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Dickens at Christmas Time
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I am sorry that the comic costume festival which was organised for Christmas by one of the chief Dickensian societies has unavoidably fallen through. It is not for me to reproach those traitors who found it impossible to turn up: for I was one of those traitors myself. Whatever character it was that I was expected to appear in—Jingle, I suppose, or possibly Uriah Heep—was, under a final press of business, refused by me. These Dickensian enthusiasts were going to have a Christmas party at Rochester, where they would brew punch and drink punch, and drive coaches and fall off coaches, and do all the proper Pickwickian things. How many of them were ready to make a hole in the ice, to be wheeled about in a wheelbarrow, or to wait all night outside a ladies' school, the official documents have not informed me. But I would gladly take a moderate part. I could not brew punch for the Pickwick Club; but I could drink it. I could not drive the coach for the Pickwick Club—or, indeed, for any club except the Suicide Club; but I could fall off the coach amid repeated applause and enthusiastic encores. I should be only too proud if it could be said of me, as of Sam's hyperbolic old gentleman who was ripped into the hyperbolic canal, that " 'is 'at was found, but I can't be certain 'is 'ead was in it." It seems to me like a euthanasia: more beautiful than the passing of Arthur.

But though the failure of this particular festivity was merely accidental (like my own unfortunate fall off the coach), it is not without its parallel in the present position of Dickensians and Christmas. For the truth is that we simply cannot recreate the Pickwick Club—unless we have a moral basis as sturdy as that of Dickens, and even a religious basis as sturdy as that of Christmas. Men at such a time turn their backs to the solemn thing they are celebrating, as the horses turn their backs to the coach. But they are pulling the coach. And the best of it is this: that so long as the Christmas feast had some kind of assumed and admitted meaning, it was praised, and praised sympathetically, by the great men whom we should call most unsympathetic with it. That Shakespeare and Dickens and Walter Scott should write of it seems quite natural. They were people who would be as welcome at Christmas as Santa Claus. But I do not think many people have ever wished they could ask Milton to eat the Christmas pudding. Nevertheless, it is quite certain that his Christmas ode is not only one of the richest but one of the most human of his masterpieces. I do not think that anyone specially wanting a rollicking article on Christmas would desire, by mere instinct, the literary style of Addison. Yet it is quite certain that the somewhat difficult task of really liking Addison is rendered easier by his account of the Coverley Christmas than by anything else he wrote. I even go so far as to doubt whether one of the little Cratchits (who stuffed their spoons in their mouths lest they should scream for goose) would have removed the spoon to say, "Oh, that Tennyson were here!" Yet certainly Tennyson's spirits do seem to revive in a more or less real way at the ringing of the Christmas bells in the most melancholy part of "In Memoriam." These great men were not trying to be merry: some of them, indeed, were trying to be miserable. But the day itself was too strong for them; the time was more than their temperaments; the tradition was alive. The festival was roaring in the streets, so that prigs and even prophets (who are sometimes worse still) were honestly carried off their feet.

The difficulty with Dickens is not any failure in Dickens, nor even in the popularity of Dickens. On the contrary, he has recaptured his creative reputation and fascination far more than any of the other great Victorians. Macaulay, who was really great in his way, is rejected; Cobbett,¹ who was much greater, is forgotten. Dickens is not merely alive: he is risen from the dead. But the difficulty is in the failing under his feet, as it were, of that firm historic platform on which he had performed his Christmas pantomimes: a platform of which he was quite as unconscious as we, most of us, are of the floor we walk about on. The fact is that the fun of

Christmas is founded on the seriousness of Christmas; and to pull away the latter support even from under a Christmas clown is to let him down through a trap-door. And even clowns do not like the trap-doors that they do not expect. Thus it is unfortunately true that so glorious a thing as a Pickwick party tends to lose the splendid quality of a mere Mummary, and become that much more dull and conventional thing, a Covent Garden Ball. We are not ourselves living in the proper spirit of Pickwick. We are pretending to be old Dickens characters, when we ought to be new Dickens characters in reality.

The conditions are further complicated by the fact that while reading Dickens may make a man Dickensian, studying Dickens makes him quite the reverse. One might as well expect the aged custodian of a museum of sculpture to look (and dress) like the Apollo Belvedere, as expect the Pickwickian qualities in those literary critics who are attracted by the Dickens fiction as the materials for a biography or the subject of a controversy; as a mass of detail; as a record and a riddle. Those who study such things are a most valuable class of the community, and they do good service to Dickens in their own way. But their type and temperament are not, in the nature of things, likely to be full of the festive magic of their master. Take, for example, these endless discussions about the proper ending of "Edwin Drood." I thought Mr. William Archer's contributions to the query some time ago were particularly able and interesting; but I could not, with my hand on my heart, call Mr. William Archer a festive gentleman, or one supremely fitted to follow Mr. Swiveller as Perpetual Grand of the Glorious Apollos. Or again, I see that Sir William Robertson Nicoll has been writing on the same Drood mystery; and I know that his knowledge of Victorian literature is both vast and exact. But I hardly think that a Puritan Scot with a sharp individualistic philosophy would be the right person to fall off the coach. Sir William Nicoll, if I remember right, once forcibly described his individualist philosophy as "firing out the fools." And certainly the spirit of Dickens could be best described as "the delight in firing them in. It is exactly because Christmas is not only a feast of children, but in some sense a feast of fools, that Dickens is in touch with its mystery.

1 William Cobbett (1763-1835), or "Peter Porcupine", was a journalist who defended traditional rural England against the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution.