

The Magic of Dickens

DICKENS is emphatically a writer to be broadcast. Had there been wireless in Dickens's day, Dickens's readings from his own works would have been the most popular items in the year's broadcasting. For before anything else, and he was many things, Charles Dickens was a man of the people. That is to say, that in his books with an immense and unflinching gusto he brought to life a huge variety of hearty, whimsical, fantastic, bluff, hypocritical, villainous, cheery or downright human beings.

They were all to be found there, almost every imaginable variety of them: not the few, not the rich or the cultured or the powerful, for with these, unless he was being satirical, Dickens's touch was not so certain, but ordinary people out of ordinary streets; London streets mostly, for Dickens was a Londoner to the finger-tips. Ordinary people they are, for deliciously grotesque as his Sam Wellers and Sairey Gamps and Mr. Micawbers may be, their exaggerated, fantastic air is but the heightened colour with which the touch of genius drives home to the reader the real truth about them.

This heightening is but a heightening of what is really there. You have but to keep a sharp look-out on your own acquaintances even for a day, and the odds are that you will find plenty that might have walked straight out of Dickens's pages. Miss Trotwood, the Wilfers, even Mrs. Bardell—we have met them all.

The method of Dickens is worlds apart from the modern fashion of realism: contrast, for example, this Bardell v. Pickwick trial with the lawsuit in Mr. Galsworthy's "Forsyte Saga." Mr. Galsworthy's more serious picture is so faithful that it might serve as a text-book for students of law. Dickens's comic scene is full of little incidents that could never have occurred just so, even in 1837. And yet we know almost as much about the nature of Law Courts after reading "The Pickwick Papers" as when we have finished "The Forsyte Saga."

By all the highbrow canons Dickens ought to have failed with his portraits, and failed time after time. For personage after personage in his novels is not a full character, not the complex of contradictory traits which we know the inside of a human being to be, but is often enough little more than one characteristic observed, as it were, from outside—Uriah Heep all snuffle and hypocrisy, Mrs. Micawber just her well-known catchword. And in spite of all this he does not fail, but magnificently succeeds. And why? The answer, of



Charles Dickens

course, is that he was a genius.

The trial scene in "Pickwick" is well chosen to illustrate Dickens at his best. There is just a touch—in the handling of Judge Stareleigh and the bullying Sergeant Buzfuz—of that passionate satire on social abuses which is so powerful in "Oliver Twist" or "Hard Times." There are the minor personages, too: Mrs. Cluppins and Susannah Sanders, who are both of them delightfully themselves, and yet, we can tell as soon as they open their lips, might have stepped out of any of a myriad back gardens.

"MY Lord and Jury," said Mrs. Cluppins, with interesting agitation, "I will not deceive you."

"You had better not, ma'am," said the little judge.

"I was there," resumed Mrs. Cluppins, "unknown to Mrs. Bardell; I had been out with a little basket, gentlemen, to buy three pound of red kidney purtaties, which was three pound tuppence ha'penny, when I see Mrs. Bardell's street door on the jar."

There is, of course, the immortal Sam Weller, too, the sprightly Cockney of yesterday and to-day and all time. It is true that the Londoner does not to-day, like Sam, turn his W's into V's—"Put it down a we, my lord, put it down a we," as his aged parent advises the judge in this very scene; but anyone who has had the good fortune to hear an imaginative taxi-driver abusing a busman in a traffic block has heard at least a shadow of Sam's "If they was a pair o' patent double million magnifyin' gas microscopes of hextra power, p'raps I might be able to see through a flight o' stairs and a deal door; but bein' only eyes, you see, my wision's limited."

No one can read the famous trial scene without recognising that, like all Dickens's best things, it is fantastic, exaggerated, and yet true. Consider the entry of Mrs. Bardell and her supporters. Her unattractive offspring, Master Bardell, is brought in after her.

"At sight of her child, Mrs. Bardell started; suddenly recollecting herself, she kissed him in a frantic manner; then relapsing into a state of hysterical imbecility, the good lady requested to be informed where she was."

Everyone is profoundly affected by this touching scene. Mrs. Cluppins and Mrs. Sanders turn away their heads and weep. Sergeant Buzfuz rubs his eyes with a large white handkerchief. Even the Judge is "visibly effected."

Now it is quite out of the judge's character, as given us in the rest of the scene, to be affected at all. He would either have been dozing or else sarcastic. But it heightens the colour of this particular episode to make him visibly affected, and, incongruous though the touch would seem to us if we were keeping a strict eye on the character-painting, we are in fact not doing anything of the sort, for Dickens's fantastic pen has disarmed our critical faculties.

Dickens Commemoration

from 2YA, February 7

Mrs. Nellie Gruttenden and members of the Dickensian Society will present

(a) "Mdlle. Hortense Visits

Mr. Tulkinghorn"

from "Bleak House" (Dickens)

(b) "In the Thieves' Kitchen"

from "Oliver Twist" (Dickens)

IT is amazing to remember that "Pickwick" (written in 1837) was Dickens's first book. It was famous before its serial publication was half over. It is still loved and quoted all over the inhabited globe. No wonder that a man who could begin so can still outsell the best sellers more than a hundred years after he was born.

He was a man of the people, and he was so not only because he loved and understood ordinary people and revealed them to us unforgettably, but because his writings delighted not highbrows only, nor lowbrows only, but all sorts and conditions of men.