisance, and she ought to have been strangled, even if she had stopped here ; but she didn't stop here, as you shall learn. For a number of the prince's subjects, being very fond of the prince's army, who were the bravest of men, assembled together and provided all manner of eatables and drinkables, and books to read, and clothes to wear, and tobacco to smoke, and candles to burn, and nailed them up in great packing-cases, and put them a-board a great many ships, to be carried out to that brave army in the cold and inclement country where they were fighting Prince Bear. Then, up comes this wicked fairy as the ships were weighing anchor, and says, 'How do you do, my children ? What are you doing here ?' 'We are going with all these comforts to the army, god-mother.' 'Oho !' says she, 'A pleasant voyage, my darlings. Tape.' And from that time forth, those enchanted ships went sailing, against wind and tide and rhyme and reason, round and round the world, and whenever they touched at any port were ordered

316

A SANE PATRIOTISM

off immediately, and could never deliver their cargoes anywhere.

“ This, again, was very bad conduct on the part of the vicious old nuisance, and she ought to have been strangled for it if she had done nothing worse ; but she did something worse still, as you shall learn. For she got astride of an official broomstick, and muttered as a spell these two sentences, ‘ On her Majesty’s service,’ and ‘ I have the honour to be, sir, your most obedient servant,’ and presently alighted in the cold and inclement country where the army of Prince Bull were encamped to fight the army of Prince Bear. On the seashore of that country, she found piled together, a number of houses for the army to live in, and a quantity of provisions for the army to live upon, and a quantity of clothes for the army to wear ; while, sitting in the mud gazing at them, were a group of officers as red to look at as the wicked old woman herself. So she said to one of them, ‘ Who are you, my darling, and how do you do ? ’ ‘ I am the Quartermaster-General’s Department, Godmother, and I am pretty well.’ Then she said to another, ‘ Who are *you*, my darling, and how do *you* do ? ’ ‘ I am the Commissariat Department, Godmother, and *I* am pretty well.’ Then she said to another, ‘ Who are *you*, my darling, and how do *you* do ? ’ ‘ I am the Head of the Medical Department, Godmother, and I am pretty well.’ Then she said to some gentlemen scented with lavender, who kept themselves at a great distance from the rest, ‘ And who are *you*, my pretty pets, and how do *you* do ? ’ And they answered, ‘ We-aw-are-the-aw-Staff-aw-Department, Godmother, and we are very well indeed.’ ‘ I am delighted to see you all, my beauties,’

CHARLES DICKENS : SOCIAL REFORMER

says this wicked old fairy, 'Tape!' Upon that, the houses, clothes, and provisions, all mouldered away; and the soldiers who were sound, fell sick; and the soldiers who were sick, died miserably; and the noble army of Prince Bull perished."

That was the message which Charles Dickens thundered into the ears of the sleeping giant of British democracy, whom he sought to rouse into some consciousness of strength and power. He besought the people to rise and throw off the swarm of pretentious officials who bound them hand and foot, to "put not their trust in princes" but in the strength of their own right arm, in their own good sense and high courage, and he pointed them to a whole world that called for the skill, the endurance and resource of the Anglo-Saxon to tame it and bring it to man's will. So far as the English democracy listened, so far they have triumphed. Canada, Australia, India even, all are eloquent to-day of the lesson that Dickens taught; that the ordinary workaday Englishman needs only a fair chance to succeed and to deserve well of the world that he liberates, and that the Stiltstalkers, the Barnacles, the Coodles and the Noodles are expensive nuisances, veritable old men of the sea, standing in the way of the progress of the common people. The colonies have long learnt that lesson. But, by a bitter paradox one portion of the Empire has not heard the message, or caught it only in fragments and confusedly. And that is the land of the novelist's birth and of his unconquerable affection.

Is this reproach longer to remain? Our history is one long, proud testimony to the fact that Britain's

A SANE PATRIOTISM

imperious needs have ever produced Britain's Imperial men. All about us lie scattered the *débris* of our march towards higher and yet higher civilization. The wounded in the economic battle bestrew our path. The refuse of old corruptions and conventions are a blot on the fair face of our land. Poverty still stalks abroad. Side by side with all this we remember that—

“ Still his deathless words of light are swimming
Serene throughout the great deep infinite
Of human soul, unwaning and undimming. . . . ”

Is not then our duty clear ?

FINIS

PRINTED BY
WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON AND BECCLES.



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

RETURN CIRCULATION DEPARTMENT
TO → 202 Main Library

LOAN PERIOD 1	2	3
HOME USE		
4	5	6

ALL BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED AFTER 7 DAYS
1-month loans may be renewed by calling 642-3405
6-month loans may be recharged by bringing books to Circulation Desk
Renewals and recharges may be made 4 days prior to due date

DUE AS STAMPED BELOW

JUL 3 1978

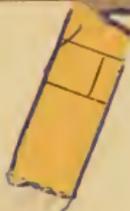
~~REC. CIB.~~ JUN 16 1978

JUN 23 2001

U. C. BERKELEY LIBRARIES



C055236986



2-14-77

955d
0951

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

