

“A Dickens of a Christmas”

Probably no one has done more to burnish the glow that surrounds Christmas than the author Charles Dickens. If we are apt to think of this season as "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time," it owes much to the imagination of one man. But to fully understand what the holiday meant to him requires knowing a little about Charles Dickens' own difficult childhood, and how his background came to shape his religious beliefs.

It helps to know that Charles Dickens was the son of an improvident father. John Dickens was warm-hearted, affectionate, and drank no more than was good for his health. His only fault was his habit of spending more than he made. The family hovered for years on the borderline between shabby gentility and flat-out poverty. Finally, when Charles was ten years old, his father was placed in the Debtors Prison of Marshalsea, while his mother camped with her seven other children in nearby Camden Town and tried to open a dingy sort of boarding school. Charles, after helping his mother in whatever he could, was at last put out to earn his own living by tying and labeling pots of boot polish in a warehouse.

"It is wonderful to me how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age," Dickens later remembered. "That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I ... The deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that, day by day, what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in ... were passing away from me, never to be brought back anymore; cannot be written."

Many of Dickens' best loved novels were at least partly autobiographical. In *David Copperfield*, the figures of Mr. and Mrs. Micawber were probably based on his own father and mother. Mrs. Micawber, a tall, thin-faced lady, was the proprietor of "Mrs. Micawber's Boarding Establishment for Young Ladies," but as David remembered it, "I never found that any young lady had ever been to school there, or that any young lady ever came, or proposed to come; or that the least preparation was ever made to receive any young lady. The only visitors I ever saw or heard of, were creditors." Visiting Mr. Micawber in the debtor's prison at King's Bench, David found that gentleman "waiting for me within the gate, and we went up to his room (top story but one), where he cried very much. He solemnly conjured me, I remember, to take warning by his fate; and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds a year for his income, and spent nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy, but that if he spent twenty pounds one he would be miserable." It's a bit of advice that Mr. Micawber offers freely and frequently to others, but seems incapable of learning himself. "Income over expenses, result happiness; expenses exceed income, result disaster." As Charles Dickens knew from sad experience, a single shilling could mean the

difference between shame and respectability, or between freedom and imprisonment.

Charles Dickens knew the value of money. He never pretended to be above cash considerations. "Good literature," he said later in life, "will always command its price." His own books commanded such a fair price that the man who began life in the hard toil of a blacking warehouse left an estate when he died of ninety-three thousand pounds. But money never attracted Dickens for its own sake. "No man," he said, "attaches less importance to the possession of money, or less disparagement to the want of it, than I do ... For myself, I would rather that my children, coming after me, trudged in the mud, and knew by the general feeling of society that their father was beloved, and had been of some use, than I would have them ride in carriages, and know by their banker's books that he was rich." For Dickens, this was more than lofty rhetoric.

His childhood gave him a lasting empathy with the poor, and his charity and generosity were known far and wide. Some of Dickens' attitudes toward wealth and poverty are revealed in that favorite tale, *A Christmas Carol*. In the story of the miser Scrooge and his penurious employee Bob Cratchit, we're made aware of how both the love of money and the lack of money can dry up the springs of the human spirit. For Scrooge, the desire for gain overshadows all warm and tender feelings and creates a world of ultimate loneliness. His grasping has ceased to have any purpose beyond itself; when he closes his office for the night he departs for a solitary dinner, and then retires to an empty apartment, where he sits alone over his bowl of gruel. To the request for alms for the less fortunate, he gives his hard-hearted reply: "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?" For the Cratchit's, on the other hand, the lack of money means an existence of thwarted hopes and deadened aspirations: little food, little joy, and little hope for their children's future. When Scrooge finally has a change of heart and learns to share what he has with others, then money ceases to be the enemy of life and instead becomes its friend and ally. Fasting gives way to feasting. The chill of loneliness melts in the warmth of human community.

If Dickens knew the importance of money and the ways it could both liberate and imprison human beings, he also understood the importance of religion, and the ways it could both bind and loose the mind and heart. There were some forms of religion that Dickens despised. "I am the only child," says a character in one of his novels, "of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured and priced had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next--nothing graceful or gentle

anywhere " with religion that was grim and punitive, Dickens had no patience. He saw it all around him in Victorian England, and satirized it in characters like Nicodemus Bumps, who "subscribed to the 'society for the Supression of Vice' for the pleasure of putting a stop to any harmless amusements; Rev. Melchisidech Howler, with his frantic groaning and thumping on the pulpit; the character Miggs, in Barnab~, who 'hates and despises herself and all her fellow creatures as every practicable Christian should." Dickens was disgusted with religion that was ostentatious or that paraded its own goodness. He was equally opposed to faith that was superstitious or obscure. He was doubtful of the truth or value of traditional doctrines like the Virgin Birth. "The contentions among Christian churches and their common endeavors to oppose the advance of scientific knowledge infuriated him," notes his biographer Edgar Johnson. As Dickens himself wrote: "The science of geology is quite as much a revelation to man as books of an immense age and of (at the best) doubtful origin; Joshua might command the sun to stand still, under the impression that it moved round the earth; but he could not possibly have inverted the relations of the earth and the sun, whatever his impressions were."

The church's opposition to Darwin's theory of evolution and to scholarly criticism of the Bible also annoyed him. "And the idea of the Protestant establishment, in the face of its own history, seeking to trample out discussion and private judgment," he said, "is an enmity so cool, that I wonder the Right Reverends, Very Reverends, and all other Reverends, who commit it, can look in one another's faces without laughing... "

Dickens took sharp aim at the moribund and life-denying forms of religion in his society, yet he also knew that religion could nurture and affirm the best in human nature. Though he mocked the conventional piety of his times, Dickens was in his own way an intensely religious man. William Ellery Channing had stimulated his interest in Unitarianism when the author visited American in 1840. And after returning to England, Dickens attended a few Sundays at the Essex Street Chapel, and later began to worship at the Little Portland Street Chapel, another Unitarian church in London's West End. Like Unitarians then and now, Dickens was never doctrinaire about his faith, and sectarian controversies seemed to him antithetical to the bonds of sympathy that genuine religion should encourage. In a book written for the religious instruction of his own children, he defined Christianity simply as the impulse "to do good always--even to those who do evil to us. It is Christianity to love our neighbors as our self, and to do to all men as we would have them do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle and merciful and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts..." The creator of Scrooge and Tiny Tim understood that religion should be for hope and cheer, not for pinched hearts and long faces. He believed that religion should be more concerned with eradicating the slums and squalor that crush the human spirit

than with policing private morality or defending the literal inerrancy of ancient scriptures. The spiritual center of Dickens is summed up by his biographer as "an almost endless relish for the richness and variety of life and human nature, a love of experience that exulted in the pure vividness with which things are themselves. Dickens liked and disliked people; he was never merely indifferent. He loved and laughed and derided and despised and hated; he never patronized or sniffed... He had no fastidious shrinkings, no snobberies, no dogmatic rejections."

"But for all the enthusiasm with which he welcomed the multiplicity of experience, Dickens did not fail in a just discrimination of black and white. His very sympathy for life's thronging variety made him stern to whatever impoverished or destroyed. From the hypocritical Stiggins in *Pickwick* to the bullying Honeythunder in *Edwin Drood*, he abominated those who sought to reduce it to a dissipated gray or to subordinate others to their own desire for power. He hated the gloomy and ferocious self-righteousness of the *Murdstones*. He derided the woolly-mindedness of *Mrs. Jellyby*, neglecting the poor of London's slums and even her own family while she worried about the natives of *Borioboola-Gha*, and detested the domineering presumption of *Mrs. Pardiggle*, pushing her way into the cottages of the poor with useless and arrogant advice. He saw England plundered by *Boodle and Coodle*, controlled by the landed aristocracy of *Sir Leicester Dedlock*, the selfish commercialism of *Mr. Dombey*, the industrial greed of *Mr. Bounderby*, and the slippery financial machinations of *Mr. Merdle*; and helplessly obstructed by the circumlocution office... Meanwhile, he beheld with loathing how this dreadful structure of iniquity and suffering spawned a host of lesser parasites, vermin, and beasts of prey, the *Fagins*, *Bumbles*, *Artful Dodgers*, *Fangs*, *Squeerses* ... all sucking or bludgeoning their own advantage out of their victims."

"Every book he produced was not only a celebration of the true wealth of life; it was an attack on the forces of cruelty and selfishness," says Johnson. "Unlike so many of the lovers of humanity who are bitterly unable to love human beings, it was not an abstract humanity constructed in his mind that Dickens loved, but men, women, and children, with all their frailties and absurdities." For all he knew of the world's imperfections, it was Dickens's optimism that prevailed and that caused his friend *J.T. Fields* to call him "the cheerfulest man of his age." The cheerfulness, the expansive love for humanity that overflows in his work was as much a spiritual and moral achievement as a gift of personality or temperament. Out of his own dark youth of drudgery and shame, he forged a stout and courageous faith in the goodness of people and the worth of living.

The world we live in is not so very different from the world that Charles Dickens knew, and criticized, and loved. Human nature doesn't change so quickly. People are still subject to the temptations of self-righteousness and self-pity, and still

capable of both cruelty and stupidity. Bureaucratic institutions and soul-less corporations are no less a problem today than they were in the time of the Circumlocution Office. The world continues to be full of ignorance and ineptitude in high places. Children still go hungry in the midst of plenty.

The challenge, now as then, is to fashion a faith that recalls us to the values and relationships that make life precious, and which helps us maintain our equilibrium and idealism amid the cynicism and corruption that abound. And so I invite you to celebrate Christmas in this spirit: as a time to affirm what is decent and honorable in ourselves and others. Celebrate, because for all its sham and pretense, it remains a marvelous world. Celebrate, because for all their meanness and arrogance, people are still capable of love and generosity. Celebrate this holiday, not because of miracles that happened long ago, but because of possibilities that are present here and now. Let it be a time to renew the bonds of kinship that unite us all, young and old, rich and poor. Make it an occasion to share with those in need. Remember that this can be a good season if we will it: a kind, forgiving, charitable, and a liberal time. Let your songs be hearty. Let your inward light shine. Pray for peace; work for justice. And have a Dickens of a Christmas!