

CHARLES DICKENS--The Christmas Novelist--By A. T. Price

His Works, Infused With the Great Spirit of Love and Charity are Still Read Throughout the Civilized World, and His "Christmas Carol" Attracts Thousands Before the Platform Where it is Publicly Read at This Season of the Year--"He Being Dead Yet Speaketh."

CHRISTMAS! A well-known public man once said that "Charles Dickens, to a great extent, made the keeping of Christmas what it is." There is little doubt that the Master-Author's Christmas stories infused into the World that Christmas spirit which is so prevalent to-day--the Spirit of Love and Charity. Charles Dickens' works are as popular today as they were fifty years ago. Branches of the Dickens Fellowship Society are established in many towns on both sides of the Atlantic, and their membership is increasing yearly. Charles Dickens will never be forgotten. Millions of his readers speak for that, and he will be always especially remembered at Christmas time.

MORE than one hundred and ten years have passed since Charles Dickens saw the light, and it is more than half a century since all that was left of the great heart and brain was deposited in Westminster Abbey. Yet the magic of Charles Dickens still touches our lives, and the manhood of the whole Anglo-Saxon race is covered by those hours of our boyhood when we laughed at Sam Weller, hated Jonas Chuzzlewit, and Carker, loved little Nell, trembled at Quilp, fancied ourselves Nicholas Nickleby, envied David Copperfield, longer to possess a Grip, detested Peckshiff and cried over the sufferings of Oliver Twist.

Mr. Stevenson once said that "youngsters love deep draughts that warm their blood and stir their pulses." It is this that Charles Dickens gave us over and over again. A great writer once said to another: "When I feel my age creeping upon me, I always take down a volume of Charles Dickens. It is like a draught at the well. Before I have read a dozen pages I could persuade myself--provided no looking-glass was near--that I am once again a youngster, the red blood flowing bravely in my veins, the love-light dancing in my eyes."

Charles Dickens knew all his characters. He knew the common people of the town, all the lights and shadows of their existence. He was never at home in the drawing-room, but in the street he was a magician to whom all secrets were known. Charles Dickens had the key to the street. He was of the people and lived among them. He listened to their wants and sorrows, saw them in their dwelling places, alleviated their distress, and then produced them in his works. His sympathy for the poor and the neglected, and the desolate and more especially for children was a passion. Very few of the wealthy would ever have known of how much wrong and sorrow, how much also of hidden nobleness existed in the lower depths of the life of our great cities. It was this deep feeling man of the people touched their hearts and taught them that these fellow-creatures had also feelings and hopes, demanding sympathy and help.

Charles Dickens as a child-lover is unique. "I love those little people," he says in the "Old Curiosity Shop" "and it is no slight thing when they who are so fresh from God, love us." His experience in his own child-life, his childish hunger, and his experience of the blacking business, throughout his works one finds that he never forgot that period of his life, and he never ceased to sympathize with suffering childhood. His portrayal of the sufferings of Paul Dombey, the intense interest displayed in the unrequited love of little Paul's sister towards her austere father; fire dreams of little Pip in "Great Expectations"; friendless and homeless Joe in "Bleak House"; above all, his little cripple Tiny Tim. Full of pathos and childlike simplicity and tenderness, yet he could hurl fierce denunciation at criminals, and the instigators of crime, against cruelty and wrong. He can make us shudder as well as laugh and cry.

A BEAUTIFUL CHRISTMAS STORY AND ITS LESSON

The lesson that Charles Dickens conveyed to the world in his "Christmas Carol" will never be forgotten. His delineation of the hard-hearted Scrooge in the first portion of the Carol, his beautiful conception of the visits of the Three Spirits--Past, Present and Future--and the conversion of the miserable, tight-fisted man to the genial and generous one, is a beautiful Christmas story and lesson. Let me quote a few lines: "Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge; a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose shrivelled his cheeks, stiffened his ears; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows and his wiry chin.

shame to quarrel upon Christmas Day. And so it was! God love it, so it was! It time he tells ceased, and the bakers were shut up; and yet there was a general shadowing forth of all these dinners and the progress of their cooking, in the baked blotch of wet above each baker's oven where the pavement sparked as if its stones were cooking too.

"Is there a peculiar flavor in what you sprinkle from your torch?" asked Scrooge. "There is, my own." "Would it apply to any kind of dinner on this day?" asked Scrooge. "Any kindly given. To a poor one most." "Why to a poor one most?" asked Scrooge. "Because it needs it most." "Spirit," said Scrooge, after a moment's thought, "I wonder you, of all the beings in the many worlds about us should desire to cram these people's opportunities of innocent enjoyment."

"I'll try," cried the Spirit. "You would deprive them of their means of dining every seventh day, often the only day on which they can be said to dine at all," said Scrooge. "Wouldn't you?" "I'll try," cried the Spirit. "You seek to close these places on the seventh day?" said Scrooge. "I seek to open them," said the Spirit. "Forgive me if I am wrong. It has been done in your name, or at least in that of your family," said Scrooge.

"There are some upon this earth of yours," returned the Spirit, "who lay claim to know us and do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, and envy, bigotry and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on themselves, not us." Scrooge promised that he would; and they went on, invisible, as they had been before, into the suburbs of the town. It was a remarkable quality of the ghost (which Scrooge had observed at the baker's) that, notwithstanding his gigantic size, he could accommodate himself to any place with ease; and that he stood beneath a low roof quite as gracefully and like a supernatural creature, as it was possible he could have done in any lofty hall.

And perhaps it was the pleasure the good Spirit had in showing off this power of his, or else it was his own kind, generous, hearty nature, and his sympathy with all poor men, that led him straight to Scrooge's clerk's; for there he went, and took Scrooge with him, holding to his robe; and on the threshold of the door the Spirit smiled, and stopped to bless Bob Cratchit's dwelling with the sprinkling of his torch. Think that! Bob had but fifteen "bob" a week himself; he pocketed on Saturdays, but fifteen copies of his Christmas money; and yet the Ghost of Christmas Present blessed his four-roomed house!

And finally we have the Spirit of Christmas Yet To Come, where in Charles Dickens, in his happiest vein depicts the agony which a man of Scrooge's disposition and nature goes through when he realizes the great mistake of his life; but the joy and happiness when he wakes and knows and feels that the opportunity of doing good to his fellow man is still his. The Spirit stood among the graves pointing to one with his finger. Scrooge drew nearer and read "Ebenzer Scrooge." "Am I that man who lay upon the bed?" he cried, upon his knees. The finger pointed from the grave to him and back again. "No, Spirit! Oh, no, no!" The finger still was there. "Spirit!" he cried, tight clutching at his robe. "Hear me, I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been; but for this inter-course, why show me this if I am past all hope?" "For the first time the hand appeared to shake. "Good Spirit," he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before him, and pitied me. Assure me that I yet must change these shadows I have thrown upon me, by an altered life!" The kind hand trembled. "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year I will live in the Past, the Present and the Future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!" In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger in his entreaty, resisted. Holding up his hands in a last

prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the phantom's hood and dress. It shrank, collapsed and dwindled down into a bedpost. Yes! and the bedpost was his own. The bed was his own, the room was his own. Best and happiest of all the time before him was his own, to make amends in!

"I'll live in the Past, the Present and the Future!" Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. "The Spirits of all three shall strive within me. O Jacob Marley! Heaven and the Christmas time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob, on my knees." He was so flattered and so glowing with his good intentions that his broken voice would scarcely answer to his call. He had been sobbing silently in his conflict with the Spirit and his face was wet with tears.

"They are not torn down," cried Scrooge, folding one of his bed-curtains in his arms, "they are not torn down, rings and all. They are here--I am here--the shadows of the things that would have been, may be dispelled. They will be, I know they will!" His hands were busy with his garments all this time; turning them inside out, putting them on upside down, tearing them, unslaying them making them parties to every kind of extravagance. "I don't know what to do!" cried Scrooge, laughing and crying in the same breath, and making a perfect Lacon of himself with his stockings. "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy, I am as giddy as a drunken man. A Merry Christmas to everybody! A Happy New Year to all the world. Hallo here! Whoop! Hallo!"

He risked into the sitting-room, and was now standing there, perfectly winded. "There's the success that the great world has in!" cried Scrooge, starting up again, and going round the fireplace. "There's the door by which the Ghost of Jacob Marley entered. There's the corner where the Ghost of Christmas Present sat! There's the window where I saw the wandering spirit! It's all right, it's all true, it all happened. Ha, ha, ha!" Really, for a man who had been out of practice for so many years, it was a splendid laugh, a most illustrious laugh. The father of a long, long line of laughs. He didn't know how long he had been among the spirits. I've never anything, I'm quite a baby. Never mind I don't care. I'd rather be a baby! Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! He was checked in his transports by the churches ringing out the loudest peals he had ever heard. Clang clang, hammer; clang, clang! Oh! glorious, glorious!

Running to the window he opened it, and put out his head. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold; cold, piping for the blood to dance to; golden sunlight; heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells; Oh, glorious, glorious! "What's today?" cried Scrooge, calling downward to a boy in Sunday clothes, who perhaps had loitered in to look about him. "Eh! returned the boy, with all his might of wonder. "What's today my fine fellow?" said Scrooge. "Today's Christmas Day," said Scrooge to himself. "I haven't missed it. The spirits have done it all in one night. They can do anything they like. Of course they can. Of course they can. Hallo, my fine fellow!" "Hallo!" my fine fellow!" "Do you know the postmaster's in the next street but one, at the corner?" Scrooge inquired. "I should hope I did," replied the lad. "An intelligent boy!" said Scrooge. "A remarkable boy! Do you know whether they've sold the prize turkey that was hanging up there? Not the little prize turkey; the big one?" "What, the one as big as me?" returned the boy. "What a delightful boy!" said Scrooge. "It's a pleasure to talk to him. Yes, my buck!" "I'm laughing there now," replied the boy. "Is it?" said Scrooge. "Go and buy it." "Walk-ER!" exclaimed the boy. "No, no," said Scrooge, "I am earnest. Go and buy it, and tell them to bring it here, that I may give them the direction where to take it. Come back with the man, and I'll give you a shilling. Come back with him in less than five minutes and I'll give you half a crown."

The boy was off like a shot. He must have had a steady hand at a trigger who could have got a shot off half so fast. "I'll send it to Job Cratchit!" whispered Scrooge rubbing his hands and splitting with a laugh. "He shan't know who sent it. It's twice the size of tiny Tim. Joe Miller never made such a joke as sending it to Bob's will be." The hand, which he wrote the address was not a steady one, but wrote it he did, somehow, and went downstairs to open the street door, ready for the coming of the poulterer's man. As he stood there, waiting for his arrival, the knocker caught his eye. "I shall love it, as long as I live," cried Scrooge patting it with his hand. "I scarcely ever looked at it before. What an honest expression it has in its face. It's a wondrous knocker. Here's the turkey. Hallo! Whoop! How are you? Merry Christmas!" It was a turkey! He never could have stood upon his legs, that bird. He would have snarped 'em short off in a minute, like sticks of sealing-wax.

AN AMERICAN OPINION OF CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens was the supreme democrat of the nineteenth century. If democracy implies a belief in fraternity and equality as well as liberty, Dickens certainly valued personal liberty. If he were alive today he would probably join with Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc in denouncing bureaucratic interference with the actions of the common man. He would oppose prohibition, and would have a greater love than Mr. Chesterton for the wilderness of prying inspectors who nowadays complicate the life of mean streets.

Equality and Fraternity. But equality and fraternity were even more to Charles Dickens than liberty. In almost every one of his books he emphasizes the equality of the simple and the highly placed, of the master and the man. It never occurred to Mr. Pickwick to treat Sam Weller as an inferior, and indeed Dickens makes it perfectly clear that Sam was infinitely superior to Mr. Winkle, Mr. Snodgrass, and Mr. Tupman. The Marchioness passed with perfect ease from the very unpleasant underground Dickens never thanked God that he was not as other men. He spent his whole life thanking God that he was as other men, and there is something intensely Christian in the constant sincere declaration of equality with others from a man of outstanding genius.

It is worth remarking that there is no condescension in the Dickens brand of equality, none of the maddening pose with which the earnest Fabian proclaims his equality with the out-of-work dock labourer. It is therefore, certain that if Dickens were alive today he would use the great weapon of his laughter against present-day abuses, and present day cruelty, as he used to in his own day against Poor Law, bullies, Yorkshire schoolmasters, the Law's iniquitous delays and the vicious system of imprisonment for debt. He would jeer at Podsnappery in high places. He would gibbet pomposity and humbug. He would exalt the simple and the kind. And, when one thinks of the turmoil and the bewilderment in which our lives are cast, if almost seems as if our great misfortune is that Charles Dickens is not alive to cleanse the world with his deep, wholesome, Cockney laughter.

LETTERS WRITTEN BY CHARLES DICKENS

America has just acquired a new literary treasure. It consists of more than 600 letters written by Charles Dickens, none of them ever published or scarcely known outside the family of their author and their recipient. They were purchased recently at the sale of the Burdett Coutts library in London by Oliver W. Barrett, a lawyer with offices in Chicago and his home in the suburb of Kenilworth. Virtually all these letters were written by Dickens to Baroness Burdett Coutts. The first is dated July 1, 1839. Their datings continue until 1866. They describe his impressions during his first visit to America, in 1842, and his reactions to the adverse criticism by him by Americans after his departure. They acknowledge sources of several of his contemporary actors, and afford intimate glimpses of him evolving his plots, writing his books and enjoying the applause of them. They make plain what an extraordinary volume of time, energy and thought he devoted to charity. They reveal intimacies of his home life, of his devotion to children in the flesh as well as in the imagination. They abound in characteristic humor and tenderness. They embody passages of narrative and descriptions comparable with his formal contributions to literature. They express as much as is to be found anywhere of Dickens' philosophy. Admittedly, they add no previously undiscovered lineaments to the portrait of Dickens as constructed by his contemporaries and conveyed in the huge volumes of his letters edited by his daughter and his sister-in-law. Their value is in filling in and revivifying these earlier pictures. Sir Edward Sullivan, in an essay written at the time their sale was announced, said: "The lady editors of the published correspondence in their preface call their work 'another book from Charles Dickens' own hands, as it were a portrait of himself by himself, many details omitted in that portrait are now forthcoming, and the resulting picture is infinitely fuller than before. So continuous, indeed, and so well connected, are these letters to Miss Coutts that, if all Dickens' other letters had disappeared, we should be able out of these alone to reconstruct the author's life and doings in a very satisfactory way."

PERHAPS TOO GENIAL

From the point of view of the social reformer, the weakness of Dickens is that he shared the characteristic of the common Englishman of being able to make the best of a bad job and to find humour in the most uncomfortable circumstances. It is quite possible that it Dickens were alive today he would deplore many modern industrial developments. He might perhaps laugh at Labour Leaders; but Dickens often laughed at the people he loved, as, for example, at Mrs. Nickleby, at Captain Cuttle, at Mr. Micawber, at Mr. Micawber, at Mr. Botfin.

REAL SENTIMENT

For him fraternity was not an aspiration but a reality. If Dickens were alive today he would regret the appalling unemployment that has resulted from the chaos of the war, he would be sympathetic with all efforts to mitigate unemployment, but he would not think he would be far more likely to go out in the streets, pick out half a dozen men from an unemployed procession, and give them a square meal without bombast or patronage, as one lucky brother giving a good time to his unlucky brethren. Dickens was not only essentially a common man, but he was also essentially an English common man. He was constantly travelling on the continent. He paid two visits to America but while flamboyant lip patriotism would assuredly

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