

The Life of Charles Dickens.

A BIOGRAPHY which represents the many-sidedness of an individual with any character at all is a performance given to few men to achieve—a monument seldom erected to any of the great and memorable. The “subject” is to his biographer what he sees him, and there is no help for the public to whom the biographer tells his tale. It is for him to choose, among the facts of the subject’s life, which he will put forward or suppress—which among the feasible impressions of the subject’s character he will suggest and substantiate. In no branch of literature are the total failures more numerous—is the average of imperfection and unsatisfactoriness larger. In certain cases, where the “life” cannot be supposed to possess a widely-extended public interest—where it is a demand as well as a product of cliqueism—narrow views and extravagant estimates, foolish exaggerations and eccentric theories, may be allowed to pass with a smile. They do not hurt the public, who do not think about them; they do not injure their judgment, lower their standard of criticism, or do violence to their common-sense. The transports of the Mutual Admiration Society harm nobody but the persons of talent who have established it, whether they indulged so as to lead the rational rest of the world to laugh at the living, or pity the dead. But it is a very different case when a biography is put forward with such claims to general importance and public interest as that of Mr. Dickens, written by his friend Mr. Forster. These claims are more readily and heartily acknowledged than those of the biographies of many men who were great in spheres of more elevated influence, work and weight, than that of any novelist. The interest and curiosity felt about even such lives are much magnified by their writers, and, at their keenest, are of brief duration, the books passing rapidly into the category of *mémoires pour servir*. But the story of the life of the humourist who had afforded them so much pleasure by the fanciful creations of his brain, was eagerly welcomed by the public, coming from the pen of the friend to whom Mr. Dickens had entrusted the task; for he had, at a very early stage of his career, foreseen that he should need a biographer, and had no shrinking from what Mr. Palgrave, pleading the poet’s right to immunity from it, calls the intrusion of “biography.”

Regarded from the point of view of that disinterested and impartial public whose eyes are not shut by the promptings of cliqueism nor their ears beguiled by its jargon—who know nothing of the fatuous

flattery of "sets," but who hold literary men amenable to the same moral and social laws as any other class of men who do their work in the world and are paid for it—the book could hardly be more damaging to the memory of its subject if it had been written by an enemy instead of a friend. Without impeaching Mr. Forster's sincerity in any respect or degree—without imputing to him a particle of the treacherous ingratitude and deadly damaging cunning which made Leigh Hunt's 'Life of Byron' notorious—it may be gravely doubted whether the little poet dealt the great one's memory a more cruel blow than Mr. Forster, in the character of a mourning Mentor out of work, has dealt the memory of Telemachus Dickens. To all unprejudiced persons, with just notions of the relations of men with their fellows, he presents the object of his preposterously inflated praise in an aspect both painful and surprising. Who is to correct this impression? We are forced to believe that Mr. Forster, from his long and close association with him, is the person who can best paint Mr. Dickens as he was in reality; we are forced to accept the man whose writings so charmed and delighted us on the evidence of a close and long-sustained correspondence with Mr. Forster, to whom he apparently assigned the foremost place in his literary and private life as guide, friend, companion, and critic. Mr. Dickens might have had no other intimate associate than his future biographer throughout the long term of years during which he was constantly appealing to his judgment, adopting his corrections, yielding to his advice, and gushing about walks, rides, dinners, and drinks in his company. There are no people in the book but these two; the rest are merely names, to which casual reference is made in records of jovial dinners and meetings for purposes of unlimited flattery. Even Jeffrey is only occasionally permitted to offer a modest criticism in a foot-note. In one instance Mr. Forster relates how Mr. Dickens pooh-pooh'd the criticism, and referred it to him, that he too might pooh-pooh as heartily the idea of Jeffrey's having presumed to pronounce an opinion on Miss Fox and Major Bagstock while only three numbers of 'Dombey and Son' had yet been issued to the world. By every device of omission, as well as by open assertion, Mr. Forster claims to represent Mr. Dickens as he was—to be the only licensed interpreter of the great novelist to the world. The world grants his claim, and, judging his book by it, is surprised by the nature of the information which is the outcome of so many years of close and unreserved intercourse. Not only is the one-sidedness common to biographies conspicuous in this one, but the two large volumes published up to the present time are as scanty in one sense as they are diffuse in another. Did Mr. Dickens correspond with no one but Mr. Forster? Has no one preserved letters from him to which his biographer might have procured access? Were there no side-lights to be had? The most fantastic of his own

creations is hardly less like a living responsible man than the excited, restless, hysterical, self-engrossed, quarrelsome, unreasonable egotist shown to the world as the real Charles Dickens throughout at least three-fourths of these two volumes; shown, it is true, upon the evidence of his own letters—perhaps the most wonderful records of human vanity which have ever seen the light of print—but shown also, through the fault of his biographer, in appalling nakedness, by his strict limitation of Mr. Dickens's "life" to the chronicle of his relations with Mr. Forster.

It is a property of genius to raise up a high ideal of its possessors in the minds of men who derive pleasure from its productions: it seems to be too frequently the main business of its biographers to pull this ideal down. That Mr. Forster has done so in the case of Mr. Dickens every reader will admit who is not infected with the arrogant ideas or carried away by the inflated jargon of the cliqueism of light literature—an essentially insolent and narrow cliqueism—which, when contemplated from a philosophical or practical standpoint, seems to be the modern rendering of the satirical fable of the fly upon the wheel. The members of this clique live in an atmosphere of delusion, in which no sense is preserved of the true proportions in which various employments of human intellect respectively aid the development of human progress and social greatness. The people who form the clique have no notion of the absurd effect they produce on the big world outside it, which takes account of and puts its trust in talent and energy of many kinds other than the literary; hence it is generally a mistake that the life of a man of this kind of letters should be written at all, and doubly so that it should be written by one who has done it in the spirit of a clique inside a clique. The reader's notions of the life and character of a great humourist, who was flattered, and who flattered himself, into the belief that he was also a great moralist, are painfully disconcerted by Mr. Forster, who leaves the most diverting of jesters, the most strained of sentimentalists, no loophole of escape, by strongly insisting, in the before-mentioned jargon, that he lived "in" his books and "with" his characters. Thus the reader finds himself obliged to conclude that, if that statement be correct, Mr. Dickens was a foolish, and if it be not correct, he was an affected person. His own letters confirm it; but then all the letters he ever wrote to everybody were by no means so exclusively occupied with himself and his sensations as those by which only he is interpreted to the public, and which, instead of being quite repulsive, would have been pardonable, and sometimes pleasing, if they had been episodic—if the reader could believe that their writer had not unconsciously sat for the portrait, drawn by his own pen, of the individual who was "so far down in the school of life, that he was perpetually making figures of 1 in his copybook, and could not get

any further. A fair test of the effect of such a posthumous picture of a man who deservedly gained a vast popularity is to imagine its being drawn and exhibited in the case of any other man who had achieved a similar reputation by similar means. Let us take, for instance, the death of Colonel Newcome, the finest piece of pathos in all Mr. Thackeray's writings, and try to imagine the author writing to the closest of his friends, while the end was coming in the strain of Mr. Dickens's letters about the death of Nelly Trent: "I went to bed last night utterly dispirited and done up. All night I have been pursued by the old man, and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable. I don't know what to do with myself. I think the close of the story will be great. . . . The difficulty has been tremendous, the anguish unspcakable. I think it will come favourably; but I am the wretchedest of the wretched. It casts the most horrible shadow upon me, and it is as much as I can do to keep moving at all." In the impossible case of Mr. Thackeray's having written such effusive rant, he would surely have cautioned his pre-ordained biographer that it was not intended for publication. It is equally difficult to imagine Mr. Trollope signing his letters, "Yours truly, John Eames," or "Ever yours, Phineas Finn." But Mr. Forster prints letter after letter in which Mr. Dickens calls himself "the inimitable" (a joke which really does not bear so much repetition), quotes his own books in illustration of all such incidents as, seeing that they concern himself, he thinks worth mentioning, and signs himself "Pickwick" and "Wilkins Micawber." He is in "Dombeian spirits" or "Chuzzlewit agonies," or he is "devilish sly," or his wife is thrown from a carriage, and laid on a sofa, "chock full of groans, like Squeers." In short, he is always quoting or suggesting quotations from himself, while his voluminous letters are remarkable for their silence concerning any other writer of the day. Then we have an overdone dedication of a book to Mr. Forster, and a letter, accompanying a present of a claret jug, which for pompousness might have been written in the Augustan age. It is not wholly inconceivable that humour of this kind may have had its charm for friends who conducted their relations on the mutual admiration principle, but it is wholly inconceivable that Mr. Forster should believe its details to be interesting to the public, and surprising that he should fail to see that just in proportion as it is "characteristic" it is injurious to their ideal of Mr. Dickens.

Was it also characteristic of Mr. Dickens to act, in all the grave circumstances of life, with a hard self-assertion, an utter ignoring of everybody's rights, feelings, and interests except his own—an assumption of the holy and infallible supremacy of his own views and his own claims which are direct contradictions of all his finest and most effusive sentiments? If not, then his biographer has to answer for producing the impression upon the mind of the reader, who looks in

vain throughout these volumes for any indication that Mr. Dickens's fine writing about human relations has any but a Pecksniffian sense. In every reference to Mr. Dickens in his filial capacity there is evident a repulsive hardness, a contemptuous want of feeling. His parents were poor, in constant difficulties, and their son made capital of the fact for some of his cleverest and some of his least pleasing fictions; the Micawbers among the former, the Dorrits among the latter. Every allusion to his father grates upon the reader's feelings. A very amusing but exaggerated description of the difficulties of stenography, and of the steam-engine-like strength and perseverance with which Mr. Dickens worked at the art, is transferred from 'David Copperfield' to the biography, with such a flourish of trumpets that readers unversed in the jargon of mutual admiration, might suppose no man but Mr. Dickens had ever thoroughly mastered such difficulties, and that he alone had invented and patented the "golden rules," which he promulgates apropos of his becoming a shorthand writer: "Whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well. What I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely. Never to put one hand to anything on which I could not throw my whole self, and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was." Of any inclination to depart from the second of these "golden rules," no reader of Mr. Forster will suspect Mr. Dickens; but of falling on the other side into an outrageous glorification of his work, whatever it was, he is convicted in countless instances by his cruel biographer.

Voltaire's cynical conceit of the chorus who sang incessant praises of the poor prince until they made him laughable to all mankind and loathsome to himself, is reflected in Mr. Forster. Pages are devoted to the energy with which a young man of nineteen, with a "Dora" in view to stimulate him, engaged in the acquisition of an art which hundreds of quiet, industrious, well-educated gentlemen practised; but the fact that his father, who was not young, and who had gone through much toil and care, had conquered the same stubborn art, and was working hard at it, is mentioned as "his father having already taken to it, in those later years, in aid of the family resources;" and again, as "the elder Dickens having gone into the gallery." When Mr. Dickens writes to his friend that he has been securing a house for his parents, the tone of the letter is singularly unpleasant; and people who are not literary or gifted, but merely simple folks, who hold that the God-formed ties of actual life should rank above the creations of even the brightest fancy, must condemn the publication of the letter which Mr. Dickens wrote on the 31st of March, 1851, *the very day of his father's death*, in which he points out that he must not let himself be "distracted by anything," though he has "left a sad sight!"—(he was present when his father

expired)—from “the scheme on which so much depends,” and “most part of the proposed alterations,” which he thinks “good.” He is going up to Highgate at two, and hopes Mr. Forster will go with him. The scheme was the Guild of Literature and Art, and the chief matter under discussion was Bulwer’s comedy, written in aid of it. Mr. Forster was going to Knebworth, and the son, just come from the father’s deathbed, and going to buy his father’s grave, would “like to have gone that way, if ‘Bradshaw’ gave him any hope of doing it.” There are men of whom this might be published without conveying the disappointing, disenchanting effect which it conveys in this instance, though in itself it is hard and shocking; but in the case of Mr. Dickens the terrible frankness of it is much to be regretted. Such testimony as this to the practical want of feeling of the man who described himself as utterly good for nothing, prostrated with anguish, pursued by phantasmal misery when Little Nell and Paul Dombey were dying, whose hysterical sensibility about every fancy of his imagination was so keen, is overwhelming. Mr. Forster ought to have shown us one side of the medal only—his friend in fantastic agonies over a fiction—“knocked over, utterly dejected,” for instance, by “the Ham and Steerforth chapter,” or his friend eminently business-like over one of the most solemn events possible in a human life. When he exhibits him in both characters to plain people, he, no doubt unintentionally, paints the portrait of a charlatan.

In another instance the biographer shocks yet more profoundly the moral sense of persons who believe that genius is not less, but more, bound by the common law of duty in feeling and in action. There is a vast amount of sentiment, there are numerous prettinesses about mothers and babies, and about motherhood and sonhood in the abstract, in Mr. Dickens’s works; and in this case also, he, for whom it is so persistently claimed that he lived *in* and *with* his books that he must needs incur the penalty of this praise, is made by Mr. Foster to produce the effect of falseness and inconsistency. The slight mention made of Mr. Dickens’s mother by the biographer is contemptuous, and his own solitary direct allusion to her is unjust and unfilial. Could not Mr. Forster recall anything, ever so slight, in all that long intimacy, so close and constant that it seems to have left no room and no time in the novelist’s life for any other, to counterbalance that impression? The temptation, which no doubt strongly beset the *littérateur*, to colour as highly as possible the picture of the “black-bottle period,” has been too strong for the biographer, who has failed to perceive that in making the episode exceedingly interesting, very alluring to public curiosity, he has made the subject of it contemptible. The picture is a painful one, not altogether and only from the side on which alone it is contemplated by Mr. Dickens and Mr. Forster; it is pervaded by the characteristics of all the pictures

of Mr. Dickens's earlier years, and of all dealings with everybody on occasions when they did not turn out to his entire satisfaction. Neither Mr. Dickens nor his biographer regard this period of the celebrated novelist's life justly; they both look at it from the standpoint of accomplished facts, of mature life, developed genius, and achieved fame. The truth is, that the poor parents of a large and helpless family were naturally glad to accept the proposal of a relative who offered to give the means of existence to one of their children, a boy of weak frame, indifferent health, and odd "ways," in which they were too dull, too troubled, and too busy to suspect and look for genius. They were not clever, literary, or fanciful; they were struggling and common-place. Mrs. Dickens was promised that the child should be taught something, and given the precedence of a relative of the master among the boys in the blacking warehouse. Both promises were kept for a time; when they came to be disregarded the family turmoil had subsided into the temporary repose of imprisonment for debt. It is very sad that respectable decent people should be reduced to being glad to have one child lodged and fed, ever so meagrely, away from them; but the man who was that child, who laid claim afterwards to an exceptional and emotional sympathy with poverty, and comprehension of all its straits, could not sympathise with his parents' poverty. He could not comprehend that to them to be spared the lodging and the feeding of one child was an important boon, and he has been so unfortunate as to find a biographer who records, as the only utterance of Mr. Dickens concerning his mother, this, deliberately spoken in his full manhood, when he was relating how his father and the relative who had given him his wretched occupation had quarrelled about him: "My mother set herself to accommodate the quarrel, and did so next day. She brought home a request for me to return next morning, and a high character of me, which I am very sure I deserved. My father said I should go to school, and should go back no more. I do not write resentfully or angrily, for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am; but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back. . . . From that hour until this my father and my mother have been stricken dumb upon it."

A great deal of public feeling upon this point has been taken for granted in perfect good faith by a great many people, for want of plain matter-of-fact comprehension of the case on its real merits. Mr. and Mrs. Dickens were in deep poverty. "All our friends were tired out"—these are their son's own words. His sister Fanny, who was gifted with musical talent, was a pupil in an academy of music, as a preparation for earning her own livelihood; and when he was sent to the employment which he so bitterly resented afterwards he

describes the family home thus: "My mother and my brothers and sisters (excepting Fanny) were still encamped with a young servant girl from Chatham workhouse in two parlours of the house in Gower Street. Everything had gone gradually; until at last there was nothing left but a few chairs, a broken table, and some beds." The mother who sent her child to earn seven shillings a week in a blacking warehouse from such a home—to be exchanged only for her husband's prison—was not, we think, quite a monster. What became of the "brothers and sisters"? Did any one outrage the family by offering help equally ignoble to another individual in whom Sam Weller's "double million gas-magnifying glasses" themselves could hardly then have detected an embryo genius? When Mr. Dickens left the prison it was as a bankrupt, and though he immediately began the toil which was merely "praiseworthy industry" in him, while it was magnified to heroism in his son, there is nothing heinous, to our thinking, in the mother's endeavour to keep those seven weekly shillings wherewith one child might be fed, and in her demur to a "cheap school," which, however cheap, must be paid for out of nothing. Stripped of verbiage, this is the literal truth, and Mr. Forster makes one of his gravest mistakes when he dwells with would-be pathos upon the effect of this childish expression upon Mr. Dickens's mind and manners in after life. The picture, if true, is a sorry one, for it is full of vanity, self-engrossment, and morbid feeling. That a man who had achieved such renown, had done such work, had so employed his God-given genius, should be awkward and ill at ease in the society of well-bred unpretending people, should go about under a kind of self-compelled cloud, because, being the child of poor parents, he had, in his childhood, pursued, for a short time, a lowly but honest occupation, is, to simple minds, an incomprehensibly foolish and mean weakness.

If Mr. Dickens were represented as having been proud of the fact that as a small and feeble child he had worked for his own living with the approbation of his employers, and thus eased off her shoulders some of the burthen his mother had to carry, it would be consistent with the self-reliance of David Copperfield, the devotion of Little Nell, the helpfulness of Jenny Wren, in short, with a number of the virtues of the personages "with" and "in" whom we are told his real life was to be found. Mr. Forster looks upon the childhood and youth of Mr. Dickens with the eyes of his fame and maturity, and cries out against the ignoring of a prodigy before there had been anything prodigious about him, just as Mr. Dickens himself complains of the publishers, to whom he owed the opportunity of making a reputation, for ill-treating a *famous author*, and fattening on his brains. Mr. Foster is emphatic in his blame of every one who was concerned in the matter—or indeed who was not, for "friends" are

taken to task—that Charles Dickens was not given a good education, and eloquent about the education which he afterwards gave himself. Here, again, the besetting temptation of the biographer to invest his subject with attributes which do not belong to him, as well as to exaggerate those which do, assails Mr. Forster. There are no facts in his narrative to prove that Mr. Dickens ever was an educated man, and all the testimony of his works is against the supposition. No trait of his genius is more salient than its entire self-dependence; no defects of it are more marked than his intolerance of subjects which he did not understand, and his high-handed dogmatic treatment of matters which he regarded with the facile contempt of ignorance. This unfortunate tendency was fostered by the atmosphere of flattery in which he lived; a life which, in the truly educational sense, was singularly narrow; and though he was not entirely to blame for the extent, it affected his later works very much to their disadvantage. As a novelist he is distinguished, as a humourist he is unrivalled in this age; but when he deals with the larger spheres of morals, with politics, and with the mechanism of state and official life, he is absurd. He announces truisms and tritenesses with an air of discovery impossible to a well-read man, and he propounds with an air of conviction, hardly provoking, it is so simply foolish, flourishing solutions of problems, which have long perplexed the gravest and ablest minds in the higher ranges of thought.

We hear of his extensive and varied reading. Where is the evidence that he ever read anything beyond fiction, and some of the essayists? Certainly not in his books, which might be the only books in the world, for any indication of study or book-knowledge in them. Not a little of their charm, not a little of their wide-spread miscellaneous popularity, is referable to that very thing. Every one can understand them; they are not for educated people only; they do not suggest comparisons, or require explanations, or imply associations; they stand alone, self-existent, delightful facts. A slight reference to Fielding and Smollett, a fine rendering of one chapter in English history—the Gordon riots—very finely done, and a clever adaptation of Mr. Carlyle's 'Scarecrows' to his own stage, in 'A Tale of Two Cities,' are positively the only traces of books to be found in the long series of his works. His 'Pictures from Italy' is specially curious as an illustration of the possibility of a man's living so long in a country with an old and famous history, without discovering that he might possibly understand the country better if he knew something about the history. He always caught the sentimental and humorous elements in everything; the traditional, spiritual, philosophic, or aesthetic not at all. His prejudices were the prejudices, not of one-sided opinion and conviction, but of ignorance "all round." His mind held no clue to the character of the peoples of foreign countries, and

their tastes, arts, and creed were ludicrous mysteries to him. His vividness of mind, freshness and fun, constitute the chief charm of his stories, and their entire originality is the 'note' which pleases most; but when he writes "pictures" of a land of the great past of poetry, art, and politics, with as much satisfied flippancy as when he describes the common objects of the London streets (for which he yearned in the midst of all the mediæval glories of Italy), he makes it evident that he had never been educated, and had not educated himself. If we are to accept Mr. Forster's version of his friend's judgment and intellectual culture, apart from his own art as a novelist, we get a sorry notion of them from the following sentence, which has many fellows. At page 82 of the first volume, Mr. Forster writes: "His (Mr. Dickens') observations, during his career in the gallery, had not led him to form any high opinion of the House of Commons or its heroes; and of the Pickwickian sense, which so often takes the place of common sense, in our legislature, he omitted no opportunity of declaring his contempt at every part of his life." This is unkind. We do not like to believe that the famous novelist was so insolent and so arrogant as his biographer makes him out to have been, and it is only fair to remark that it is Mr. Forster who represents his 'subject's' contempt for men and matters entirely out of his social and intellectual sphere as something serious for those men and those matters. That Mr. Dickens was rather more than less unfortunate than other people when, like them, he talked of things he did not understand, is abundantly proved by his 'Hard Times,' the silly Doodle business in 'Bleak House,' the ridiculous picture of an M.P. in 'Nickleby,' and the invariable association of rank with folly and power with incompetence in all his works. He knew nothing of official life; he had no comprehension of authority, of discipline, of any kind of hierarchical system, and his very humour itself is dull, pointless, laboured, and essentially vulgar, when directed against the larger order of politics; it becomes mere flippant buzzing, hardly worth notice or rebuke.

It is not only in the education of books that we perceive Mr. Dickens to have been defective. Mr. Forster's account of him makes it evident that he was deficient in that higher education of the mind, by which men attain to an habitually nice adjustment of the rights of others in all mutual dealings, and to that strictly-regulated consideration which is a large component of self-respect. If this biography is true and trustworthy; if the public, to whom the author of books which supplied them with a whole circle of personal friends was an abstraction, are to accept this portrait of Mr. Dickens as a living verity, then they are forced to believe that, though a spasmodically generous, he was not a just man. According to the narrative before the world, he had a most exacting, even a grinding estimate, of the sacredness and inviolability of his own rights. To under-estimate *his*

claims was the unpardonable stupidity; to stand against *his* interests was the inexpiable sin. This deplorable tendency was lamentably encouraged by Mr. Forster—who in 1837 made his appearance on the scene which thenceforward he occupied so very conspicuously as a party to Mr. Dickens's second quarrel in the course of a literary career then recently commenced. He had already quarrelled with Mr. Macrone, the publisher of 'Sketches by Boz,' and his subsequent kindness to that gentleman's widow by no means blinds a dispassionate observer to the fact that the strict right—not the fine feeling, not the genius-recognising disinterestedness, but the mere honest right—was, not with the author, but with the publisher. His second quarrel was with Mr. Bentley, his second publisher; his third quarrel was with Messrs. Chapman and Hall, his third publishers. His fourth quarrel is recorded in the second volume; with the proprietors of the *Daily News*, after a very brief endurance of the ineffable stupidity, the intolerable exaction, and the general unbearableness of everybody concerned in the management of that journal—qualities which, by an extraordinary harmony of accident, invariably distinguished all persons who came into collision with Mr. Dickens in any situation of which he was not absolutely the master. We know that there is a fifth quarrel—that with Messrs. Bradbury and Evans—yet to be recorded; and we submit, that to plain people, who do not accord exceptional privileges to men of genius with regard to their dealings with their fellows, those facts indicate radical injustice and bad temper. The pages of TEMPLE BAR are not the place in which the merits of the indictment of Mr. Bentley at the bar of public opinion by Mr. Forster ought to be discussed. They form matter for fuller disclosure and more abundant proof; but the editor must permit us an allusion to this case so pompously stated by Mr. Forster, because it differs in kind from the subsequent instances. In 1836 Mr. Dickens was what his biographer calls "self-sold into bondage," i.e. he was employed by Mr. Bentley to edit the 'Miscellany,' to supply a serial story, and to write two others, the first at a specified early date, "the expressed remuneration in each case being certainly quite inadequate to the claims of a writer of any marked popularity." We have only to refer to the letter written by Mr. George Bentley, and published in the *Times* on the 7th of December, 1871, to perceive the absurdity of this statement, unless Mr. Forster's estimate of the claims of rising young *littérateurs* be of quite unprecedented liberality, in which case it is to be hoped he may make numerous converts among the publishers; while the notion that a man so keenly alive to his own value would have made a bad bargain, is *à priori* totally inconsistent with his whole portrait of Mr. Dickens. But Mr. Dickens never seems to have understood practically at any time of his life that there were two sides to any contract to which he was a party. The terms of the first

agreement which he made, and did not carry out, were as follows : Mr. Dickens was to write two works of fiction, 'Oliver Twist,' and another, subsequently entitled 'Barnaby Rudge,' for £1000, and to edit the 'Miscellany' for £20 a month ; this sum of course not to include payment for any of his own contributions. No rational person can entertain a doubt that these conditions were exceedingly advantageous to Mr. Dickens at the then stage of his career. The terms of the second agreement which he made, and did not carry out, were, that he should receive £30 a month as editor of the 'Miscellany.' The terms of the third agreement which he made, and did not carry out, were, that he should receive £750 for each of the two novels and £360 per annum as editor of the 'Miscellany.' The story of the fourth agreement which he made, and did not carry out, will be told elsewhere. It suffices here to say that he had his own way in all. Throughout the whole of this affair, as Mr. Forster relates it, Mr. Dickens was childishly irritable and ridiculously self-laudatory ; and it never seems to have occurred to either of them that a writer of books, employed by a publisher, is a man of business executing a commission, by business rules and under business laws. If Mr. Dickens, writing 'Pickwick' for Messrs. Chapman and Hall and 'Oliver Twist' for Mr. Bentley at the same time, "was never even a week in advance with the printer in either," outsiders will think that neither Messrs. Chapman and Hall nor Mr. Bentley were to blame for the circumstance, that it was no business whatever of theirs, and that it had nothing to do with Mr. Dickens's objection to furnish the works he had contracted to write, at the price for which he had contracted to write them. The truth is, that Mr. Dickens was not a famous author, on whose brains Mr. Bentley designed to fatten, when he made the first agreement of that "network in which he was entangled" (Mr. Forster's astounding description of a series of contracts, each made on Mr. Dickens's own terms, and each altered at his own request,) for he had written nothing but the 'Sketches by Boz' ('Pickwick,' had not even been commenced) and he had never edited anything, or given any indication of the kind of ability requisite in an editor, while he was evidently not an educated man. In fact, the first bargain strikes impartial minds as a rather daring speculation on Mr. Bentley's part ; and there can be only one opinion that, when the whole matter was concluded, it was on extraordinarily advantageous terms to Mr. Dickens. For £2250 Mr. Bentley ceded to him the copyright of 'Oliver Twist' (*with the Cruikshank illustrations*, whose value and importance Mr. Forster vainly endeavours to decry, but on which public opinion cannot be put down), the stock of an addition of 1002 copies, and the cancelled agreement for 'Barnaby Rudge.' We have the progressive figures which tell us what Mr. Dickens's salary as editor of 'Bentley's Miscellany' had been. We

have the records of his early experience, and of his exact position when Mr. Bentley employed him in that capacity. Taking all these things into account, the discretion of his biographer in recording his poor joke when he relinquished the editorship, saying, "it has always been literally Bentley's miscellany, and never mine," may be denied without impertinence.

From a more general point of view than merely that of this biography and its subject, the story of Mr. Dickens's frequent quarrels with everybody with whom he made contracts is lamentable. Mr. Forster seems seriously and genuinely to regard the persons who expected Mr. Dickens to keep his engagements, merely because he had made them, as heinous offenders. In vol. ii. page 42, we find a story about Messrs. Chapman & Hall's having ventured to hint their expectation of his fulfilment of a contract by which, in the event of a certain falling off in a certain sale, which falling off actually did take place, he was to refund a certain sum, and this conduct is described with a sort of "bated breath" condemnation, as though it were a dreadful departure from honour and decency, which, having been atoned for, is merely referred to, pityingly, under extreme pressure of biographical obligation. And all this because one of the contracting parties is a novelist, whose fame is built upon the very articles which he has supplied by the contract! Why do publishers employ authors? Is it that they may write successful or unsuccessful books? Fancy a man undertaking to write a serial novel—which must be a venture for his publisher, who purchases it unread, unwritten—for a certain sum of money, writing it well, so that it succeeds, and that his publisher is a gainer by it—the writer's gain being of course, in the nature of things, a foregone conclusion, and the transaction being described as "an obligation incurred in ignorance of the sacrifices implied by it." What an absence of commercial morality and of a sense of fair dealing is implied by the notion! If we could suppose this line of argument to be transferred to the productions of other orders of genius than the literary, its uncandidness would come out with startling distinctness. Supposing an artist were to contract with a picture dealer to paint a picture for him within a given time and for a stated sum, and that during the painting of that picture the artist's reputation were to rise considerably, in consequence of his excellent execution of another task, so that not only would the picture be of greater value to the purchaser than he had had reason to believe it would be at the date of the commission, but the artist would be entitled to ask a larger sum for his next work. What would be thought of the artist, if he denounced the dealer as everything that was mean and dastardly, because he proposed to pay him the price agreed upon, and not a larger price? What would be thought of the same artist if, an agreement to paint a second picture on the same terms as the first having been changed

at his request and to his advantage, he deliberately instructed a friend to cancel that agreement also, and bemoaned himself in terms so unmanly and so unbusinesslike as the following: "The consciousness that I have still the slavery and drudgery of another work on the same journeyman terms," *his own terms*, "the consciousness that my work is enriching everybody connected with it but myself, and that I, with such a popularity as I have acquired, am struggling in old toils, and wasting my energies in the very height and freshness of my fame in the best part of my life, to fill the pockets of others, while for those who are nearest and dearest to me I can realise little more than a genteel subsistence; all this puts me out of heart and spirits. . . . *I do most solemnly declare that morally, before God and man, I hold myself released from such hard bargains as these, after I have done so much for those who drove them.*" It is impossible to conceive any great man in the world of art or any other world, which involves production and purchase, writing in such a style as this, and no blame can be too severe for the indiscretion which has given to the public such a picture of mingled vanity and lack of conscience. If this view of the business relations of author and publisher were to be accepted as the just view, the success of the author would be the misfortune of the publisher, and the grand object of the trade would be to supply Mr. Mudie with a placid flow of mediocrity, by which they could count on a certain moderate profit without risk; but they would shun rising geniuses like the plague. We protest against all the unworthy, unbusinesslike, and untrue jargon in which this story, and the others like it are set forth, not only because it gives an impression of the character of Mr. Dickens extremely disappointing to the admirers of his genius—of whom the present writer is one of the most fervent—but also for a much more serious and far-reaching reason. Everything of the kind which is believed and adopted by the public as true of literary men, is degrading to their status and demoralising to their class. Why should a business transaction to which a man of letters is a party, be in any moral or actual sense different from any other business transaction whatsoever? The right divine of genius is to be better, honester, higher minded, than mediocrity, because it has truer insight, a nobler, loftier outlook and ideal, and greater aims. At least this is the common notion of the great privileges of genius, and to controvert or degrade it is to inflict on the public a misfortune entailing a loss. No man can claim of himself or be held by his friends to be outside, above, or released from any common moral law, without a failure of true dignity, a violation of common sense, and an offence to the great majority of respectable and reasoning people who make up that public whose word is reputation. Seldom has a more unfortunate phrase than "the eccentricities of genius" been invented. It has to answer for many a moral declension, which, if the phrase

had not existed, would have been avoided, because toleration would not have been expected—for many a social impertinence, which would have been too promptly punished for repetition. The “eccentricities of genius” are always its blemishes, frequently its vices, and the sufferance of them by society is a mistake, the condonation of them is a fault, the laudation of them is a treacherous sin.

Next to Mr. Dickens's indignation that his publishers should presume to make money by his work, Mr. Forster exposes most mercilessly his disgust at the possibility of his illustrators getting any credit in connection with his books. It would be unprofitable to recapitulate the controversy between Mr. Cruikshank and Mr. Forster about the artist's share in the production of ‘*Oliver Twist*,’ but in connection with the subject it may be observed, that if Mr. Cruikshank's Bill Sykes and Nance did not realise Mr. Dickens' wish, every reader of ‘*Oliver Twist*’ thinks of the housebreaker and his victim as Mr. Cruikshank drew them, and knows that, in the case of Nance, the author's was an impossible picture (a fact which no one, as Mr. Thackeray ably pointed out, knew better than Mr. Dickens), while the artist's was the coarse, terrible *truth*. On which side the balance of suggestion was most heavily weighted it is not easy or necessary to determine, but nothing can be clearer than that Mr. Cruikshank followed no lead of Mr. Dickens, in his wonderful pictures, but saw the villainous components of that partly powerful yet partly feeble romance of crime with a vision entirely his own. Mr. Halbot Browne is allowed a little credit; but, though Mr. Forster presides over the production of each book in succession, and all he suggests and says is received with effusive respect and gushing gratitude, though he reads and amends sheets hardly dry, and makes alterations which require separate foot notes to display their importance, and italics to describe their acceptance, every hint of counsel from any one else is treated with offensive disdain. To Mr. Forster the world is indebted for the Marchioness's saying about the orange-peel and water, that it would “bear more seasoning.” Mr. Dickens had made it “flavour,” but the censor considered that word out of place in the “little creature's mouth,” though the little creature was a cook, and so it was changed. What a pity he did not suggest that Dick Swiveller might have been quite as delightful, and yet considerably less drunken! To him the world owes Little Nell's death, but Mr. Dickens would probably have acknowledged the obligation on his own part less warmly if he had foreseen the publication of the absurd rhapsody in which he announced the event as imminent; declaring that he trembles “to approach the place more than Kit; a great deal more than Mr. Garland; a great deal more than the Single Gentleman.” Then with ingenuous vanity, and forgetting grammar in gush, he protests: “Nobody will miss her like I shall. What the

actual doing it will be, God knows. I can't preach to myself the schoolmaster's consolation, though I try." Only the pachydermatous insensibility which comes of mutual admiration could have prevented a biographer's perception of the inappropriateness of such revelations, and of scores of similar ones; only such insensibility can account for his complacent sacrifice of every one else to the glorification of that leviathan in whose jaws he could always put a hook. That Mr. Dickens may be made to praise Mr. Mark Lemon patronisingly, Mr. Forster prints a statement concerning Mrs. Lemon, which that lady has contradicted in the press; and that Mr. Dickens's generosity and delicacy may be duly appreciated, Mr. Forster tells how he deputed Mr. Wills to make Mr. Sala a present of £20. It is necessary to keep constantly before one's mind that it is Mr. Forster who is speaking for Mr. Dickens, if one would escape from an overwhelming conviction that the great novelist was a very poor creature, and that it would have been far better for his fame had he been made known to the public only by his novels. It is especially necessary to remember this when we find a school of morals imputed to him, when he is represented as a great teacher who adopted the method of apologue, and we are gravely assured that "many an over-suspicious person will find advantage in remembering what a too liberal application of Foxey's principle of suspecting everybody brought Mr. Sampson Brass to; and many an over-hasty judgment of poor human nature will unconsciously be checked, when it is remembered that Mr. Christopher Nubbles *did* come back to work out that shilling."

When we read scores of similar passages, we ask ourselves, Can this be in earnest? Can it be possible that this is intended to be serious? Or is Mr. Forster, getting occasionally tired of the perpetual swing of the censor of praise before the image of the friend who, in his lifetime, never wearied of sniffing the enervating perfume, and swung lustily for himself, poking ponderous fun at the public? Even the humour of the great humourist suffers by the handling of his ardent but indiscriminating worshipper. The rubbish by which the tradition of Mrs. Gamp is continued, the silly letters in dubious French, which exhibit Mr. Dickens's absolute incapacity to comprehend any foreign country, and the unpardonable nonsense, in which he was encouraged by wiser men, of his pretended admiration for the Queen, are flagrant examples of injudiciousness, which heavily punishes the folly it parades. Mr. Dickens's letter about her Majesty, written thirty years' ago, was a sorry jest. Mr. Forster's publication of it now is supreme bad taste.

Mr. Dickens's sentimentalism, always exaggerated and frequently false, suffers at the hands of his biographer even more severely than his humour. Mr. Forster as confidant, and Mr. Dickens as Tilburina, in intercommunicated hysterics over the 'Christmas Stories,' 'Dombey and Son,' and 'David Copperfield,' become so very wear-

some, especially when Mr. Forster solemnly declares his belief that the 'Christmas Carol' "for some may have realised the philosopher's famous experience, and by a single fortunate thought revised the whole manner of a life," that it is a positive relief when they are parted. Mr. Dickens's 'Letters from America' form the least disappointing portion of this work; in them his egotism is less persistently offensive and his humour is displayed to great advantage. The reverse of this is the case in his 'Letters from Italy.' In them he is in a perpetual state of ebullition, fussiness, impatience, effervescent vanity, and self-engrossment. It is amusing to observe that the great humourist was so little accustomed to recognise humour in others, that it never occurred to him he could be quizzed. When a witty consul warned him not to let his children out of doors, because the Jesuits would be on the watch to lead their innocent feet into popish places, he swallowed the warning with the docile credulity of a Vansittart.

It must be acknowledged that Mr. Forster's advice was very sound and valuable in many instances. Perhaps his consciousness of that fact has blinded him to the extent to which his exposure of his friend's weaknesses has gone. Was it, for instance, worth while, in order to record that he rejected the proposition, to let the public know that Mr. Dickens ever proposed as a title for his projected weekly miscellany, "CHARLES DICKENS: *A Weekly Journal, designed for the instruction and amusement of all classes of readers. Conducted by Himself*"?

In one more volume this warmly-welcomed, eagerly-read biography is to be completed. That volume must necessarily be a more difficult and responsible task than its predecessors. It is to be hoped that it will fulfil the expectations of the public more satisfactorily, and that it will do more justice to Mr. Dickens by doing less injustice to all with whom he was concerned. It is to be hoped that it will put before the world a more substantial representation of the great novelist who was so variously gifted; that it will leave its readers able in some measure to respect and esteem its subject as a man, for real qualities, while ceasing to urge an imaginary claim to misplaced consideration, and especially that it will be free from the faint suggestion which pervades the present volumes, that, essentially, "Codlin was the friend, not Short."

A Voice from the Bush.

O! mihi præteritos

HIGH noon, and not a cloud in the sky to break this blinding sun!
Well, I've half the day before me still, and most of my journey
done.

There's little enough of shade to be got, but I'll take what I can get,
For I'm not as hearty as once I was, although I'm a young man yet.

Young? Well, yes, I suppose so, as far as the seasons go,
Though there's many a man far older than I down there in the town
below,—

Older, but men to whom, in the pride of their manhood strong,
The hardest work is never too hard, nor the longest day too long.

But I've cut my cake, so I can't complain; and I've only myself to
blame.

Ah! that was always their tale at home, and here it's just the same.
Of the seed I've sown in pleasure, the harvest I'm reaping in pain.
Could I put my life a few years back would I live that life again?

Would I? Of course I would! What glorious days they were!
It sometimes seems but the dream of a dream that life could have been
so fair,

So sweet, but a short time back, while now, if one can call
This life, I almost doubt at times if it's worth the living at all.

One of these poets—which is it?—somewhere or another sings
That the crown of a sorrows' sorrow is the remembering happier
things;

What the crown of a sorrows' sorrow may be I know not, but this I
know,

It lightens the years that are now, sometimes to think of the years
ago.

Where are they now, I wonder, with whom those years were passed?
The pace was a little too good, I fear, for many of them to last;
And there's always plenty to take their place when the leaders begin
to decline.

Still I wish them well, wherever they are, for the sake of 'auld lang
syne!

Jack Villiers—Galloping Jack—what a beggar he was to ride!—
Was shot in a gambling row last year on the Californian side ;
And Byng, the best of the lot, who was broke in the Derby of fifty-
eight,
Is keeping sheep with Harry Lepell, somewhere on the River Plate.

Do they ever think of me at all, and the fun we used to share ?
It gives me a pleasant hour or so—and I've none too many to spare.
This dull blood runs as it used to run, and the spent flame flickers up,
As I think on the cheers that rung in my ears when I won the
Garrison Cup !

And how the regiment roared to a man, while the voice of the fielders
shook,
As I swung in my stride, six lengths to the good, hard held over
Brixworth Brook ;
Instead of the parrots' screech, I seem to hear the twang of the horn,
As once again from Barkby Holt I set the pick of the Quorn.

Well, those were harmless pleasures enough ; for I hold him worse than
an ass
Who shakes his head at a 'neck on the post,' or a quick thing over
the grass.
Go for yourself, and go to win, and you can't very well go wrong ;—
Gad, if I'd only stuck to that I'd be singing a different song !

As to the one I'm singing, it's pretty well known to all ;
We knew too much, but not quite enough, and so we went to the wall ;
While those who cared not, if their work was done, how dirty their
hands might be,
Went up on our shoulders, and kicked us down, when they got to the
top of the tree.

But though it relieves one's mind at times, there's little good in a
curse.
One comfort is, though it's not very well, it might be a great deal worse.
A roof to my head, and a bite to my mouth, and no one likely
to know
In 'Bill the Bushman' the dandy who went to the dogs long years
ago.

Out there on the station, among the lads, I get along pretty well ;
It's only when I get down into town that I feel this life such a hell.
Booted, and bearded, and burned to a brick, I loaf along the street ;
I watch the ladies tripping by and I bless their dainty feet ;

I watch them here and there, with a bitter feeling of pain.
Ah! what wouldn't I give to feel a lady's hand again!
They used to be glad to see me once, they might have been so to-day;
But we never know the worth of a thing until we have thrown it away.

I watch them, but from afar, and I pull my old cap over my eyes,
Partly to hide the tears, that, rude and rough as I am, will rise,
And partly because I cannot bear that such as they should see
The man that I am, when I know, though they don't, the man that I
ought to be.

Puff! With the last whiff of my pipe I blow these fancies away,
For I must be jogging along if I want to get down into town to-day.
As I know I shall reach my journey's end though I travel not over
fast,
So the end to my longer journey will come in its own good time at
last.
