

Charles Dickens.

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born at Landport, a suburb of Portsmouth, February 7th, 1812. His father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. In childhood, Dickens was little and sickly, much given to reading and observation, and not strong enough for the games in which other boys delighted. He attended a private school, but when in his ninth year his father removed to London, his school-days came to an end. The family became involved in money difficulties. Their home was in Camden Town, one of the poorest districts in London. Here Charles made those sad little journeys to the pawnshop and the second-hand dealers which he describes in *David Copperfield*, and gained by painful experience that insight into the life of the London poor which he afterwards made use of in producing those lifelike pictures in his stories.

After many unsuccessful attempts to make a living for his family, his father, was thrown into the Marshalsea Prison for debt. After a time the family came to live with him, except Charles, who had obtained service in a blacking factory managed by a relative of his father. This was a period on which Dickens in after life could never bear to look back, not that he was ill-treated or overworked. On the contrary, he was respected in the place, and known as "the little gentleman." It was the humiliation of such work with such associates. He says: "I had no assistance from Monday morning to Saturday night, no advice, no counsel, no encouragement from anyone I can call to mind, so help me God."

He lodged in a house in Camden Town, kept by an old lady, the original of Mrs. Pipchin in *Dombey and Son*. He took his meals, for part of the time, with the family in the Marshalsea. An agreement was reached between the father and his creditors, and he was released from prison. The affairs of the family now began to improve. A legacy was left them by a relative, and Charles was taken from his mean employment and sent to school, on leaving which he became a clerk in an attorney's office in Gray's Inn. During his leisure he taught himself shorthand, and in 1831, at the age of nineteen, he left the law office and became a parliamentary reporter for the *London Morning Chronicle*. His fluency of expression and power of rapidly grasping the leading features of a speech, combined with his quick work as a shorthand writer, gained him

a leading position among parliamentary reporters of the day. In 1831 he made his first literary venture, dropping, with fear and trembling, a short article into the letter-box of the proprietors of the *Old Monthly Magazine*. It was accepted, to his great joy, and other articles followed. In 1836 these were collected and published under the title *Sketches by Boz*. In the same year *Pickwick Papers* was begun, and Dickens became the editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, and left off his work as parliamentary reporter.

In the same year he married Catherine, eldest daughter of Mr. George Hogarth, a musical critic. Novel followed novel in quick succession, appearing in monthly parts, each of which was eagerly waited for and read. The sale of his works was extraordinary and his popularity increased in a marvellous manner. *Oliver Twist* was begun before *Pickwick* was completed, and was followed in 1838 by *Nicholas Nickleby*. Between 1839 and 1850 there was published *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Christmas Books* and *Dombey and Son*, besides descriptive notes on America and Italy, which countries he had visited in 1842 and 1845 respectively. He visited the United States again in 1868. In 1850 *David Copperfield* appeared, by many considered his best story. Between 1850 and 1870 Dickens wrote *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations* (one of his best) and commenced the *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which he did not live to complete. His health had been declining for some years, and he died at his home, Gad's Hill, June 9th, 1870, and was buried at Westminster Abbey.

Dickens was an accomplished dramatic reader and his readings in Great Britain and the United States were very successful from an artistic and pecuniary point of view. His early death was probably largely due to the exertion and excitement entailed by these readings.

The humour of Dickens, a humour quite peculiar to himself, is concerned chiefly with the weaknesses and foibles of particular characters. It never passes into bitterness, though it is often closely allied to pathos. Taine, the eminent French critic, though he denies to Dickens all claims to real humour, says he is the most railing, the most comic, the most jovial of English authors, moving