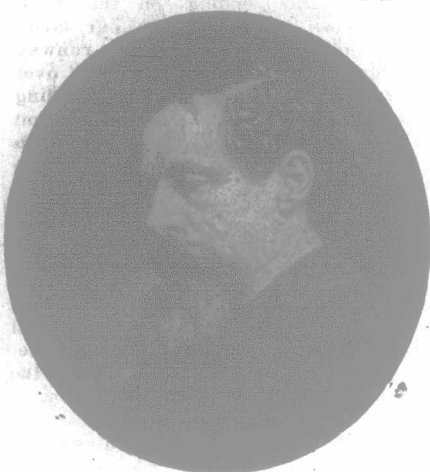




Life, Literature and Education.

Charles Dickens.



(Biographical sketch.)

Thirty-five years ago this month there died in England the novelist, who, perhaps, more than any other English writer, has endeared himself to all classes of people, both in his day and ours. In London the anniversary is being made the occasion of a great demonstration in his honor; in Canada, it is but fitting that we, too, should pay his memory tribute.

Charles Dickens was born Feb. 7th, 1812, in Landport, Eng., where his father was a clerk on a small salary in the navy pay-office. With a large family, and naturally "shiftless" habits, the elder Dickens found the problem of making both ends meet too much for him. His little children were reared in poverty, and he was finally imprisoned at the Marshalsea for debt. In passing, it may be said that he still lives in the immortal Micawber, who will go down the ages "waiting," like many another of his clan, "for something to turn up." The mother of the family seems to have been scarcely more "thrifty," and as a consequence the education of the children was sadly neglected. During his early years, however, Charles made up for this by an insatiable habit of reading. Even at the age of eight years, his genius was already showing itself by his devotion to Fielding, Smollett, Lesage and Cervantes, writers who have been wont to tax much more mature intellects. At a later day he added to these favorites Shakespeare, Addison, Steele, Ben Johnson, Carlyle, Scott and Goldsmith. The Bible was at all times his stay.

Having at last been liberated from the Marshalsea, his father went to London, where he obtained the position of reporter for the London Chronicle, and here in this big city were spent the saddest days of the author's life—the saddest, and yet the richest in the material whose elaboration was afterwards to make him famous. For a time he worked at odd jobs along the Thames, and even was apprentice in a blacking establishment, mingling with many of the people who afterwards were resurrected for all time in his books. His schooling appears to have been confined to three or four years in

as many educational institutions, one of which, doubtless, afforded the basis of "Squeer's Academy," in "Nicholas Nickleby." For a short time afterwards he was clerk in an attorney's office, where he became conversant with the legal facts and characters which appear in his writings. But, for the most part, such education as he attained was due to his own efforts. Among other things, he taught himself shorthand, an acquisition which stood him in good stead; in fact, his whole earlier life, unwittingly as it was, seemed to have a direct bearing on the work of his after life. By reason of his acquirements in shorthand he was given the position of reporter for the True Sun, in the gallery of the House of Commons, a position which later led to his appointment as general reporter for the Morning Chronicle. In this capacity he was sent here and there all over England, and so enabled to travel in stage-coaches, lodge in inns, and mingle with the great mass of "common" people, in whose description he is at his best, and whose every trait and peculiarity he perceived with hawk-like keenness and registered in his memory with an unflinching tenacity.

From reporting he soon turned to original work, first in a series of newspaper articles which appeared as "Sketches from Boz." In 1836 appeared the "Pickwick Papers," whose success was so marked that the struggling young journalist of twenty-four found himself immediately one of the most popular writers in England. From this time his pecuniary troubles were at an end. In fast succession came "Oliver Twist," "Master Humphrey's Clock," "Nicholas Nickleby," "Old Curiosity Shop," and "Barnaby Rudge," all of which were widely read and lucrative. In 1841 he sailed for America, and, on his return, published those works, displeasing enough to the American people, which marked him as a satirist of the first order—"American Notes," and "Martin Chuzzlewit." In 1843 appeared "The Christmas Carol," "The Chimes," "Cricket on the Hearth," and "The Haunted House." The next year he went to Italy, and finally settled for a time at Lausanne. Here were written "Pictures from Italy" and "Dombey and Son." Following these came "David Copperfield," "Bleak House," "Hard Times" (his poorest work) and "Little Dorrit." About 1850 he established the magazine, "Household Words," which still exists as the official organ of an association known as the "Dickens Fellowship."

Besides accomplishing this enormous amount of writing, he was for several years connected with theatrical companies, acting as stage manager, playwright, and, on occasion, even as actor. In 1856, also, he began the fatal series of "reading" tours, which netted him an additional fortune, but finally resulted in undermining his health. In the same year he bought his famous old place, "Gadshill," where unfortunate domestic complications immediately led to his separation from his wife. Once more he plunged into work, and "Tale of Two Cities," "Great Expectations," "An Uncommercial Traveller," and "Our

Mutual Friend," appeared in quick succession. In 1868 he again came to America on a reading tour, but returned to England broken down in health, and began his "Mystery of Edwin Drood," which was never finished. On the 8th of June, 1870, after working at his book all day, he was suddenly stricken with paralysis, and died the following morning. On the 14th of June he was buried in Westminster Abbey with the ceremony which Great Britain offers as a last tribute to those who have proven themselves the worthiest among her children.

The Literary Genius of Dickens

A just criticism of the work of Charles Dickens would require nothing short of a volume; nay, to it has been given the space of many volumes. Yet, upon this anniversary of the great author's death, a few words, in passing, may not be amiss. It has often been a matter of wonder as to why his books have taken such a hold upon the public—for they are still, and promise to be indefinitely, among the most popular on the sales' counters. Faultless they are not. Occasionally their narrative drags until it becomes almost wearisome; almost invariably they show lack of system and balance in construction; in some portions there is ample evidence of hurried work, in others a straining for theatrical effect, due, probably, to the author's passion for the stage. Here and there, even, one may detect a positive lack of skill in inventing a natural sequence of events to bring about a desired situation. His style, though in general masterly, and in places ascending to the very highest type of literary art, is not uniformly up to the recognized standard of excellence. Yet he is, perhaps more than any other English writer, beloved by the great reading public, and his works have been translated into almost every other language in which books are written or read.

The greatest secret of his popularity, probably, lies in his unbounded sympathy, and that keen insight into the motives and thoughts of men, which—since human nature does not change, though its outward manifestations may—has rendered Dickens, like Shakespeare, "of no age," because belonging to all. Add to this his inimitable humor, his pathos, his power of vivid word picturing, and the fact that he excels most of all in depicting the great middle class—the class to which the majority of people belong—and it does not appear wonderful that he should be popular. We like to laugh, we like—so far as our reading is concerned—to cry, we like to encounter ourselves and those whom we meet, on paper. In all this, and more, Dickens gratifies us. He understands the human heart. He interprets humanity to itself. The world understands him.

It has been claimed that Dickens' characters are, as a rule, caricatures. But, as has been observed, "this objection has been chiefly launched by those who never knew the classes of which he has written." Possibly, also, it has been hazarded by those whose vision is not so keen as they credit it to be.

In a little book called "Friendship of Art," Bliss Carman has told of examining the work of an artist friend who always painted his shadows blue. To the poet this coloring seemed unnatural, and he objected. His friend simply told him to "use his eyes." He did so, and, after a short time, was astonished to find that all shadows appeared to him blue, a thousand times more beautiful than the brown ombres he had imagined them to be, simply because he had not seen aright. Possibly, among many of Dickens' critics, a little closer observation of real life might bring about a modification of this criticism as to his "exaggeration." Certain it is that, the more of Dickens we read, the more often do we meet his very "creations" on the street, in our business, in our homes. True, he often forces the "eccentricities" of his characters upon us by reason of constant repetition, but this repetition serves its purpose in giving a distinctiveness to each individual among the hundreds of which he treats, and without it his works would lose immeasurably. His books contain matchless examples of the very highest literary art. What, for example, could excel the ability to portray Sairey Gamp in such a way as to disclose to our minds the besotted, repulsive creature that she was in reality, and yet enable us to see her live in the story, without a feeling of nausea? Again and again he is equal to this achievement.

Dickens' books, unlike those of Howell's and others of a highly-lauded school, were all written with a purpose. He was a champion of the poor and downtrodden, and threw his whole soul into their cause. He wrote neither for money nor for fame, although both of these came to him; and who can say that his very ambition that his books should do good was not the true well-spring of his marvellous success? When writing, he laughed and cried with his paper children, and more than once grew positively ill over their troubles. Could the expression of such feeling be other than powerful? However that may be, the fact remains, and will remain, so far as literary foresight can prophesy, that he ranks among the most beloved of those who have contributed to the world's literature.

The Death of Little Paul.

Little Dombey closed his eyes with these words and fell asleep. When he awoke the sun was high, and the broad day was clear and warm. Then he awoke—woke mind and body—and sat upright in his bed. He saw them now about him. There was no gray mist before them, as there had been sometimes in the night. He knew them every one, and called them by their names.

"And who is this? Is this my old nurse?" asked the little child, regarding, with a radiant smile, a figure coming in.

Yes. Yes. No other stranger would have shed those tears at sight of him, and called him her dear boy, her pretty boy, her own poor blighted child. No other woman would have stooped down by his bed and taken up his wasted hand and put it to her lips and breast as one who had some