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**A Tale of Two Dickens BY PETER ACKROYD**

To the world he was a literary genius, a loving husband and father - but the private letters of Charles Dickens reveal an angry obsessive living a double life

WHEN Charles Dickens made his last tour of America in 1868, President Andrew Johnson booked a box at the Carroll Hall theatre in Washington seven nights' running to hear the great author give readings from his novels. For one performance the entire US Cabinet occupied the front row. The Supreme Court was there, too. Dickens was at the height of his powers - a man whose brilliance was only matched by his celebrity. For thirty years he had been a sensation. Yet within two years he was dead, worn out in mind and body by the demands of his public and his own insatiable compulsion to work. He was the most famous author in the English-speaking world; he had captured for generations to come the squalor, the vigour and the injustices of his era. But Dickens himself was unhappy and oppressed, filled so much with resentment and remorse that he often forgot he was a famous man and wandered once more down the dark ways of his childhood. It is only now, more than 130 years later, that the twelfth and final volume of his private letters reveals Dickens to be a man as extraordinary as any of his literary creations. The publication sets the seal on a scholarly enterprise almost without parallel in English letters for its comprehensiveness and detail. The first volume of correspondence was published in 1965 and through 12 books Dickens's career takes on a wonderful shape and coherence. Great lives are like this: the end clarifies the beginning. Only when it is completed does the pattern emerge. All his life Dickens had been an actor and a performer. When he was a small child he used to sing and dance on the tops of tavern tables; in front of his family he acted out episodes from Smollet or Defoe; when he was a schoolboy he imitated the old Cockney ladies of the streets. He acted in amateur theatricals, and wrote for the stage. But by the time of his last American tour it was killing him. He lay dead faint upon a sofa after each performance, and could be revived only after five or ten minutes; he ate little, and drank less. "My cold," he wrote, "sticks to me, and I can scarcely exaggerate what I sometimes undergo from sleeplessness. The day before yesterday I could get no rest until morning, and could not get up before twelve." He was continually streaming with what he called "American catarrh", but which really seems to have been misery and hopelessness. "I am nearly used up," he wrote. If he had gone on with his reading tour, "I think I must have broken down". It says something about his character, however, that on the journey back to England he was already planning a reading tour of the entire British Isles. He was a driven man, incapable of rest. Even at the end of his life he would overwhelm himself with work; he positively liked to be worn and dazed with constant labour. "The older I get," he wrote, "the more I do, and the harder I work." This was the true spirit of the man. He was always "constantly occupied" amid "many distractions". Nothing, however, prevented his inexhaustible comic spirit breaking through. He found many episodes of American life "ridiculous beyond description". When a dog wandered into one of his readings and stared at him, he burst out laughing. A small girl came into his hotel room; she was "all stockings, and much too tall, who sat on the sofa very far back, with her stockings sticking stiffly out in

front of her and glared at me and never spoke a word". They were "held in a sort of fascination, like serpent and bird". He called himself "Majesty", "behaving with inconceivable dignity and grandeur". This had always been an aspect of his personality - the facetiousness, the eye for the ridiculous, the irrepressible laughter. As a schoolboy he had a propensity to loud laughter; as a lawyer's clerk he had been noted for his general drollness and comedy. Laughter kept him alive. It also kept him sane. He always felt the need to sparkle. "The undersigned," he wrote, "is in his usual brilliant condition." Even when he was weighed down with misery and disappointment, he resolved to remain cheerful in the sight of others. "Cheer up," he told one correspondent, "for the sake of all that is good in you and around you." It was the closest Dickens came to a philosophy of life. As the editor of a weekly journal, his injunction to contributors was always "Brighten it! Brighten it!" On his return to England the houses around his neighbourhood, in Kent, were draped in flags to welcome him; the local churches rang out peals of bells in his honour. And yet immediately he plunged back into his world of work. He was obliged to edit his periodical almost single-handedly, since his principal assistant was very ill, and wrote many letters on editorial matters. "Please keep," he told one contributor, "on abrupt transitions in the present tense, your critical eye." He had always been a working journalist as well as novelist; as a young man he had worked in the press gallery of the House of Commons (which he despised) and had reported on trials and parliamentary elections. His journalist's eye - his awareness of the the events and sensations of the day - plays a part in all his novels. The Pickwick Papers has scenes from a debtors' prison at a time when there were calls for reform of the prison system. Our Mutual Friend comments upon the horrors of the workhouse. Some novels, among them Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop, were published in serial form in weekly or monthly magazines. It was part of his genius to transform the incidents of the moment into his fiction. He once declared that he wished to bring romance within the domain of the everyday and the familiar; hence that combination of the fairy tale and the newspaper headline, the grotesque and the realistic, which makes his work live. Throughout his letters, his practicality and quickness in all the affairs of the world leave a lasting impression. "I am going on at the same tremendous rate everywhere," he told his son. He was a symbol for his age, embodying the doubt, the determination and the divisions of the Victorian world. He was also thorough and methodical in every aspect of his life; no man ever put a higher premium upon neatness and order. No detail was too small for him. There is a letter, for example, on the precise ingredients of of salad dressing: "4 Mustardspoonsfull of Mustard ... 3 raw eggs ..." Another letter concerns watered gin: "Mr Charles Dickens sends his compliments to Messrs Seager Evans and Co and begs them to test the accompanying bottle of gin drawn from their cask this morning. It appears to Mr Dickens to have neither the right strength nor flavor, and he thinks it must have been tampered with at the Railway. When the cask was tapped at Gad's Hill on Saturday, it was observed to be particularly full." This attention to detail explains perhaps why he excelled in everything; he was sure he would have forced his way upward to the top of any career he chose for himself. His need for neatness and cleanliness may have deeper sources. His parents were constantly on the move from house to house, driven by poverty and debt; at the age of 12 he went to work in a blacking factory. Just as much of his life consisted of a flight from early misery, the factory left him with a lifelong horror of grime. In his letters he ascribes his adult self-reliance and determination to his harsh

beginnings. "You know how hard I work for what I get," he tells one of his sons, "and I think you know that I never had help from any human creature after I was a child." He saw everything in terms of his past. It was the lodestone of his existence. Whenever he felt depressed or weary he was attacked by the same pain in his left side which he first suffered as a child; his imagination is filled with the phantoms of the past. It makes him wonderful in his work but, in his life, he could be hard. He had an almost military air, and his favourite metaphor was of "the battle of life". "It is indeed a sad experience," he wrote, "to find how comrades fall, as the life fight progresses. There is nothing for it but to close up the ranks, march on, and fight it out." It was a toughness combined with tremendous self-belief. It was a favourite delusion of his that he was never wrong. No man was ever more confident of himself - of his genius, of his imagination, of his general correctness in all matters. In public he was modest about himself and his work, but he was quite aware both of his standing in the world and of his stature in posterity. His interest in his reputation led him into strange places. There is one letter, with the superscription "P", which needs explanation. "P" stood for Peckham, where Dickens had taken a large house for his young companion, Ellen Ternan. She is referred to in the correspondence, albeit very rarely, either as "N" or "the patient". She may have been his mistress, or simply his companion and confidante; nobody knows. Nobody knows because Dickens did not want anybody to know. He paid the rates for the Peckham house under the assumed name of Charles Tringham and went there incognito. He was, in fact, leading a double life. There was the famous novelist and public figure; there was the anonymous gentleman who travelled on the railway from Waterloo to Peckham Rye, no doubt deep in a book. His separation from his wife, Catherine, after some 20 years, had already caused enormous scandal. There were rumours of affairs with an actress, with Ellen, even with his sister-in-law. His infatuation with Ellen did, in fact, lead directly to the dissolution of his marriage; he divided his marital bedroom in half, and then effectively banished his wife from his presence. He had published in the newspapers statements about Catherine's supposed mental disorder. He lost control of events and his daughter, Kate, said that he had behaved like a madman during that period. He did not want to lose control again; his private life, his inner life, had to remain secluded. He was in any event a naturally reticent person. He harboured many secrets. He did not tell his wife or family about the blacking factory, or of his father's incarceration for debt in the Marshalsea. These events were still too much part of his inner life to be disclosed even to those closest to him. He was reticent with his children, too, and showed no signs of open affection as they grew older. In fact the tone of his letters to them is one of iron paternal control; he dispatched them to Australia, or into the Navy, as he thought fit. "What you have always wanted until now," he wrote to Edward Dickens, aged 16, "has been a set, steady, constant purpose. I therefore exhort you to persevere in a thorough determination to do whatever you have to do as well as you can do it." There then follows the old refrain. "I was not so old as you are now when I first had to win my food ..." It could not have been easy to be the son of the illustrious novelist. But this natural reticence coexisted with an unfathomable well of anger and resentment. In the last months of his life he was intent upon performing, against the advice of doctors as well as friends, the murder of Nancy by Sikes from *Oliver Twist*. He wrote about "the Murder" as if it were some private act of vengeance. "It is very horrible," he told a friend, "but very dramatic." During one reading 20 ladies were born out of the hall "stiff and rigid". And yet, he

added: "I have a great deal of Murdering before me yet." The effort left him nerveless and prostrate, his pulse racing dangerously and even fatally high, but he insisted on continuing. The motives behind this act of self-wounding are incalculable - although one among them must have been the desire for sensation. There is much in this last volume to provoke speculation. For example, there are reminders that Dickens was an expert mesmerist who was credited with curing disorders of the mind and body by means of "animal magnetism". A newly discovered cache of letters concerns his involvement with an asylum for "fallen women" in Shepherds Bush where his concern for detail (he chose the fabric for the young women's clothes) is matched only by his attention to the characters of those chosen for reform. "Dear Mrs Morson," he wrote to the superintendent of the home, "will you send under-clothing to Eliza Wilkin now living with her father at 18 Market Row Oxford Market - with money for her to get a warm bath - or two would be better, and instructions for her to do so, that she may be perfectly clean and wholesome ..." It is sometimes as if he were watching them develop within a novel. THE volume also reveals him to have been a keen observer of contemporary affairs, from the merits of technical education to the Fenian question. These letters are written from all over the country; he was always travelling, always moving on, in the course of what he called "an episodal life". He needed "constant exercise", too, and he was convinced that he should walk for as many hours each day as he spent at his desk. But in the last months of his life he had become, as he put it, "quite lame". He blamed his incapacity on too much walking in snow, but in truth his swollen foot was simply one sign of the vascular degeneration which would kill him. In his last year he took some American visitors on a tour of what he called "the darker side of London life"; he walked with them down the "stony hearted streets" of the East End and showed them the workhouses and night lodgings of what he called "Babylon". He was re-entering his kingdom. He was wandering in the city which, in his novels, he had recreated in the image of his childhood suffering. And indeed nothing for him had really ever changed. He had always had his secrets. He had always been possessed by the need to perform and to entertain. He was still filled with the desire to work hard and yet harder. And then he died quite suddenly, as a direct result of all the labour which had made him what he was. In the beginning is the end. During dinner at Gad's Hill Place he rose suddenly from his chair, muttered indistinctly about going to London, and then fell upon the floor. He was laid upon a narrow couch, and warm bricks placed against his feet, but he never regained consciousness. After lying there all night and all day he sighed deeply; a tear rose from his right eye and trickled down his cheek. As he put it in one of the letters: "But the dream must be dreamed out, 'till we wake somewhere." ·

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