

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1932.



By
H. E. Bates

WHEN the days shorten and London grows gloomy in the early afternoon, and one hurries home in the foggy lamplight to eat crumpets by the fireside, and more still as Christmas draws on, and those obese and almost indecent-looking turkeys begin to hang up outside the shops of poultrymen, who blow on their cold fingers and stamp their feet as they wait for customers, and when—in short, as Mr. Micawber would have said, when winter arrives, one begins to think of Dickens.

And the reasons for it are simple. The world of beauty, pointed out by Mr. E. M. Forster once, was largely closed to Dickens, and, heretical though that may sound to those who still persuade themselves of the beauty of characters like Little Nell and Sydney Carton, it is nevertheless true, for though Dickens had enough lifeblood for twenty novelists, scarcely a drop of it was a poet's. Not only was the world of beauty—of natural beauty, such as Hardy and Tolstoy knew so intimately—closed to him, but he does not ever seem to have been interested in it.

Dickens was the great apostle instead of the gloomy and dingy, the sordid and grotesque, the outcast and scum of life; the uglier a spot the better he loved to lay a scene there—he revelled in prison scenes, in thieves' kitchens, in dirty lodging-houses, in sordid school-rooms, in dark and dingy city offices.

He loved especially to sketch those gloomy November afternoons, with thoughts of crumpets—and very often no thought of crumpets—which make one instinctively think of him. If by any mistake a character of his got into the country, Dickens was unhappy until he had made it snow and the coach break down and had brought his characters to a convenient inn, where there was sure to be an eccentric waiter or a sinister traveller, and the chance of a bowl of punch.

The chirping of waiters, the glow of the fireside, and the smell of punch were to Dickens what the songs of birds, the sun's warmth, and the fragrance of summer grass were to a writer like Tolstoy. His substitute for beauty seems to have been, indeed, conviviality.

Two of the most irritating and repeated criticisms that the modern novelist has to face are those which declare that his books have no plot and that they are "unnecessarily sordid"; in order to rectify those errors he is urged to go back and study—and even worship—the great Victorians. Dickens was a great Victorian—in the eyes of many the greatest Victorian—and it is amusing for the young modern novelist going back to him to discover that not only was he a more sordid novelist than perhaps anyone writing to-day, but that his books lacked plot.

Lacked plot? Dickens? Yes, indeed, like the novels of Sterne and Defoe, the novels of Dickens lacked plot. What is the plot of *Moll Flanders*? What is the plot of *David Copperfield*, or *Pickwick*? What is the plot of the most famous novel in the world, *Robinson Crusoe*? The answer is the same for Dickens as Defoe—there is no plot.

If there is no plot, what is there? And the answer is again the same for both Dickens and Defoe—there is character, and though for every thousand persons asking at the lending library for "a novel with a good plot" only one will be asking for "a book with a good character," character—allied with atmosphere and style—is the true test for any novel's existence.

Here, then, is the mystery of Dickens—the mystery of his greatness. The fame of Dickens' characters is universal; Mr. Squeers and Serjeant Buzfuz and Mr. Pickwick and Uriah Heep are as much part of the history of England as Oliver Cromwell and the Duke of Wellington; year after year—generally at Christmas—they are given as character-studies wherever a man or woman has the gift of mimicry or putting on a wig; it would have been possible to fill this article simply with the names of those Dickensian characters that have become famous—waiters more famous than Dukes in actual life, landlords better remembered than Duchesses.

Only one other writer in English literature created as many famous men and women as Dickens, and no other writer in the world created so many characters that looked alive and were really dead. That is the mystery of Dickens and his greatness.

The truth is, that Dickens' characters

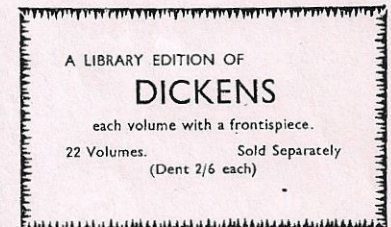
The Man who Half-made Christmas

are flat, as flat as omelettes. They are types—types which we recognise as soon as they appear on the page. There is no doubt about this—they are flat and they are types—and yet, as an acute critic once pointed out, "they have also a wonderful feeling of human depth." They look alive—but is it with their own intrinsic life or with a life which Dickens himself momentarily imparts to them as he juggles them about?

It is as though Dickens in making his omelettes, imparted such gusto and liveliness and intoxicating good humour into the operation as to persuade us, even against our better judgment, that what he finally produced were not omelettes at all, but chickens, and live chickens, too. There must be something in this, for though one hears of lovable chickens one never hears of lovable omelettes, and there is no doubt that dozens of Dickens characters are not only lovable but loved.

What is Dickens' secret? How does he produce a type like Mr. Micawber, who never develops or alters a single idiosyncrasy of his character from first to last, and force us to believe in him as an immortal figure when he has never even been a mortal one?

In a novel, atmosphere comes after character in essential importance and after atmosphere, style. Dickens was a master of both. Next to Defoe he is perhaps the greatest creator of life-like atmosphere in English literature; like Defoe he is the great master of the picaresque that is also the realistic.



A LIBRARY EDITION OF

DICKENS

each volume with a frontispiece.

22 Volumes.

Sold Separately

(Dent 2/6 each)

It is so easy to believe in the atmosphere where his characters are moving that it becomes automatically easier to believe in them, too. It is his style which forces us to do this—a style which, with its redundancies and tricks and long-windedness, ought to be bad, but which is so richly human and good-humoured and pulsating that we are carried away by it into belief of anyone or anything.

In short, as Mr. Micawber would have said, in short Dickens ought to be bad—he lacks taste, his novels have no plot, his pictures are overdrawn, his characters are flat, he is atrociously sentimental, the world of beauty is closed to him—but for some reason or other he is great.

We never ought to believe in bits of cardboard like Mr. Jingle and Sam Weller, but we do. We certainly ought never to like them, but the truth is that we love them. And like the pudding which we eat at Christmas, the festival we have been assured that he half-made for us, he is no doubt thoroughly indigestible and bad for us, but the fact is that we consume him with delight; and I for one, like Oliver Twist, hold up my plate for more.