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THE LIFE OF
CHARLES DICKENS
AND FAVORITE STORIES



DICKENS AND HIS CHARACTERS. BY "PHIZ"

CLEARTYPE EDITION

THE LIFE OF
CHARLES DICKENS

BY
EVERETT H. RUPERT



AND
FAVORITE STORIES

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LIFE OF DICKENS

CHAPTER I

A CHILD IS BORN

SHORTLY before midnight on February 7th, 1812, an aged crisis was awaited in a modest home at Landport, Portsea, England. A young woman was about to present her husband with a second child.

Preparations for the event had been simple and scant. True, the village doctor, summoned post-haste to officiate at the occasion, and doubtless grumbling at the inconsiderate hours which most infants choose for making their entrance into the world, had already arrived on the scene, dripping with the night-fog through which he had lighted his way over the slippery cobbles with a candle-lantern, but bristling with a sense of his vast importance, and determined to do his level best. And in 1812 a doctor's level best was little enough. At that time, methods of sanitation and medical care were still crude and uncertain; and being born, no less than giving birth, was a much more precarious business than it is today.

In this instance, however, Nature was kind; for blending with the midnight chimes there sounded the first weak wail of a newborn infant whose heart was destined to speak to the heart of all humanity, whose immortal genius as a story-teller was to hold the whole world in its spell.

This child, christened John Charles Huffman, was the second child, but first son, born to John and Elizabeth Dickens. John Dickens was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office—a small job at small pay. He did his work well, and was liked and respected by his associates. But the Navy Pay Office offered little chance to get ahead. It scarcely answered the eternal question of how to make both ends meet. Clothes, fuel, rent, doctor-bills, presented griev-

ous and often unanswerable problems. And now, with the birth of his son Charles, there was another mouth to feed—a state of affairs serious enough to test the fitness and courage of the average man.

But apparently John Dickens did not stem from the breed of average men. Honest at heart, reliable and efficient in his humble job, he was a careless, happy-go-lucky sort, little given to lying awake nights worrying about where the next dollar was coming from. Life was hard enough anyway. Why go out looking for trouble? Time enough to mend affairs that needed mending after trouble caught up with him. Besides, John had “expectations.” He didn’t just know how they were going to materialize—but life couldn’t go on beating him forever. Something was bound to turn up.

Something did. Another child. And another. More hungry mouths to feed, bodies to clothe—and ever-mounting doctor-bills and rent to meet. He drew too freely on his credit, and presently found himself staggering under a growing mountain of debt. Dire poverty, hunger, want, stared the Dickens family in the face—but John stared right back, grinning cheerfully. He admitted things looked bad, but they couldn’t last. Better days were ahead. Something was bound to turn up.

And, strangely enough, as if to justify his faith in the goodness of things in general, the Lords of the Admiralty transferred him to London, where his fortunes momentarily improved. But just as suddenly he was sent to a post in Chatham, and it was the old story all over again—only worse. The wolf snarled a little louder, closer; the growing Dickens family tightened its belt a little tighter. The wife and mother, Elizabeth Dickens, seems to have endured the family misfortunes with as much patience and good nature as could have been expected. If the case was otherwise, it has failed to get into the record. At any rate, the husband and father continued to smile cheerfully at their manifold troubles, and to assure his flock that “we’ll get ourselves out of this mess yet.”

It was while the Dickens family resided at Chatham that the boy Charles began to emerge, sharp and clear, from the shadows which enveloped his earliest years. According to his own account,

written long afterward, he was frail and sickly as a child, unable to join in the rough games of the neighborhood boys. Marbles, peg-top and prisoner's base were about his limit, and he did not shine in any of them.

Such formal schooling as he got during his early childhood was little better than no schooling at all. His tired, over-worked mother taught him his letters, and later the rudiments of English and a little Latin. After he learned to read, the biggest event in his young life was the discovery of some dusty, dog-eared old books which his father had collected through the years, and which had lain long neglected in the attic of the house in Chatham.

Among these books, young Charles found "Robinson Crusoe," "Tom Jones," "Roderick Random," "Humphrey Clinker," "Peregrine Pickle," "The Vicar of Wakefield," "The Arabian Nights," "Tales of the Genii," "Don Quixote," "Gil Blas," and certain volumes of Voyages and Travels. While the lustier boys of the neighborhood played their rough games, the lad pored over these marvelous books by the hour. They stirred his sensitive soul, kindled his imagination. He read and re-read them, until he almost knew them by heart.

In later years, he described the famous characters which tramped from the pages of these precious volumes as "a glorious host to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time—and did me no harm. For whatever harm was in them was not there for me; I knew nothing of it. When I think of it, the picture always rises in my mind of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life. Every barn in the neighborhood, every stone in the church, and every foot of the churchyard, had some association of its own, in my mind, connected with these books, and stood for some locality made famous in them."

As a result of this passionate reading, the youngster began to make up stories of his own—the first hint of a talent which, when he came to man's estate, was to captivate and thrill millions of eager readers the world over. It was at about this time, too, that he began to display other unusual capabilities. He recited pieces and sang comic songs uncommonly well; and his proud

parents, as proud parents are wont to do, took advantage of every opportunity to mount their precocious son on a table-top where he could "show off" to unoffending visitors who were expected to admire and applaud him, and who apparently had the good sense to do both, whatever their secret feelings in the matter may have been.

During the last two years of the family residence at Chatham, when Charles, now a dark-eyed, curly-headed youngster, was eight or nine years old, he attended a school kept by a young Baptist minister named William Giles. This was an important period in the unfolding life of the future novelist. The schooling itself, if of any value, was only incidentally so. More important was the fact that the schoolmaster liked the boy, understood his sensitive nature, admired his keen intelligence, and encouraged his passionate love of reading. Here the lad also got his first taste of theatricals, and became so enthused that he actually wrote a whole tragedy which bore the grandiloquent title: "Misnar, the Sultan of India."

Those were happy days—but the clouds were gathering, and a period of black misery lay just ahead. For some reason or other, the Lords of the Admiralty decided that the elder Dickens was again needed in London. So to London the family moved, taking a house in Bayham Street, one of the meanest, poorest parts of the town. The house itself was a small, ramshackle tenement; the neighborhood one of bleak poverty, human wretchedness and squalor. A washerwoman lived next door, a Bow Street officer lived over the way.

In the entire district there was not a single boy whom the sensitive Charles could have accepted as a playmate. His own room was a miserable garret overlooking a damp, malodorous court. Here there were no lessons to be learned except the lessons of neglect and poverty. In this atmosphere his body seemed imprisoned, his soul warped with hopeless despair. Nobody seemed to care what became of him.

John Forster, the intimate friend and biographer of Dickens during his later life, throws some light upon the child's state of mind during this distressing period when he says: "Many times had he spoken to me of this, and how he seemed at once to fall into a solitary condition apart from all other boys of his own

age, and to sink into a neglected state at home which had always been unaccountable to him."

Meantime, in spite of the enforced move to London, the earnings of the elder Dickens did not advance by a single farthing; and with the increased costs of living in the city, the family hardships also increased. To make things more difficult, the family itself had grown more numerous. There were bills and more bills, which good John Dickens, try as he would, could not meet. They shifted from one shabby home to another, always dodging the sheriff, often hungry, never knowing a moment of security. Such a sordid drama could have but one ending. And it came, to add to the misery of poverty the bitter disgrace which overtook the family when poor John Dickens was imprisoned in the Marshalsea for debt.

For a time the mother made a pathetic attempt to keep her little flock housed and fed by selling the meager furniture a piece at a time. But at last nothing was left. Mrs. Dickens, with her younger children, joined the father in prison, while a humble lodging was found for Charles outside.

Yet through all this misery, for which he might easily have held the elder Dickens accountable, the boy Charles did not once waver in the deep affection and great admiration which he had for his father. He afterwards wrote:

"I know my father to be as kind-hearted and generous a man as ever lived in the world. Everything that I can remember of his conduct to his wife and children, or friends, in sickness or affliction, is beyond all praise. By me, as a sick child, he has watched many nights and days. He never undertook any business, charge or trust, that he did not zealously, conscientiously, punctually, honorably discharge. But in the ease of his temper and the straitness of his means, he appeared to have utterly lost at this time the idea of educating me at all."

It is certain, however, that the tragedy which reached its terrible climax with his father's imprisonment, left the lad saddened and bewildered, and beginning to ask, even at his tender age, what life was all about. He must have spent many a miserable, lonely night, wetting with his tears the hard straw pallet in the wretched garret where he slept, wondering what he could do to

help his poor father and mother. But what could a mere child do?

Early each morning the lad came to the gloomy fortress where he waited patiently for the great gates to open, so that he might go in and get breakfast, such as it was, with his father and mother. And there he remained, occupying the long hours as best he could, until the gates were closed at night, when he crept back to the mean hovel where he slept.

It was during this dark interval that Charles, then ten years old, secured, through the good offices of a relative, his first employment in a blacking factory—a crazy, tumble-down old building squatting on the edge of the river, and literally overrun with rats.

“Its rotten floors and staircase,” he wrote in after years, “and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellar, the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs . . . and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again.”

The child’s job was to paste labels on blacking-pots. The hours were long, the pay miserable—only six shillings a week—and the work pure drudgery. Three other boys, dragged from the London gutters and similarly engaged, were his only companions.

“No words,” Dickens wrote, “can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship . . . and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man crushed in my breast. The sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; the shame I felt in my position; the misery of it to my young heart . . . cannot be written.”

Only a few minutes were allowed at noon for lunch—he was always hungry—and he sometimes squandered a part of his slender earnings for a four-penny plate of beef at a nearby cook-shop, or for a plate of bread and cheese at an old public house over the way.

A penny cottage loaf and a pennyworth of milk provided his breakfast, and secreted in a cupboard of the shabby garret chamber where he slept, he kept another small loaf and a quarter pound of cheese to make a supper on when he came back at night. Saturday, being pay-day, was the big day of the week; and Saturday night was always looked forward to as a great occasion, when he

could walk home with six shillings in his pocket—and on the way stop and look in at the confectioners' windows, and think what he might buy with his money, if he only dared spend a little of it.

Thus life ran month after month—days of ill-paid drudgery, in ugly surroundings that tortured his sensitive soul; nights of loneliness, heartache, a hopeless sense of abandoned neglect, for which, as he tells us, he had “no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no support from anyone I can call to mind, so help me God. My rescue from this kind of existence,” he says, “I considered quite hopeless . . . though I never, for one hour, was reconciled to it, or was otherwise than miserably unhappy. I felt keenly, however, the being so cut off from my parents, my brothers and sisters; and when my day's work was done, going home was such a miserable blank.”

One can easily see why, when Dickens came to write *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist*, he did not have to draw upon his fertile imagination for material. He had only to call to memory the bitter struggle of his own childhood. So great indeed was his loneliness, so warm the ties which bound him to his unfortunate parents, that his entire Sundays were spent in the Marshalsea; and on one such visit, the restraints which he had hitherto managed to impose upon his emotions when in their presence, slipped beyond control, and he pleaded with his father to find some way to remove him from the squalid lodgings which he called home.

Dickens Senior was so deeply touched by his son's pitiful appeal that he wept, and promised the lad that he would move heaven and earth to find him a decent place in which to live. “He also told me,” says Dickens, “to take warning by the Marshalsea, and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a year and spent nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy; but that a shilling spent the other way would make him wretched.”

Charles never forgot the warning; but neither did his father forget his promise to secure for his son more desirable living quarters. John Dickens had a little money derived from a small pension, and this he now drew upon to pay for a back attic that overlooked a lumber yard. A mattress with some bedding was sent to this place, and a cot made up on the floor. There was a little

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