



**CHARLES
DICKENS**

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THE EXCUSE.

"Dickens," Mr. G. K. Chesterton has written, "is as individual as the sea and as English as Nelson;" and I can find no better excuse than this for writing another — and a very little — book about him. Dickens is to me a writer apart. I have been reading and re-reading his novels since I was six. I know his characters as I hardly know any of the men and women I have met in the flesh. Dickens is the novelist of the lettered and of the unlettered. The man at the street corner who has hardly heard of Thackeray knows all about Sam Weller and Mrs. Gamp. This is the glory of Dickens, In the pages that follow I have retold, briefly and simply, the events of his life. I have summarised his "cheery, gladsome message," and I have endeavoured to suggest the particular value and significance of each of his principal books. A writer so universal inevitably appeals to different men in different manners. Of all the books I have read on Dickens, I find myself in most complete agreement with Mr. Chesterton's characteristic monograph. I have quoted frequently from his pages, and I have to acknowledge my indebtedness for many suggestive annotations that have helped to fuller understanding.

II. BIOGRAPHY.

Charles Dickens was born at Landport, outside Portsmouth, on the 7th of February 1812. He was the eldest son and the second child of John Dickens, a clerk in the Navy Pay Office and the original of Mr. Micawber, his mother appearing in his novels as Mrs. Nickleby. The family a year or two after his birth moved to London, and when Dickens was between four and five years old his father was given an appointment in Chatham Dockyard, and he and his family lived at Chatham until the novelist was nine. In after years he recalled himself as " a very small and not over particularly taken care of boy." He was too sickly to be much good at games, and long before he was in his teens he was a prodigious reader. John Forster says that the account of the early reading of David Copperfield is literally auto-biographical, and that Charles Dickens' boy's imagination was quickened by Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Bias, Robinson Crusoe, and The Arabian Nights. His reading enthused him with a desire to write, and when he was about eight he composed a tragedy called Miznar, the Sultan of India, which was acted by his brothers and sisters. Dickens always loved the theatre and he always had a tendency to " show off," and it is not surprising to know that as a small child he used to sing comic songs at all the family parties.

When he was nine his father was moved to Somerset House, and the family went to live in a small mean house with a small mean back-garden in Bay ham Street, Camden

Town. John Dickens had become involved in his Micawberesque money entanglements, and there was a great contrast between the comparative comfort of the life at Chatham and the unqualified poverty in Camden Town. The elder Dickens was kindly, affectionate, and conscientious, but he was essentially what is called "easy-going," and, as his son wrote, "he appeared to have utterly lost at this time the idea of educating me at all, and to have utterly put from him the notion that I had any claim upon him in that regard whatever. So I degenerated into cleaning his boots of a morning and my own; and making myself useful in the work of the little house; and looking after my younger brothers and sisters (we were now six in all); and going on such poor errands as arose out of our poor way of living." As a matter of fact it was at Bay ham Street, Camden Town, with a washerwoman next door and a Bow Street officer opposite, that Charles Dickens began his essential education. He began to learn the humour and the dignity that belong to the lives of the simple and the poor. He began the journey that was to end in Charles Dickens, the author of *The Pickwick Papers*, of *David Copperfield*, and of *Bleak House*. The circumstances of the family grew worse and worse. "I know," wrote Dickens, "we got on very badly with the butcher and baker, that very often we had not too much for dinner, and that at last my father was arrested." John Dickens declared that the sun had set for him forever, and was carried off to the Marshalsea — perhaps the most providential arrest in the whole history of the world, for his son's boyish experiences of the horrors and the stupidity of the debtors' prison brought fruit years afterwards in *Pickwick* and *Little Dorrit*, and directly led to the abolition of the whole cruel absurd system of imprisonment for debt.

Frequent visits to the pawnbroker, and the gradual selling up of the home until there was nothing left "except a few chairs, a kitchen table, and some beds," led to

Charles Dickens beginning life as a money earner. He was just ten years old, and the good offices of a relative secured him an engagement at Warren's Blacking Manufactory in Hungerford Market at a salary of six shillings a week. The horror of this part of his life never left him, and it is fully described in *David Copperfield*. No grown man ever remembered the tragedies of his childhood so vividly and so naturally as Dickens remembered them. No grown man ever sympathised with a child's sorrow so entirely, and this splendid power was a heritage from the blacking factory. In a fragment of autobiography quoted by Forster and largely used in *David Copperfield*, Dickens said:

" It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age. It is wonderful to me that even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been since we came to London, no one had compassion on me — a child of singular abilities, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt, bodily and mentally — to suggest that something might have been spared, as certainly it might have been, to place me at any common school. Our friends, I take it, were tired out. No one made any sign. My father and mother were quite satisfied; they could hardly have been more so if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a Grammar School and going to Cambridge. . . .

" 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 after day what I had learned and thought and delighted in and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, was passing away from me never to be brought back any more, cannot be written."

Soon after he went to the blacking factory the whole family moved into the Marshalsea, and Dickens was sent to lodge in Little College Street, Camden Town, with " a

reduced old lady," the original of Mrs. Pipkin in *Dombey and Son*. His father paid his lodging, but otherwise he was left entirely on his own resources — " no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no support from anyone that I can call to mind, so help me God! " And the boy was just ten. It is wonderful indeed that he should have grown into the supreme laughter-maker of the after years; and yet, perhaps, as I shall try to show, it was not so wonderful, for miracles do happen and miracles always happen according to natural law — a fact of importance of which both scientists and theologians often appear strangely ignorant.

A legacy of some hundred pounds was left to the elder Dickens. He took his release from the Marshalsea, and soon afterwards he quarrelled with his blacking-manufacturer relative, and Charles was happily discharged. He was sent to a school in the Hampstead Road called the Wellington House Academy, and there he stayed until he was fourteen. Some of the characteristics of the school were used afterwards in the description of Salem House in *David Copperfield*. On leaving school his father obtained for him an engagement in the office of Mr. Edward Blackmore, a solicitor in Gray's Inn, and there he acquired that intimate knowledge of the futility and chicanery of the law which he was to use with such splendid effect in *The Pickwick Papers*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations*.

John Dickens — he was a man of ability and at times of resource — had become a parliamentary reporter on the staff of *The Morning Herald*, and his son decided to learn shorthand as the first step in his real career. He worked almost viciously. " Whatever I have tried to do in life," he once said, " I have tried with all my heart to do well." To teach oneself shorthand from a text-book is not an easy task. " The changes that were rung upon dots which in such a position meant such a thing, and in such another position something else entirely different; the wonderful vagaries