



On Tuesday next a specially-arranged dramatisation of Charles Dickens's immortal "Christmas Carol" will be produced from 2YA by Clement May and Company. Orchestral effects will be introduced by the Salon Orchestra, and carols will be presented by the Melodie Four.

IN a book entitled "The Greatest Book in the World," by A. Edward Newton, one of America's noted litterateurs and book collectors, appears a short homily on Dickens's "Christmas Carol," which the author acclaims as "the greatest little book in the world."

He records how, while four ardent Dickensians, himself one of them, were gathered together one evening in the library of a friend, the question—"Which is the best of Dickens's novels?"—arose. A violent discussion ensued.

The author then continues: Above a voice urging "Bleak House" someone was heard to say that "A Christmas Carol" was the greatest little book in the world. "And if," said the speaker, "you think that a 'rather large order,' name a greater!"

There was a silence for a moment, and then a chorus of praise. It was the writer who made the all-embracing statement. He has the advantage of knowing only one—his mother-tongue; he was talking of books of to-day, not of great little books of ages past; and he was talking with companions who were much too Dickensian to challenge any statement in praise of the master.

Let there be no misunderstanding. I know all that can be said in dispraise of Dickens; that his characters are not real people, but the personifications of virtue and vice and the whole range in between; that he wallows in sentimentality; that all is exaggeration; that eccentric characters pepper his pages; that his women are all "impossible," and that his heroes wear side-whiskers; that he himself had long curly hair, perfumed, and greasy with macassar oil. I admit all this, and yet am disposed to say that in the resplendent firmament of English literature there is only one name I would rank above his for sheer genius: Shakespeare. And I make this statement with the less hesitation for the reason that it passed unchallenged—was applauded almost—when I made it first several years ago, in London. But that is another story. Now, I just want to say a few considered words about "Christmas Carol."

DICKENS had made his first trip to America and was engaged upon the study of "Martin Chuzzlewit," when it occurred to him to write a short story which was to make the world better and happier at Christmas time. The result was the "Little Carol," as he affectionately called it. Its composition affected him in the most extraordinary manner; he roamed about London, as was his habit, thinking and talking to himself about it—and no one knew and loved London better than he; and none could describe it better, especially the streets on a winter's day, when the poor sufferer, for, while Dickens was a boisterous person,

overflowing with animal spirits, the poor were always on his mind.

Bear with me while I sing of the London streets in winter. Is there, can there be anything colder? The thermometer is not to be depended upon, for with true British pluck the mercury keeps up appearances and declines to record the all-pervading dampness which freezes one to the marrowbones. I know; for I have played hide-and-seek in a fog with well-known landmarks for my playmates—to keep myself from freezing—and I am not especially fitted for the game; solitaire I could play better but for the exertion it entails.

BUT no one has written of a winter's day as Dickens: Listen for a moment: "It was cold, bleak, biting weather; foggy withal. . . . The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already; it had not been light all day; and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighbouring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air. The fog came pouring in at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were phantoms. . . . It was piercing, searching, biting-cold."

Such was the weather in London on that day before Christmas many years ago when Dickens elected to sing a carol which all the world has heard and which all English-speaking people join in singing.

Dickens was a man of simple emotions; what did not move him to laughter moved him to tears; some things moved him to both at once. Of nature, in the ordinary acceptance of that word, he knew nothing, cared nothing. London was to him a vast field in which wild flowers grew—the children of the poor—and he gathered them by armfuls. He was a man without what we call taste,

and, like Shakespeare, he took little interest in either religion or politics, but he had an intense love for humanity. He did not write for the stage, but he wrote dramatically; in tragedy he was apt to be maudlin; in humour he was with the gods. The "Carol" is Dickens in essence, for in it his love for humanity and his love of fun are all-embracing.

May I hum the first stanza of the "Carol"?

"Marley was dead: to begin with . . . as dead as a door-nail. Mind! I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed hands shall not disturb or the Country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a doornail."

But I take it for granted that you can sing the "Carol" as well as I can, and go on with my story.

It was published a few days before Christmas, 1843; six thousand copies were sold on the first day, and 15,000 more before there was the (Concluded on page 2.)



"The phantom slowly, gravely, silently, approached. . . ."