

# DICKENS'S LOVERS

BY ARTHUR WAUGH

## I

EVERYMAN, says the poet, boasts two soul sides; and this was particularly true of Charles Dickens. There were, indeed, many men in Dickens, many personalities struggling one against another; but preëminently and in the foreground there were two main sides to his character. There was, first, the Dickens of the world of London, the man who epitomized his age, the ebullient mouthpiece of the early Victorian era; and there was, secondly, the Dickens of the fireside, the philosopher of the simple affections, the prophet of domesticity:

And when we come to Dickens and ask him, 'What is Love?' we get two different answers, according to which soul side of him is uppermost at the moment. The one answer is dictated by the fashion of the time, and may be said to be already discounted and pigeonholed. The other comes from the immortal heart of a great, simple, and sincere nature, and is the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever. Let us strike a balance, if we can, between the two, and try to see how far Dickens leads us in the philosophy of Love.

If ever a man was the product of his age that man was Charles Dickens. Just as so many of his characters are embodiments of a type, so he himself seems to embody, in Gargantuan form, the whole panorama of early Victorian England. And if we try to pick out a single quality as expressive of the spirit of that age, the epithet, I think, which we should choose is theatrical.

The age of Charles Dickens was tremendously theatrical. Every man that imbibed its inspiration was secretly acting a part. The Reform Bill of 1832 had let loose a perfect cataract of individualism. Jack was as good as his master now; Mr. Roebuck was flattering the Sheffield cutlers with the glory of their independence; Macaulay was proclaiming his triumphant Philistinism: 'An acre in Middlesex is better than a principality in Utopia'; young men were rollicking through the midnight streets, wrenching off door knockers to assert their bursting personality. Steam was being let off from a million human steam engines. The air was full of hissing and roaring. It was all one splendid debauch of the theatrical spirit. And through the midst of it reveled Dickens, the Inimitable, arm in arm with half his generation.

Well, everyman has a touch of the actor about him. We all like to imagine ourselves in heroic attitudes. Even if we are too sensible to set our fancies free when we are awake, what devils of fellows some of us are, to be sure, in our dreams! But the greater part of this drab, indeterminate, workaday world has precious little opportunity to figure in the limelight at all. That, of course, is why the lower middle class is so desperately in love with a funeral. Death, that dignifies the most squalid bed chamber, brings for a few days the atmosphere of high tragedy into a mean home. For the few days that intervene between the death and the interment every mem-

ber of the household has a chance, if he or she wishes it, of playing a part in the solemn drama of life. And the duller the lives into which the common tragedy of death penetrates, the keener the relish with which the opportunity is seized.

But there are other chances also; and a more cheerful opportunity for acting a part is afforded, of course, when we are in love. We all like to appear heroes and heroines to our well-beloved, however ridiculous and homely our infatuation may seem to the rest of the world.

And of all generations of whom we have any record, the early Victorian was surely the most theatrical in its attitude to love. I don't suppose it meant to be insincere, but it certainly posed and attitudinized more than any sane person in our own more disillusioned age would imagine possible. And even the indomitably sincere and human Dickens was infected by the poison.

## II

Let us consider one or two typical examples, and to begin with, let Arthur Clennam come into the court, to answer for his loyalty towards the god of Love. He has certainly done yeoman service, for he has three girls to his name. Before the story opens he has 'toyed with light loves in the portal' in company with Flora Casby. Soon after the tale is well under way he is musing about Pet Meagles by the riverside, and he ends up with leading Little Dorrit down the steps of St. George's Church 'into a modest life of usefulness and happiness.'

Arthur Clennam is, I think, we shall all admit, a complete representative of the theatrical lover. His attitude to the past is theatrical. He is not half so honest as the voluble Flora, for she is true to the old sentiment, while he, it is easy to see at every turn, is terribly ashamed of his youthful infatuation.

Now, no decent man ought to be ashamed of his old loves. That is the conduct of a prig. And when Pet Meagles quite unconsciously pays him out for his inconstancy to Flora, by showing him that she herself is so much in love with another as never to have imagined it possible that Clennam could be in love with her — then his behavior is even more theatrical than any modern hero of the Lyceum. For he fills the bosom of his coat with her roses (what a sight he must have looked), and scatters them upon the moonlit river, as a sort of dramatic symbol that his hopes and dreams are floating out into the darkness. And all the while the limelight keeps playing furiously from the flies!

Little Dorrit, you remember, falls in love with Arthur Clennam; but Clennam in his magnificent, water-tight self-concentration never notices it for a moment. Who is it that notices it, then, and opens the dull man's eyes to the truth? Why, the youth who really loves her, loves her unaffectedly and unselfishly, with all the fervor of the brave little heart which swells to the size of a gentleman's under the waistcoat of sprigs — 'mere slop work, if the truth must be known' — John Chivery son of the porter of the Marshalsea. John Chivery cuts but a poor figure on the stage of the higher drama; but he is the perfect lover for all that, the true knight-errant among the groves of last week's washing; and if I were Little Dorrit I would have chosen him a dozen times before the junior partner in Doyce and Clennam.

Clennam gets the lady, of course, and seasons his vows with all the decorations of theatrical oratory, but the true honors of the Court of Love go with John Chivery. It is his solitary figure that remains in the memory, lingering on the iron bridge across the river where once she used to pass o'

Sundays, or composing marble epitaphs for his own tomb, among the drying clothes upon the clothes line, which remind him, by some strange perverted association, of the grove of Venus.

'He's a breaking his heart for her,' says his mother, 'and I could wish to take the liberty to ask how it's to be good to his parents, when bust.'

How indeed? for it is a treasure of pure gold and precious jewels!

### III

Now let us pause here for one moment to ask a question upon which, I am inclined to believe, depends the whole secret of Dickens's success or failure in the portrayal of love and lovers.

Why is it that these simple, unheroic domestic lovers carry our sympathies with them wherever they go, while the really serious, superfatted lovers, who were clearly designed to take the centre of the stage, trouble us not one whit, and are forgotten almost as soon as the book is closed? Why is it?

Well, the answer lies buried in the depths of human nature. There are two kinds of love, sacred and profane; and out of profane love spring the great passions which have animated the world's imagination — Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Henry and Rosamund — all those fiery impulses which drive a man and a woman into one another's arms, across all obstacles, and in the teeth of all the scruples of honor and advantage.

Now Charles Dickens was never the creator of a grand passion. There is no hero in any of his books who could declare that the world was well lost for a woman's sake; such an idea never entered into his scheme of creation at all.

But he did; as an artist, get just so far in the pale reflection of passion as the young man who writes the sort of love letters which make such a cruel

show from time to time in the law courts. He did conceive heroes who wanted to tread the heights of rhapsody in their ladies' praise, but could never get beyond the language and the sentiment of the stage. Their hearts, in fact, were acting a part, and their tongues could only speak the language of their hearts.

We laugh at such people now; but Dickens did not laugh at them; and thereby hangs a hidden truth of some interest.

There are two kinds of laughter — the laughter which laughs at people, and the laughter which laughs with people; and Dickens, who loved laughter more than most men, has plenty of both sorts and to spare. But one of the wisest things ever said about Dickens was said by Mr. Gilbert Chesterton, when he let slip the theory that Dickens, as a creator, is never quite at ease with any character, with whom he has not laughed. Think of his own autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*; how he laughs with himself through all the stages of emerging boyhood, a kind, tender, indulgent laugh, that sympathizes with every weakness and mistake. 'What a fine fellow, I thought myself,' he seems to say; 'ah, me! how changed I am to-day. And yet, after all, was n't I rather lovable in all my foolishness?' That is the true spirit of laughing with a person; and it may be said to be the touchstone by which we can test Dickens's true lovers. The people over whose romances one can smile with a fond indulgence — those are the people who really touch the heart. Dickens laughs with them, and through his laughter gleams the mist of tears — the tears of sympathy and of some fond memory of our own, which makes the whole world kin.

The more you think this over, I am sure, the more convinced you will be of its truth. All the lovers in Dickens

whom one really loves are the lovers with whom one can laugh. Examples will crowd in upon your memory, directly you begin to think. Let me remind you of one or two fairly obvious ones.

You cannot laugh with Walter Gay, even if you believe in him at all.

'So, if ever you see her, Uncle,' said Walter, 'I mean Miss Dombey now — and perhaps you may, who knows? — tell her how much I felt for her; how much I used to think of her when I was here; how I spoke of her, with the tears in my eyes, uncle, on this last night before I went away. Tell her that I said I never could forget her gentle manner, or her beautiful face, or her sweet, kind disposition that was better than all. And as I did n't take them from a woman's feet, or a young lady's; only a little innocent child's' said Walter: 'tell her, if you don't mind, uncle, that I kept those shoes — she'll remember how often they fell off, that night — and took them away with me as a remembrance!'

No; it really will not pass.

But how about Mr. Toots? Poor, neglected, inarticulate Mr. Toots — 'It's of no consequence, thank you' — what anyone thinks of him, but he is a real good lover, none the less.

Step down with Dickens from the throne of melodrama into the homely world of comedy, sit down by the fire among the people with whom you can laugh, and in a moment you are in a different world altogether.

'I'm very well, indeed,' said Mr. Toots, taking a chair. 'Very well indeed, I am. I don't remember that I was ever better, thank you.'

He does n't know what to say to his lady. He can only gaze at her with a watery eye. Why! it is one of the first and truest symptoms of love — to be struck dumb in the presence of the beloved object.

Walter Gay, you may be sure, would not have lacked words.

'Speak like a stranger,' returned Walter. 'No, I could not speak so. I am sure at least I could n't feel like one.'

But it is the very essence of love, in these early stages, that it makes strangers of those who are aching to rush into one another's arms. Toots is the true lover, and Walter Gay the false, and Toots by all the laws of justice ought to inherit the reward of chivalry. But alas! the novelist could not break away from the tradition of his time. The public of the fifties would never have put up with such a marriage for their heroine as a marriage with the tender-hearted, chuckle-headed Toots. He has to be content with the maid instead of the mistress, and his good loyal heart learns to be genuinely proud of his Susan, and the rapidly increasing family of daughters with which their blameless union is blessed. It is the common lot. How many model husbands in every generation have fallen in love with Florence Dombey, and ended by being peacefully content with Susan Nipper! Yet the first romance is never superseded.

'I have never changed my sentiments towards Miss Dombey,' said Mr. Toots, articulate and even garrulous at last. 'They are the same as ever. She is the same bright vision to me always. When Mrs. Toots and myself first began to talk of the tender passion, I explained that I was what you may call a blighted flower, you know. She knows that there's nobody in the world I look up to, as I do to Miss Dombey. She knows that I consider Miss Dombey the most beautiful, the most amiable, the most angelic of her sex. What is her observation upon that? The perfection of sense. "My dear you are right. I think so too."'

There is the sublimation of married

confidence. There, my friends, is the secret of wedded happiness. I commend Susan Toots to you all, as a very model of wifely wisdom. Happy is the hearth that has such a plump and pleasing fairy seated in the ingle.

## IV

Perhaps all this seems rather a lowering of the spiritual value of love. Certainly the novelist of the present day finds the profane love of the pavement a more congenial study than the sacred love of the domestic hearth.

But that is just Dickens, and you must take him as you get him. The typical Victorian citizen, that was Dickens, always dominated the universal lover of humanity that was also Dickens to just this extent. Love to him led only one way, and that the way of respectable citizenship. The altar of St. George's Church was its inevitable goal, with the pew-opener smiling all round, the third volume of the Registers open for signature, and the fresh perspective of the street shining outside in the autumn sun. Dickens must laugh with his lovers, if he is to be truly happy in their company, and he can only laugh, when a genial atmosphere of respectability lies mellow over all the world.

Give him that atmosphere, however, and that kindly hope, and the whole panorama of domestic love is spread out before you in his pages.

Think of *David Copperfield* — his book of private confessions — it contains nothing less than an odyssey of youthful susceptibilities. David begins in the nursery with Little Emily, whom he loves the moment he sets eyes upon her in Mr. Peggotty's cheerful boat-house, and the way in which that fascination floats quite naturally away, is only one in a million tributes to the novelist's wonderful human intuition. There follows Miss Shepherd at the

dancing class, who was stood in the stocks for turning in her toes, received one shy kiss in the cloak room, and was ungrateful enough for a whole bushel of brazil nuts, offered as a propitiatory gift, to prefer another youth of no merit whatever, and to make faces at David, when she passed him in the street, as a sign that all was over between them.

When we come to riper years, we do not actually make faces at our neglected flames, but the sentiment is everlasting. It is inbred in the uglier side of human nature.

And then the eldest Miss Larkins, who was no chicken, for the youngest Miss Larkins was not that — the eldest Miss Larkins who flirted with officers, allowed David to steal a flower from her bouquet, and was all the time engaged to Mr. Chestle, a portly hop-grower in Kent; Mr. Chestle who spent the evening of his inamorata's infidelities playing whist in the anteroom, plumply content with the certainty that she would be bound to him hand in foot in a fortnight. Excellent Mr. Chestle, and irresistible Miss Larkins! Who of us, looking back into his own secret record, would not be forced to confess to at least one Miss Larkins of his own?

But Dora (as I have often said elsewhere amid universal protestation!) Dora is the masterpiece in the gallery of young love. Every man falls in love with Dora some time in his life. Some men are lucky enough to escape the peril of marrying her. When the ring is sent back in a despairing note, folded like a cocked hat, the dismissal, in such a fortunate case, is taken as final. That man has got free with a happy memory, and may thank his stars for his escape. Some men again fall in love with Dora after they are married to Agnes Wickfield, and they are lucky too; for there is no taint of vice in Dora's composi-

tion. She would just shake her curls in the married man's face, and skip away with Jip down the garden path. And that man, too, would have a happy memory to carry back to his sheltered fireside, with Agnes darning innumerable stockings in the lamplight.

The really unlucky man, of course, is the man who carries Dora home, when the honeymoon is over, and settles down with her to a lifetime of underdone veal and leathery pudding. For his dream is bound to be overclouded with reality; his romance inevitably melts away, when the oysters are unopened, and there is no knife to open them, and Jip has got all his feet into the mushroom ketchup. Yes, the truth is that there are some very lovable lovers who are not made for marriage nor destined to domesticity; and it is really too bad of Dickens to make us men fall in love with Dora, only to remind us in the next breath that his beaten pathway to the steps of St. George's Church is not, after all, the only path through which Love steals its way.

Nevertheless, it is the one way for Dickens, the imperturbable British citizen; for housekeeping, the setting up of a home, its furnishing, equipment, and management are always the longed for haven of all his romances. The failure of David and Dora's married life is simply a failure in housekeeping. They never loved one another less, nor went philandering after other people. Dora was a divine sweetheart to the last, and yet she knew that her married life was a tragedy.

'I am afraid it would have been better, if we had only loved each other as a boy and girl, and forgotten it. I have begun to think I was not fit to be a wife.'

Well; it depends upon what you ask of a wife! At any rate Dora was not fit to be a housekeeper.

And to be a good little housekeeper is, as we have seen, the one goal to Charles Dickens of all soft whisperings in the twilight. The lovers begin with that ideal from the first. Ruth Pinch makes a pudding, and is immediately etherealized. Traddles's first consideration, when once he has secured the affections of the dearest girl in the world, is the provision of furniture. Sophie buys a flowerpot and stand for the parlor window out of her earliest savings, and Traddles himself acquires a little round table with a marble top—two feet ten inches in circumference—'admirable piece of workmanship, firm as a rock'—but there is always one anxiety in the background, one menacing kill-joy of apprehension. How will they ever collect the tablecloths, the pillow cases, the ironmongery and candle boxes, because all those little things mount up? Still their motto is 'Wait and Hope.'

And when the household goods are collected, even if the whole supply of family glass amounts to no more than two tumblers, and a custard cup without a handle, what a time they will have together, with their family about them, round the Christmas fire! All roads lead at last to the roast goose and speckled pudding of the Cratchits—there was a housewife for you, if you like—Bob said, and calmly too that he regarded that pudding as the greatest success achieved by Mrs. Cratchit since their marriage. Come, then, let us all sit down together and be happy. The compound in the jug is simmering; the chestnuts are spluttering on the fire. 'God bless us everyone!'

v

Well; we have reduced Love and married life into the region of burlesque. It is time to rescue it before we finish. And of course amid all this saturnalia of good citizenship there are



glimpses enough in Dickens of the sinister side of passion — the shadow cast by Love, like the shadow which followed Betsey Trotwood through the midnight streets, or waited for Lady Dedlock by the gate of the graveyard. Dickens may not have drawn a grand passion, a supreme attraction that turns men and women into fallen gods, knowing good and evil — but he knew the ugly side of Love only too well; he knew what a beast Love can make of a man, when desire is thwarted and pride set down.

Bradley Headstone is perhaps the nearest Dickens ever got to the portrayal of a man tortured out of endurance by a passion which burns him like the shirt of Nessus.

'You are the ruin of me,' he cries to Lizzie Hexam, 'I have no resources in myself, I have no confidence in myself, I have no government of myself when you are near me or in my thoughts. . . . No man knows till the time comes what depths are within him. To some men it never comes; let them rest and be thankful. . . . You could draw me to fire, you could draw me to water, you could draw me to the gallows. . . . But I have been set aside and cast out. I only hope that I may never kill him.'

The step from fear to brooding, from temptation to consent is a very narrow one. Given the opportunity, and Bradley Headstone becomes John Jasper, and jealousy finds its inevitable end in betrayal and murder.

#### VI

But the shadows pass — all shadows always pass across the pages of Dickens's golden book of life — the shadows pass, and the sunlight comes out again. At the end of all his stories the chimes are forever ringing the wedding peal. In the matter of love, Dickens is an indomitable optimist, and who can say how many happy marriages crown the

panorama of his dreams? For Dickens might have laughed with his characters never so much, as he followed them in and out of the tortuous ways of life, but at heart he loved them all the better for his laughter, and like the old-fashioned playgoer, he liked to see everybody comfortable and contented at the finish.

Here is Sophie, hiding behind the curtains among the dingy law books in the Inns of Court, and dragged out into the firelight, a midsummer rose of blushes. Here, after many days, is the last bottle of the old Madeira, hoary with dust and cobwebs, the golden wine shedding a lustre on the tablecloth. For Walter and his wife have come home, and Toots and Susan are married also — and all the wanderings are done, and there shall be no more sea. There must be feasting, of course, for with Dickens all happy anniversaries imply a full table; but it shall be the simple comforts of the homely hearth — with no damaging taint of the vincerings.

And of all such homely feasts there is perhaps one that stands out in the brightest light of all — not the less bright because it is the first feast — a wedding day feast, to tell the truth, and a stolen secret wedding at that. The sun is setting over the river at Greenwich, and three conspirators are seated in the bow window overlooking the laughing water. The bridegroom is there, and, of course the bride, and the third figure, cherubic, beaming, the very embodiment of the god of love himself, is the dear little father who has lent his countenance to this naughty runaway match, who will have to answer for it when he gets home, and who is terribly conscious at the back of his heart that he is going to be intolerably lonely, now that his Bella is lost to him, but who all the time keeps up the cheerfulness due to the occasion with an imperturbably unselfish smile.

And what a dinner it was — complete symbol of Dickensian peace — fishes of all the colors of the rainbow, dishes seasoned with bliss, and golden drinks bottled in the golden age, and hoarding up their sparkles ever since.

‘You won’t feel solitary or neglected, Pa, going away by yourself — will you?’

Brave little cherub of a hero, what could he answer but ‘No’? ‘Lord bless you! No, my Life.’ But there is no happiness in this world so complete, but it brings some shadow of loss to someone else.

‘Good-bye, dearest Papa, good-bye.’

The Dickensian

‘Good-bye, my darling. Take her away, my dear John. Take her home.’

The old man turns back to the lonely life, as age, alas! must always turn away, however much it loves, from the perfect happiness of youth. But the last glimpse of them is enough to comfort him on his solitary way.

For the sun is shining still, and ‘So, she leaning on her husband’s arm, they turned homeward by a rosy path, which the gracious sun struck for them in its setting. And O, there are days in this life worth life and worth death. And O, what a bright old song it is, that O, ’tis love, ’tis love, ’tis love, that makes the world go round!’

## BOOKS AND READING

BY WALTER DE LA MARE

AMONG my early — though not my very earliest — recollections is that of a far-away Christmas morning. Whether frost-bound was the air, whether snow-flakes were silently drifting across the window, I cannot remember. But I can very clearly descry — in a vague spectral fashion can even again become — the small boy of six or seven I then was. He is sitting up in bed, his wits still fringed with dream, and in the folds of his counterpane lie an orange, a red-cheeked apple, a three-penny bit, and a limp stocking that has well served Santa Claus’s purpose. It is not, however, the orange or the apple or the threepenny bit that incarnadines the occasion, but a book: a limp, broad picture-book, printed in bold type, with half a dozen or so full-page

plates in the primary colors — Gulliver, pinned down by lank strands of his hair and being dragged along by a team of cart-horses, fifty strong, on a vast shallow dray with wheels like reels of cotton; Gulliver entertaining (and being richly entertained by) two sneezing Lilliputians in his gold snuffbox; Gulliver with desperate head just emerging from a Brobdingnagian bowl of cream.

Not only is it possible to reanimate these glossy and gaudy pictures more vividly (and with more pleasure) than to visualize, say, the façade of Buckingham Palace, but with a ghostly thrill I remember how I then and there proceeded to spell out word by word that bowdlerized edition of a romance which may or may not be the more valuable for being also a satire, of a