

quarters to the new cabin. To be sure, it has no walls, but it has a roof for which I am mainly responsible.

As I write up my diary by the dim light of a lantern, before dropping off to sleep, I gaze reflectively upward and see a star peeking slyly down at me from above. It is a very brilliant star

and I ponder which one it may be. Then it suddenly occurs to me that it is quite an achievement — even for a star of first magnitude — to shine through a thatched roof.

Thereupon, I send upward, through my transparent roof, a fervent prayer that it may not rain, at least to-night.

CHARLES DICKENS

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

[This essay is Mr. Chesterton's Presidential Address to the members of the Dickens Fellowship, delivered at Connaught Rooms, London, on the occasion of his election to the Presidency.]

From the *Dickensian*, January
(QUARTERLY OF THE DICKENS FELLOWSHIP)

ON an occasion like this, of a social and festive nature, it would be natural, I think, in the ordinary course of things, to consider the great man whose name is our title, chiefly in relation to those great festive gatherings, and that great humane spirit which he shows in English literature; and whatever degree of attention it is possible to pay to it, it is certainly the thing which should be considered first, and without which any kind of criticism of Dickens is futile. The festive mood, the social spirit, when it really for a time achieves human happiness, is a thing that has been very rarely presented in literature. There are all sorts of shades of melancholy, which have been most delicately dealt with by the artistic geniuses of all ages. Blue devils, so to speak, are of every shade of blue, from sky-blue to that variety cultivated by the German professors, which might fairly be called 'Prussian blue!' But that red firelight

of direct human happiness has been very seldom in any way successfully indicated, even by men of the greatest creative genius. There are only a very few instances of it which are successful, I think, and nearly all those instances are in Dickens. I will not say that the modern novelists, the earnest, scientific, psychological novelists, do not describe happiness, for I suppose they do not try. Possibly they have no happiness to describe! But it is, I think, instructive to notice how almost all attempts to describe man in a condition of spiritual satisfaction, save in very rare and wonderful single lines of great poetry, generally fail. We are all acquainted, for instance, with that class of literature which describes Utopias, or perfect social conditions in the future; and I think that most people will agree with me when I say that the effect of reading the account of any perfect social state is to fill the soul with the

sick and fiercest reaction, in which one feels that, rather than live for half an hour in such a society, one would consent to go on living even amid the vulgar and servile sweating and scheming of a corrupt Capitalism under which we do live!

It is the same in those higher spheres, in which literary men and other great poets and great prophets have attempted the description of happiness. It has had exactly the same effect as a rule — an effect of reaction. The habit of painting pictures, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern pictures of angels in bleached wings and white nightgowns, and so on, has always had, I think, upon most people, the effect that it produced in the Byronic reaction — a general literary enthusiasm for praising hell, and describing devils as noble and generous people, and generally celebrating an infernal condition, the attractions of which I believe to be very much overrated.

I say, therefore, that it is very, very rare that that particular note of the human spirit, at once singing and at rest, has been achieved in literature, but it has sometimes been achieved by that great Englishman whom we are met to glorify. It is a very English characteristic, because, though the English cannot write about happiness any more than anybody else, I do think that there is a sort of atmosphere and heaven of happiness in English literature from Chaucer downward, and perhaps before. It runs through the Robin Hood ballads and innumerable passages of imaginary prose, and it culminates, as I say, in a certain spirit in Dickens. You do feel that when Kit and his family went to the theatre, that they did enjoy themselves. As I say, it is a small thing, to all appearance, but it is an achievement in which one may say that Dante failed!

When one considers that aspect of

Dickens, one feels that it is the proper aspect to insist upon, or, at any rate, to begin upon, in any such meeting of our fellowship as this. But the kind of entertainment which it is possible to provide on these occasions is upon a very much lower level; as, for example, this glass of water is upon a very much lower moral level than that with which Dickens's characters were in the habit of regaling themselves! It is impossible for us to entertain you in the manner in which the Cratchit family, let us say, celebrated Christmas. I am the only substitute or approximation to a pudding which can be put before you this evening! And, unfortunately, the spectacle of a journalist making a fool of himself is not so entirely fresh and novel to you as, say, a theatrical performance was to the Nubbles family!

But when we have — I will not say, done justice to, but — very inadequately indicated that supreme social characteristic in Dickens's works, it is well, perhaps, to correct a tendency to overstate that, or, rather, to understate the other corresponding aspect of his work. Dickens was — I will not say, although a happy man, but rather because a happy man — a very pugnacious man. Indeed, I think an optimist who is not pugnacious is the most depressing person in the world! If a man cannot enjoy a fight, he cannot enjoy anything, and the kind of philosophical optimist, the serene Buddhist, calm, smiling optimist, who approves of all things and accepts all things — well, there is nothing to be done with him except to hit him a thundering crack on the nose and see whether he accepts that!

Now, Dickens had this other aspect, as I say, of pugnacity, of reforming villainess, and, above all, of satire; and the satire marks, perhaps, the peculiarly challenging character of his work all over the world. It represents, for in-

stance, the whole of that question which has often been discussed, of his relations to America. When I was in New York in the early months of this year, I am happy to say that I attended a very delightful meeting of our fellowship in that city, where I can only say that no conceivable English meeting could have been more enthusiastic than was that American meeting, for the author of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. As a matter of fact, what Dickens did in relation to America is very much what he did in relation to England. There is a curious sort of impression, to judge from some people's criticism of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and of the *American Notes*, which seems to suggest that Dickens described America as a kind of lunatic asylum, full of criminal lunatics like Hannibal Chollop and Jefferson Brick; while he was, at the same time, describing England as an island of innocence, a happy world consisting entirely of poor and ardent beings like Mr. Pecksniff and Jonas Chuzzlewit, and Chevy Slyme, and Montague Tigg! Now I think that even those Englishmen who consider that Dickens's satire against America was deserved, or even those Englishmen who think that something of the evils against which that satire was directed still remain in America, even such Englishmen may very reasonably look at home for any field of reform, or for the application of the moral truths of Dickens. When we have got rid of all our Pecksniffs, it will be time to ask the Americans to get rid of all their Jefferson Bricks! And I am not going to give a list of the Pecksniffs whom it might be well to get rid of, though, as Mr. Pecksniff himself observed, 'A suitable opportunity now offers!'

But I will remark that there is practically no difference, so far as that mere enumeration of fantastic or despicable characters is concerned, between the England and the America of *Martin*

Chuzzlewit. The truth is that Dickens did something to England and to America which is far more valuable and far more practical for the real purpose of uniting two peoples than most of the vague and verbose eulogy that has appeared upon both. I do not know whether what I say is calculated in any way to chill the political enthusiasm of others, but I must frankly confess that I have very seldom listened to any of those wonderful, statesmanlike, diplomatic speeches about how impartially we all love the Czechoslovaks or whoever it may be, without feeling my genuine enthusiasm for the Czechoslovaks, which I now say is at boiling point, to sink almost to zero! Whenever I hear the formal eulogy, and an assertion of the friendship of two nations, a horrible, phantom echo seems to come to me of some speech by Mr. Pecksniff! I do not know that the utterances of the statesmen or diplomatists are insincere; I think in some cases they are prompted sincerely, but the very medium that is employed, the extreme difficulty of praising anything except in the form of a poetical ode which most politicians are not ready to produce on the spur of the moment, gives something unreal and almost spectral to the whole of that expression of social unity.

Now, what Dickens did to unite the two peoples was to make them laugh at each other. He satirizes both of them, but by satirizing his own people he showed that he was doing it impartially; he showed that what he satirized was common human folly and weakness, and, therefore, as I can myself testify from my experience in America, his satire has left no kind of bitterness whatever in the attitude of that democracy towards that great democrat.

Now, when a great satirist, and one so powerful as Dickens, also so popular, attacks the snobberies or the priggishness of this world, this world gener-

ally has a more or less subconscious tendency to escape from the satire. Some fact or other is always insisted on, or some fancy is indulged in, which will rob the satirist, to some extent, of his intellectual authority. I need not point out that this has been so from the beginning of the world; the prophets have been called madmen; everyone insisted that Dante was glum and bitter and savage. A more plausible case is that of that very great man Swift. A vast amount of Swift's satire is now very unjustly neglected, because of the tradition on which his enemies so much insist — that he was a very misanthrope and madman raving at all mankind.

Now, when the world was confronted with the searching and even scourging satire of which Dickens was capable, the world, in its unconscious self-defense, was in a difficulty. It was obviously difficult to maintain that the author of the account of the Dingley Dell Cricket Match was an unsmiling and glum figure like Dante! It was very difficult to maintain that the author of *A Christmas Carol* was a maniac or misanthrope hating all mankind! Therefore, the existence of that hypocritical spirit in society, which always seeks to protect itself, consciously and unconsciously, tended toward another explanation. It created and fixed permanently the opinion which says that Dickens was only a caricaturist; he made an absolutely unreal world, fantastic and fascinating indeed, but unlike the world in which we live — he was an inventor of goblins and elves and fairies! In other words, all Dickens's criticisms were to some extent blunted by the theory that anything he said was to be taken as a kind of glorious and amusing lie. In defining that theory, it is well on our side to maintain measure and common sense. As Sir Thomas More said: 'Never was the heretic yet who spoke all false,' and

there is in that criticism an element of truth, as in the other criticisms directed against other reformers. It is perfectly true, for that matter, that Dante was a man of glum temperament. It is perfectly true that Swift was a man of morbid sensibility, and of a terrible trend toward depression. And it is perfectly true that Dickens's type of art, his mode of expressing himself, was of the fantastic sort; that his literary style was exuberant rather than restrained. But what people always leave out in those rough-and-ready estimates of this great man was a small, not unimportant thing called 'truth itself'! The things that Swift said about Government, about law, about the great, about the weak society of his day, then at the height of its glory — the things he said were indeed said by a bitter and morbid, even an insane man. But the things he said happened to be most of them true. The criticism which he made of the early eighteenth century and that corrupt oligarchy which has left so many of its evils behind it, were in themselves virile and noble criticisms of an evil state of society.

In the same way, it is perfectly true that Dickens had running through his whole work an indistinct element of exaggeration, but that exaggeration is itself exaggerated. He exaggerated in the same fashion that all poets and artists of a certain somewhat flamboyant type always do emphasize or over-emphasize certain things. He exaggerated in literature as Turner, for instance, exaggerated in painting — another great Englishman full of very much the same kind of highly colored energy and imagination. You all know the old story about Turner and the realistic critic. It is a chestnut, but it is the business of these solemn occasions to repeat stories for the thousandth time: the story of the man who, when Turner was painting a sunset, said to

him: 'It is all very well, Mr. Turner, but I never saw a sunset like that!' And Turner said: 'Don't you wish you could?' That story above quoted is embodying the case against realism, but, as a matter of fact, it embodies something else as well. It is not only an argument against realism, but it is the real proper restraint upon imagination. Turner recognized that while an artist may make up something that does not exist in the real world, it is his business to make up something that the human spirit desires to imagine. In other words, simple and hackneyed as the form is, it is not only the business of the artist to create, but also to please. If you consider the large amount of modern realistic and psychological fiction, just as if you consider the very large amount of modern art, I think you will be inclined to hesitate about whether the artist can claim even the attraction of Turner's sunset. When you read about somebody who says: 'Never in the course of all my rambles through country churchyards have I ever come upon a tombstone with an inscription like that of Mrs. Sapsea,' in these circumstances, it is perfectly legitimate to reply: 'Don't you wish you could?' If a person says that he thinks any particular character, even such as the most expansive characters in the very earliest books, such as — well, I won't say Dick Swiveller, because I think he has a perfect right to live — but any of the most expansive of his figures, say Mr. Dowler, for instance, that swagger through the admirable reminiscences of Pickwick; if anyone says of those: 'I never met a man like that,' it is legitimate to say: 'Don't you wish you could?'

But if you read one of these slow, careful, modern stories, which describe the gradual development of some young lady — how she fell in love with the drawing-master, and had a strange inward feeling that she wished to hammer

drawing-pins into his head, or something of that kind — you all know that delicate description of human feeling which is so common in fiction, when you read about that young lady, and say: 'I never met a young lady of that kind,' it is not possible for the artist to reply: 'Don't you wish you could?' On the contrary, if he did say: 'Don't you wish you could?' you would have the obvious answer: 'I thank God I can't!'

As a matter of fact, I may say, in conclusion, that the charge of Dickens's exaggeration is exaggerated. A vast amount of Dickens is far more realistic than most modern realistic fiction; practically the whole of the last two or three novels, for instance, are packed full of facts which are so true, facts about politics and high society, which are so true that you are not even now allowed to print them in the newspapers. It would be much truer to say that Dickens fills his pages with stories of real life, the names being merely altered, than to say that what he depicted was exaggeration, and impossible. And if it is true, as some say, that he stands out of that Victorian Age as a kind of ridiculous pantaloon decked out in fantastic clothes, and that people count him with Thackeray and Trollope, I think the very reverse is the case. I have a great admiration for Thackeray and Trollope and those other great pantaloons; but I think it was they who were deceived. It was they who were under the delusions; it was they who were hoodwinked by fables and fictions, many of which, though not all, have now passed away. But the man who really saw our society as it is, was Charles Dickens.

Well, it is a very old story. In all times, people have had that illusion which the people of what I may call with every respectful intention the Thackeray epoch, held, the illusion that the fashions and forms of their

own time were all eternal. I think to Thackeray the figure of a perfect man of the world like Major Pendennis appeared to him to be, as it were, a central type of citizen. If you were to look at their costumes now, or even their manners, I venture to think that Major Pendennis would look quite as fantastic as Mr. Turveydrop.

But that, as I say, is an old story, and an old moral, and one that it never required even this great man to teach us — that it is the genius that creates which remains, that it is the spirit of man, the imagination which is a part of our immortality which abides, and that it is the fashion of this world that passes away.

'DROSERA CANNIBALIS'

BY RENÉ MOROT

[M. Morot's fantastic tale has a basis in fact. Plants of the genus drosera, like the more familiar Venus's fly-trap (dionæa muscipula) of our own woods, have actually the power of capturing insects that alight on their sensitive leaves, specialized for the purpose, and then absorbing them. Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose, to whom reference is made in the course of the tale, is, of course, the celebrated Hindu botanist, now head of the Bose Research Institute and a Fellow of the Royal Society, famous for his researches into plant movement and response, and for the invention of extraordinarily delicate pieces of apparatus, notable among them being his 'crescograph,' an instrument capable of recording plant growth at the rate of one hundred-thousandth of an inch a second.]

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I DO NOT know why anyone should try to cast doubt on the death of Professor Hartenstatter, the celebrated botanist, for I am myself perfectly qualified to prove that it actually took place. The great botanist has not merely disappeared; he is really dead. I saw him while he was dying, and again when he was dead; and I was one of the two witnesses who signed his death certificate in November 1918, while I was still in the army.

Nobody need doubt that he has disappeared for good. It is necessary to say 'for good' when one talks about the death of a queer scientific enthusiast, who has been reported dead many

times when he had simply disappeared; for it was his custom to vanish mysteriously for two or three years at a time, in the virgin forests of Africa or South America, searching for the unknown plants whose discovery and classification had made him the greatest botanist of his day.

You probably remember that Hartenstatter was passionately devoted to the study of carnivorous plants and that he had succeeded in giving some of them a truly monstrous development. In the great greenhouse, forty or fifty feet high, which he had erected near his villa at Rothmunster and into which no one, not even his servant, was