

THE SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLMASTERS OF  
CHARLES DICKENS.

## I.

## PRIVATE SCHOOLS.

The most forcible and vivid scenes and characters of Dickens are those which are faithful reproductions of his own experience. One of his great gifts seems to have been that of taking by observation a strong mental photograph or brain picture of his surroundings, and of being able to recall these and describe them with extraordinary minuteness in after-life. This appears to have been a natural gift, commencing with his early infancy, and enabling him to remember toddling from mother to nurse during his first efforts to walk. Of himself, he says in his autobiography, which he afterwards adapted to "David Copperfield": "If it should appear from anything I set down in this narrative, that I was a child of close observation, or that, as a man, I have a strong memory of my childhood, I undoubtedly lay claim to both of these characteristics." He speaks of himself moreover as a "very queer small boy," and again as a "very small and not over particularly taken-care-of boy." We learn from Forster's "Life of Dickens" that after leaving a small preparatory day school at Chatham he went for two years to a school kept by a Baptist Minister, in the same town, the Rev. Mr. Giles, where he laid good foundations during a period of two years—which school he afterwards remembered with pleasure and respect, and which he left with extreme regret, on his father's removal to Somerset House, London, and to his residence in Bayham Street—a poor neighbourhood in the north-west district.

While at Chatham his imagination was kindled by Roderick Random, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, The Arabian Nights, and the Spectator, Idler, &c., a choice collection of books to which he had access "in a little room upstairs, which nobody else ever troubled." Here he devoured and impersonated the heroes; it was the birth-place of his fancy, and he says: "I have seen Tom Pipes going up the steeple; I have watched Strap, resting with knapsack on his back, at the wicket gate; and I know that Trunnion held that club with Mr. Pickles in the parlour of our little village ale-house."

That he should recite the tales so strongly impressed on his mind to his school-fellows is most natural, and even at this early age he took to writing—one of his efforts, "Misnar," or "The Sultan of India," being very popular amongst his school-fellows. On leaving he says his "good master came flitting in between the parking cases to give me Goldsmith's 'Boz' as a keepsake. I kept it for his sake and for its own a long time afterwards." During the publication of "Pickwick" the same "good master," Mr. Giles, sent a silver snuff-box as another souvenir, inscribed: "To the imitable Boz." At this school probably he met with his hero Steerforth, and his remembrances of it appear to be all genial. Of his journey up to London he says: "I have never forgotten the smell of the damp straw in which I was packed and forwarded like game, carriage paid; there was no other inside passenger, and I consumed my sandwiches in solitude and dreariness. It rained hard all the way, and I thought life steeper than I expected to find it."

Just now as his mind was fully open to improvement, his opportunity passed from him, and from about the age of ten to twelve he was sadly neglected, and his condition at that period seems to have called forth his tenderest sympathy in after-life. With touching reverence for his unfortunate and weak father he raises excuses for him, of whom he says: "He was proud of me in his way; but in the case of his temper and the straitness of his means, he appeared to have utterly lost the idea of educating me at all. So I degenerated into cleaning his boots of a morning and my own, making myself generally useful in the work of the house, and going on such poor errands as arose out of our poor way of living."

Things went from bad to worse till, moving from Bayham Street to Gower Street, north, "a large brass plate appeared on the door announcing

## "MRS. DICKENS' ESTABLISHMENT."

"I left," says he, "a great many circulars at a great many doors; yet nobody ever came to school or proposed to come, and at last my father was arrested."

That his sister fared better by being placed in the Royal Academy of Music and well instructed there was the occasion of much heart-burning, though he strongly disclaims the idea of jealousy. Then came his hard and depressing struggle at the blacking warehouse, described in "David Copperfield."

## Poverty was now his "Schoolmaster."

"I know," he says, "that I worked from morning to night with common men and boys, a shabby child. I tried, but ineffectually, not to anticipate my money, and to make it last the week through, by putting it away in a drawer wrapped in six little parcels, one for each day. I know that I have lounged about the streets insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond." Reflectively he says: "It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast aside at such an age. It is wonderful to me that, even after my descent into the poor little drudge I had been in London, no one had compassion on me—a child of singular abilities—to suggest that I should be placed at a common school. No one made any sign. My father and mother could hardly have been better satisfied if I had been twenty years of age, distinguished at a grammar school and going to Cambridge." A change, however, was about to come, and he was sent for nearly two years as a day scholar to "Wellington House Academy," of which establishment he favours us with a succinct account in "Household Words," (Vol. 4, No. 31, pp. 49-52) under the title of "Our School." When he went to look at it in midsummer, 1831, he found that the "Railway had swallowed the play-ground, sliced away the school-room, and pared off a corner of the house, which resembled a forlorn flat iron, without a handle, standing on end."

"It was a school," he says, "of some celebrity in its neighbourhood. Nobody could have said why—and we had the honour to attain and hold the eminent position of first boy. The master was supposed among us to know nothing, and one of the ushers was supposed to know everything. The chief was always ruling, ciphering books, with a bloated mahogany

ruler, or smiting the palms of offenders with the same diabolical instrument, or viciously drawing a pair of pantaloons tight with one of his large hands and caning the wearer with the other. A profound respect for money pervaded "our school," which was, of course derived from its chief. "Our school" was remarkable for white mice. Red polls, linnets, and green canaries, were kept in desks, drawers, hat-boxes and other strange refuges. We recall one white mouse who lived in the cover of a Latin dictionary, who ran up ladders, drew Roman chariots, shouldered muskets, turned wheels, and even made a creditable appearance as the Dog of Montargis. He might have achieved greater things, but mistaking his way in a triumphal procession to the Capitol, he fell into a deep inkstand and was drowned."

The usher, who "knew everything," was a great favourite with the boys, "and would have made it a much better school if he had had more power."

"He was writing master, mathematical master, and English master. He made out the bills, mended the pens and did all sorts of things." He was, no doubt, the original of poor Mr. Mell, who played on the melancholy lute, at Salem House.

"The Latin master was a colourless, doubled-up, near-sighted man with a crutch, who was always cold, and always putting onions into his ears for deafness, and disclosing ends of flannel under all his garments. He was a very good scholar and took pains where he saw a desire to learn—otherwise perhaps not. We remember how he fell asleep one sultry afternoon, when the chief aroused him and said: "Mr. Blinkins, are you ill, sir?" "Sir, rather so," was the blushing reply. "Mr. Blinkins, this is no place to be ill in" (which was very true) and catching a wandering eye, the chief eyed that boy for inattention, and thus expressed his feelings towards the Latin master through the medium of a substitute.

"Then, there was a fat, little dancing master who used to come in a gig, and taught us hornpipes. Also, a brisk little French master who used to come in the sunniest weather with a handleless umbrella, and to whom the chief was always polite because (as we believed) if the chief offended him he would instantly address the chief in French, and so for ever confound him before the boys with his inability to understand or reply. There was, beside, a serving man named Phil. He mended whatever was broken and made whatever was wanted, and was general glazier. He waited at table, and although usually morose and impenetrable, with a profound contempt for learning, yet one time when we had the scarlet fever in the school, Phil nursed all the sick boys of his own accord and was like a mother to them."

The two years of Mr. Giles' school at Chatham, and the two years of Mr. Jones' Academy in the Hampstead Road are probably combined in the elaborate picture of Salem House Academy in "David Copperfield," where Creakle, the brutal and coarse chief; Mr. Mell, the gentle and accomplished usher; "whounderstood boys;" Steerforth, the brilliant but unprincipled "head boy;" the patient and kind-hearted Traddles, who let out all his wrongs in skilful jests; and the tough's mother's wooden-legged Tungay, are characters drawn with a lingering fondness and faith, which are less works of the imagination than "portraits from the life."

"Poor Traddles! in a tight sky-blue suit that made his arms and legs look like German sausages or poly-poly puddings—he was the merriest and most miserable of all the boys. He was always being caned. I think he was caned every day that half year, except one holiday Monday when he was only ruled on both hands—and was always going to write to his uncle about it and never did. After laying his head on the desk for a little while he would cheer up, somehow, begin to laugh again, and draw skeletons all over his slate, before his eyes were dry. I used at first to wonder what comfort he found in drawing skeletons, but I believe he did it because they were easy and didn't want any features. He was very honourable, and held it as a solemn duty in the boys to stand by one another. He suffered for this on several occasions, and particularly once when Steerforth laughed in church and the beadle thought it was Traddles, and took him out. He never said who was the real offender, though he smarted for it next day and was imprisoned so many hours that he came forth with a whole churchyard full of skeletons swarming all over his Latin dictionary."

Under this cruel tyrant, Dickens himself suffered much. "Not," says he, "that I mean to say that there were special marks of distinction which only I received. Half the establishment was writhing and crying before the day's work began; and how much of it had writhed and cried before the day's work was over, I'm afraid to recollect. I should think there never can have been a man who enjoyed his profession more than Mr. Creakle did. He had a delight in cutting at the boys, which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite. I am confident that he couldn't resist a chubby boy especially, there was a fascination in such a subject which made him restless in his mind until he had marked him for the day. I was chubby myself and ought to know. I am sure when I think of that fellow now, my blood rises against him with disinterested indignation—but it rises hotly, because I know him to have been an incapable brute, who had no more right to be possessed of the great trust he held than to be Lord High Admiral or Commander-in-Chief—in either of which capacities he would have done infinitely less mischief."

When Mr. Mell admits upon Steerforth's cruel taunt that "his mother lives on charity in an almshouse," and is unanimously dismissed by Mr. Creakle, he gently taps upon the shoulder the conscience-stricken Copperfield, who has inadvertently disclosed the fact, and takes his farewell. "I take my leave of you, Mr. Creakle, and all of you. James Steerforth, the best wish I can leave you is that you may come to be ashamed of what you have done to-day. At present, I would prefer to see you anything rather than a friend to me or to anyone in whom I take an interest." Mr. Creakle then caned Tommy Traddles for being discovered in tears instead of cheers on account of Mr. Mell's departure, and I soon forgot him in contemplation of Steerforth, who, in an easy amateur way, took some of his classes until a new master could be found.

The indignation which Dickens felt towards the cruelty and oppression practised in private schools led him, at an early period of his popularity, to go into Yorkshire to make a full exposure of the scandalous slavery there exacted under the lash. Of this he tells us in one of his later editions of "Nicholas Nickleby." "I cannot call to mind, now, how I came to hear about Yorkshire schools when I was a not very robust child, sitting in bye-places near Rochester Castle with a head full of Partridge, Strap, Tom Pipes, and Sancho Panza; but I know that my impressions of them were picked up at

bat time, and that they were somehow or other connected with a suppurated abscess that some boy came home with, in consequence of his Yorkshire 'guide, philosopher, and friend' having ripped it open with an inky penknife."

With a view to his investigation he tells us that he "concerted a pious fraud," taking some letters of introduction in a feigned name, to make enquiries on behalf of a widowed mother, who wished to place her "supposititious little boy" in one of these schools. An honest Yorkshireman, to whom one of these letters was addressed, on leaving him without giving him the required information, suddenly took up his hat and said in a low voice: "Weel, Measther, we've been verra pleasant toogather, and ar'll apak' my moind t'voo. Dinnot let the weeder send her son to yan of our schools, measther, while there's a bare to hold in a Lunnon, or a gootour to lie asleep in! I never saw him afterwards, but I sometimes imagine that I desery a faint reflection of him in John Browdie."

"This is the 1st class in English spelling and philosophy, Nickleby," said Squeers. "We'll get up a Latin one and hand that over to you. Now then, where's the first boy?" "Please, sir, he's cleaning windows!" says a small boy. "So he is, to be sure," rejoined Squeers. "We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby, the regular education system—c-le-a-n—clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour; w-i-n—win, d-e-r—der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of book he goes and does it. Where's the second boy?" "He's weeding the garden, please, sir!" "To be sure, so he is," said Squeers. "B-o-t—bot, t-i-n—tin, n-e-y—ney, Bottinney, a knowledge of plants. He goes and knows 'em. That's our system, Nickleby. What do you think of it?"

Perhaps we may assume that Nicholas Nickleby has been so well read by our readers that further quotation would be "an old story." Dickens has, however, told us in a few pregnant sentences what he thought of it.

"Of the monstrous neglect of education in England, and the disregard of it by the State, as the means of forming good or bad citizens, and miserable or happy men, private schools long afforded a notable example. Although any man who had proved his unfitness for any other occupation in life, was free, without examination or qualification, to open a school anywhere; although preparation for the functions which he undertook was required from the surgeon who assisted to bring a boy into the world or might one day perhaps assist to send him out of it; in the chemist, the attorney, the butcher, the baker, the candle-stick-maker; the whole round of crafts and trades, the schoolmaster excepted, and although schoolmasters, as a race, were the blockheads and impostors who might be expected to spring from such a state of things and flourish in it, these Yorkshire schoolmasters were the lowest and most rotten round in the wide ladder. Traders in the awards, indifference or inability of parents, and the helplessness of children—ignorant, sordid, brutal—men to whom few considerate persons would have entrusted the board and holding of a horse to a dog—any formed a corner-stone of a structure which, for absurdity and a magnificent and high-minded *laissez-aller* neglect, has rarely been exceeded in the world."

The tale of incompetence, cruelty, slavery, and heartlessness all combined, is here completed. In our next Review we shall quote his examples of a more refined species of cruelty—for which a higher, and therefore more culpable, class of society is held responsible. E.

## WEATHER SUPERSTITIONS.

There is a natural tendency in the human mind arising from the mutual influence of the different organs of the brain, and the consequent association of ideas, to attach notions of good or evil to those objects which have been observed to precede or to accompany pleasurable or painful circumstances; hence the origin of many superstitious opinions.

From such association of ideas many animals were anciently worshipped, either as good or evil spirits; and even at a later period when their worship was rejected as superstitious, or useless, they were considered as foreboders of evil or of good.

Hence the rise of sorcerers, augurs, and other impostors, the interpreters of omens and portents who pretended in the peculiar flight and song and croaking of birds to read the destinies of monarchs and of nations.

In the figurative language of the ancients, facts were often ascribed to contemporaneous remarkable circumstances; hence the influence of Procyon or dog-days, the blustering of the stormy Orion, and many others. There can be no doubt that many of these superstitions originated in the observance of facts ascribable to atmospheric influence. Some observations on the physical origin of such superstitions may be found in Cicero's work on Divination. Thus, certain birds being affected by peculiarities of the air, previous to thunderstorms, or other terrible events, and showing signs of their affections by particular habits, were found to be foreboders of tempests, hurricanes, and other dangerous atmospheric commotions; and they were subsequently considered as evil omens in general, raining, as it were, an ill name by their utility as indicators. So the crow, garrulous before stormy weather, was afterwards regarded as a predictor of general misfortune. Many animals too were considered as influenced by human prayers and supplications. The cat, among the Egyptians, was sacred to Isis or the Moon, their Hyacinth or Diana. The Egyptians typified the Moon by this animal, as the Chinese and some of the people of India do now by the rabbit; but the cause is as likely to remain a mystery as their hieroglyphic mode of writing. Some of the ancients have amused themselves with guessing at the reason. They have supposed that the cat became fat or lean with the increase or wane of the Moon; that it usually brought forth as many young as there are days in a lunar period; and that the pupils of its eyes dilated or contracted according to the changes of the planet.

Among all the birds of evil report among the ancients the owl stands foremost, as being the most generally regarded as the harbinger of mischief and of death. Pliny represents the horned owl as a funeral bird, a monster of the night, the abomination of human kind. And Virgil describes its death-howl from the top of the temple by night; a circumstance probably introduced here by the poet as a precursor of the death of Dido.

Ovid constantly speaks of this bird as an evil omen; and