

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF MR. PICKWICK

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MARCH 30th was a notable day for all lovers of Charles Dickens. Many a one who has laughed and cried over his novels was carried back in thought a hundred years to that spring day when a modest, light green covered magazine number was on sale in a few London bookshops. It was the first monthly part of the *Post-humous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, edited by Boz. This grandiloquent title, so characteristic of the day, has become abbreviated to *The Pickwick Papers* and, with the affectionate familiarity of the years, to *Pickwick*. It has been pleasant to know that the Centenary was so enthusiastically celebrated in ways which Dickens himself would have enjoyed. Mr. Pickwick and his friends have driven from London by coach and horses along the green-bordered roads of Kent to historic Rochester; Messrs. Chapman and Hall, whom we cannot think of apart from Dickens, have published a *Pickwick Portrait Gallery*, in which distinguished Dickensians have written with rare insight on the immortal characters; and in London's great newspapers memorable tributes have been paid to what is perhaps the most popular book that Boz ever wrote. Those Centenary celebrations have expressed the enduring appreciation and keen enjoyment of Dickens in the English-speaking world and beyond.

The story of the origin of *Pickwick* is interesting in itself, for all beginnings are of interest, and it has, on account of the controversy in which it was involved, been told more than once. With his *Sketches by Boz*, illustrated by George Cruikshank, Dickens early in 1836 had attained no small measure of fame. He was highly thought of in the newspaper world, and was beginning to attract the attention of enterprising publishers on the outlook for writers who could make a popular appeal. He was fortunate indeed when Mr. Hall of the publishing firm called on him with a proposal. Would he write something for monthly numbers, to go with certain humorous plates which Robert Seymour the illustrator had in mind? Seymour had for some years been developing his humorous vein in sketches, chiefly of sporting subjects, and had

met with considerable success. In 1833 he had contributed drawings for *Maxims and Hints for an Angler*, a reprint professedly of the Minutes of the Common Place Book of the Houghton Fishing Club. Some of the plates show a fat old fellow wearing spectacles, not unlike Mr. Pickwick, and there is also a tall, thin gentleman playing chess and, at another time, fishing, attended by a servant in uniform; the last two faintly suggesting to those familiar with *Pickwick* Mr. Jingle and Sam Weller. Seymour now wished to do a series of cockney sporting plates. A Nimrod Club was suggested, whose members should go out shooting and fishing and getting into all kinds of trouble and amusing discomfiture. Dickens was interested, but he was no sportsman. Besides, he wanted full scope for his powers. He wanted to paint on a broader canvas, with a freer range of English scenes and people:

I was afraid I should ultimately do so in any case, whatever course I might prescribe to myself at starting. My views being deferred to, I thought of Mr. Pickwick and wrote the first number, from the proof-sheets of which Mr. Seymour made his drawing of the club, and that happy portrait of its founder by which he is always recognised and which may be said to have made him a reality. I connected Mr. Pickwick with a club because of the original suggestion, and I put in Mr. Winkle expressly for the use of Mr. Seymour.

This was the explanation which Dickens gave eleven years afterwards, when Seymour's family had accused him of appropriating the illustrator's idea. Their version of the story was that Seymour was the true originator of *Pickwick*, for he had drawn his very likeness. Dickens had seized upon the picture and had gone his own way, committing a grave injustice against Seymour. The truth is that Seymour had been drawing fat men and thin men, men who might be the prototype of Mr. Pickwick, men who could not possibly be. Dickens had seen the sporting plates, and it may be granted that he was indebted to Seymour for some inspiration. That was all. Mr. Chapman intervened, with what Dickens agreed was the last word on the picture of Mr. Pickwick. Seymour's first portrait, he said, had been of a long man:

The present immortal one he made from my description of a friend of mine at Richmond, a fat old beau who would wear, in spite of the ladies' protests, drab tights and black gaiters. His name was John Foster.

The truth seems to be that Seymour wanted the drawings to hold the first place, as they had done in other cases; the letter-

press was to be subsidiary. But he failed to appreciate the developing gifts of the young writer, and he did not reckon with such masterfulness; for after the first number, which appeared with four plates, Dickens made it clear that Seymour must make the drawings conform to his ideas. Seymour was taken aback at this, and it had such an effect upon him that, after an interview with Dickens, he went home and shot himself. The whole circumstances were painful, and the controversy most unfortunate, but Dickens thus early showed that he was determined to look sharply after everything that he wrote. With poor Seymour out of the way, it was uncertain how the suitable drawings were to be contributed until Hablot Knight Brown, familiar to Dickens readers as "Phiz", was found to fill the gap with great success.

So the first numbers of *Pickwick* were published, but they met with only a moderate response. To those who look back with such keen enjoyment of the whole book, this seems surprising; but if they will read through the early chapters again, they will discover the reason. Dickens sat down with the Nimrod Club in his mind. The adventures on which Mr. Pickwick and his friends embark are pervaded by the comic Nimrod atmosphere of horses that run away and chaises that come to grief and guns that go off with awkward results. It is all good fun in the fashion of Jorrocks, but there is nothing to become enthusiastic over. Yet it may be noticed that Dickens left himself free to insert the *Stroller's Tale* with its moving and dramatic portrayal of the dying clown, and the *Tale of the Convict's Return* told by the old clergyman at Dingley Dell. These occupy pauses in the narrative. They show how Dickens was becoming alive to the possibilities of his roving literary commission. He had, as early as the second chapter, introduced Mr. Alfred Jingle:

He was about the middle height, but the thinness of his body and the length of his legs gave him the appearance of being much taller. . . . His long black hair escaped in negligent waves from beneath each side of his old, pinched-up hat; and glimpses of his bare wrists might be observed between the tops of his gloves and the cuffs of his coat-sleeves. His face was thin and haggard; but an indescribable air of jaunty impudence and perfect self-possession pervaded the whole man.

Dickens went forward into a new world of his imagination to Mugleton, where took place the famous cricket-match, one of those English scenes that he loved, with the game and the goodfellowship and above all with Mr. Jingle, the mysterious stranger with

his pleasant, voluble flow of words and his quick-changing commentary on all that went on. Stephen Leacock, one of the latest Dickensian interpreters of Dickens, has written:

For most of us *The Pickwick Papers* really begin with Mr. Alfred Jingle, or at any rate with Mr. Jingle at the cricket match. At once we are lifted into an atmosphere of exhilaration, not only for Jingle, but for the new light thus thrown on Mr. Pickwick. It is perhaps with Jingle that Dickens really finds himself; that extraordinary magic by which he turns a cheat and a crook into a charming character, a criminal impostor into a thing of delight—that is Dickens, and that is no one else. Jingle is the first of the long line of these amazing creatures. It is as if the world itself is transformed, and its worst sins seen in the light of a kindly and amused tolerance that is higher than humanity itself. This is the highest quality of Dickens's work.

It is well known that Dickens always kept his eye on the public. He noted the way in which his books were received. He studied the publishers' report of the sales from month to month. When they were, as they often were, astonishing, he soared into high spirits; when they were only moderate, falling below his expectations, he was put on his mettle. He was determined to succeed.

With Mr. Pickwick in his mind from day to day, he went forward with fresh zest and creative vigour to new triumphs. The July number, No. 5, contained the fruits of his efforts. Back again in the London that he knew and loved, he made Mr. Pickwick meet Sam Weller at the White Hart Inn in the Borough. It was the appearance of the immortal Sam that really captured the public, and the sales, which up to that time had been disappointing, went up with a bound. From the beginning no one could help liking Mr. Pickwick, and enjoying him. For a Londoner, he was so simple and gullible; he was involved in trouble so guilelessly; wherever he went, he made friends so easily; but when he met Sam Weller, it seems as though these two had been destined to come together. "They were demanding" says Ralph Straus, "to make friends with all the world"; and all the world seemed, if we judge by the sales, determined to make friends with them. Henceforth these two, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, were to travel the world together, master and servant, sharing the varied adventures of the road, until Mr. Pickwick should go into quiet retirement attended by Sam to the last. In the summer of 1836 the British people took Mr. Pickwick and Sam Weller to its heart, and has ever since kept them there.

Sam Weller is one of the author's great creations. He is the quintessence of that intimate knowledge of the streets and people

of London, especially in the poorer parts, which Dickens acquired while he worked in the blacking-factory and afterwards. Sam is a character after Dickens's own heart, a typical cockney, with a definite, cheerful, proverbial philosophy of life which is, so to speak, always on tap, and is poured forth unconsciously for our delight:

"Delightful prospect, Sam," said Mr. Pickwick.

"Beats the chimley pots, sir," replied Mr. Weller, touching his hat.

"I suppose you have hardly seen anything but chimney-pots and bricks and mortar all your life, Sam," said Mr. Pickwick, smiling.

"I worn't always a boots, sir," said Mr. Weller, with a shake of the head. "I was a vagginer's boy, once."

"When was that?" enquired Mr. Pickwick.

"When I was first pitched neck and crop into the world, to play at leap-frog with its troubles," replied Sam. "I was a carrier's boy at startin': then a vagginer's, then a helper, then a boots. Now I'm a gen'l'm'n's servant. I shall be a gen'l'm'n myself perhaps one of these days, with a pipe in my mouth, and a summer-house in the back garden. Who knows? I shouldn't be surprised, for one."

"You are quite a philosopher, Sam," said Mr. Pickwick.

"It runs in the family, I b'lieve, sir," replied Mr. Weller.

Sam was a philosopher of London streets and London inn yards. He had his own thoughts, his own distinctive attitude to life; as in Dr. Johnson's friend Edwards, cheerfulness was always breaking through, and cheerfulness kept him going throughout all.

It has already been pointed out that Dickens developed as *Pickwick* went on. He drew increasingly from the rich supplies of creative imagination, bringing new characters on the stage and making the already familiar ones change and grow also. We feel that Mr. Pickwick changes and becomes something other than he was in the earlier parts. There he was the simple, happy, benevolent spectator of life, spending his time in fun and frolic. But he does not remain so. We look upon a more serious Pickwick, a man with a mission. "Intent upon the resolution he had formed of exposing the real character of the nefarious Jingle in any quarter in which he might be pursuing his fraudulent designs, he sat at first taciturn and contemplative, brooding over the means by which his purpose could be best attained." This is the intimation of a different Mr. Pickwick, and it prepares us for all that is to come. True, he will keep some of the facility for getting into amusing situations, but these will be but the foil for the more serious business of life.

Literary critics complained of the change in Mr. Pickwick, but Dickens treated their complaints lightly. He was far more interested in life than in letters, and he defended the change by asking his critics to reflect that in a character like Mr. Pickwick, whimsical as he was, it was the peculiarities and oddities that impress us at the first, but on better acquaintance we begin to look below these superficial traits and to know the better part of him. Forster remarks that Dickens might have said that the change had become necessary for his own satisfaction, for while Dickens had endless high spirits and loved fun and farce, yet he was very much in earnest, and he could not content himself with a Mr. Pickwick who merely enjoyed himself in good company at Dingley Dell and elsewhere in his travels. So he was called to pass through the ordeal of the action *Bardell against Pickwick*, and protesting against an iniquitous decision to enter as a debtor into the Fleet Prison and to mingle with all sorts and conditions of men before he was able at last to come forth, restored to his friends, with his character deepened and strengthened through suffering.

Dickens had the marvellous gift of living in his characters, being wholly in them for the time. His daughter has left on record that she has seen him intent at his desk, making grimaces as he imagined his characters so vividly. It reminds us of Jean Armour, Burns's wife, taking note of the poet when the inspiration of *Tam o' Shanter* took possession of him by the banks of the Nith at Allisland. Dickens enjoyed making Mr. Pickwick change and grow, in contact with different phases and experiences of life in the world, and he himself grew in the power of his art.

It was the inspiration of imaginative genius to bring Mr. Pickwick to the Fleet. Dickens himself was conscious of it. As he wrote, he was borne along as never before with eager interest and enjoyment. The Fleet chapters stand out in their greatness of humour and pathos, making a lasting impression. Dickens had had the bitter experience of knowing the inside of the Marshalsea debtors' prison, when his unfortunate father brought the whole family to live there. They could live there more easily than anywhere else. During that time, however, the boy was looking around upon the whole humiliating and squalid scene; and now it came forth from his mind, touched with rare imaginative and descriptive power.

What a world of humanity was congregated in that noisy, sordid place, debtors drawn from every rank of life; all living an aimless, restless life; some wandering about the galleries; some smoking, laughing and drinking; and some sitting silent in their bare rooms, lost in endless rounds of thought and remembrance!

It was a scene which afforded Dickens a rich chance for what he confessed was his infirmity, to fancy or perceive relations in things which are not apparent generally. The light of his humour plays upon Mr. Mivins and Mr. Smangle, the two adventurers who gather round Mr. Pickwick and drink at his expense. There is humour, too, when the Rev. Mr. Stiggins comes to call upon Sam, who to our delight has accompanied his master to prison; and humour in the description of the cobbler who has been ruined by his legacy. Amid all this, it is refreshing to see Mr. Pickwick's kind heart going out in sympathy to the poor Chancery prisoner, as he lays his hand gently and compassionately on his arm and offers him, amid the unceasing noise, the quiet of his room.

The Fleet was a strange meeting-place. We had almost forgotten Mr. Jingle and Job Trotter, but we meet them here, the former as voluble as ever, but no longer his jaunty self, worn and thin and dejected, and his eyes sometimes moist with tears. Indeed in the Fleet we are never far from tears. Humour must at last turn to pathos, and our hearts are powerfully moved when the Chancery prisoner dies. "I have seen enough" said Mr. Pickwick. "My head aches with these scenes, and my heart too." When at last he left the Fleet, having mingled with so much sadness and unhappiness, he was himself a sadder man, drawn more closely than ever to his fellow men.

We have touched upon only a few aspects of this wonderful treasure-house which is *Pickwick*. Indeed the one word which describes Dickens is "wealth". What a wealth he had! Wealth of high spirits! He was one of those enjoying natures who sit down to the great feast of life with a heartiness which takes our breath away. His high spirits blow like a gale from beginning to end. We can see him sitting down to *Pickwick*, feeling that he had got his chance, and resolving to give to all who should read him a huge slice of life for their enjoyment. How grateful his readers have been for the rich gift which has so often dispelled their cares and made them cheerful and gay! Dickens has given them his whole self. Many a one this summer, seeking rest and refreshment, will take a few favourite books with him. We hope he will put *Pickwick* in the bag along with them, for *Pickwick* is a wonderful refreshment and tonic for the spirit.

Wealth of characterisation! Dickens's supreme gift was the imagination which created so many characters who live before our eyes, and in *Pickwick* he gave us a wonderful world of them. As we name them, they rise and play again those parts which will never cease to move us to laughter and tears. Mr. Pickwick, Mr.

Snodgrass, Mr. Tupman and Mr. Winkle—the immortal four; Mr. Wardle and Joe the Fat Boy, Mr. Jingle and Job Trotter, Mrs. Bardell and Tommy, Benjamin Allen and Bob Sawyer, Dodson and Fogg, Sergeant Buzfuz, the Rev. Mr. Stiggins, Tony Weller and Sam and a host of others whom we call minor characters, but who were never minor figures to Dickens, never even figures, but real and living men and women; each one, however humble, standing for something distinctive in the whole gallery of life.

What wealth of humour is here! There is abundance of fun and farce in *Pickwick*. Of these Dickens was an exuberant purveyor. But if he had only made us laugh, if he had given us only Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Winkle and their mishaps on the road and in the field and on the ice, he would not have continued to hold the unique place in thousands of hearts. He was greater far than ordinary writers of fun. What is it that makes Sam Weller such a delightful figure? He is so natural and cheerful and optimistic, so sane and shrewd in his thoughts of life, and he comes out with such quaint sayings, such unexpected turns of speech that we cannot help laughing with him. He wins us and becomes our friend. The supreme gift of Dickens, his imagination, has enabled us to see associations in life to which our dull eyes were blind, and his sympathy has made these associations so living and real that we feel with a start our common humanity in unexpected places and in unlikely persons.

Wealth of human feeling! The Roman writer of comedies, Terence, once wrote a memorable sentence: "I am a man, and nothing that is human I count foreign." That was supremely true of Dickens, and of Dickens *Pickwick* was a large part. Mr. *Pickwick* looks out on life with kindly eyes. He is interested in everyone and as we see him brought into contact with all those persons of different temperament and character who come upon the stage at one, time or another, the simple and the sophisticated, the honest and the dishonest, the good and the bad, we seem to reach the inmost secret of Dickens's heart—that spirit that pervades not only *Pickwick* but all that he wrote, the sympathy that unites him to all human kind. Have we not a picture at the last of Mr. *Pickwick*, "his countenance lighted up with smiles which the heart of no man, woman or child could resist: himself the happiest of the group turning round in a different direction at every fresh expression of gratification or curiosity, and inspiring everybody with his looks of gladness or delight"?

Pickwick has endured a hundred years, because the humanity that breathes in it finds a response in human hearts, and nothing is surer than that *Pickwick* will go on living and bringing joy to countless lives.