

# Dickens Distilled

## How to Lose Size Without Losing Stature

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ONE can imagine how Charles Dickens would have raved and fumed at the idea that any one could have had the effrontery to make a "digest" of his work. It would have seemed as presumptuous as offering to Moses a digest of his Ten Commandments. . . . And this, indeed, is the attitude of mind in which many of us, lifelong lovers of Dickens, approach the idea. This is—to use a term unknown in Dickens's day—our first "reaction" to it, or from it. Yet we have to admit that not only has Mrs. Aswell\* attempted this daring task but has achieved it.

Here is the immortal Pickwick humiliated into a hundred large print pages and yet Pickwick. . . . Here is *Oliver Twist*, with less tears but enough, in fact, plenty; *Martin Chuzzlewit* foreshortened in perspective, but still, in a way, all there, and here is *David Copperfield*, though it doesn't seem possible, explaining himself in only two hundred pages of large print. The secret is that Mrs. Aswell has not in any way altered Dickens or rewritten Dickens. She has not "digested" him by leaving things out. She has not added a syllable. . . . And the text of Dickens, we only whisper it among ourselves and refuse to acknowledge it to outsiders, can stand having some of it left out.

But no,—we no sooner say that than we must take it back again in part. The fault is not all with Dickens; the fault is mainly with the lapse of time. Literature passes and changes: each generation has its own modes and methods which in the main are wearisome to those who follow. Moreover, this is especially so in an age of such rapid

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mechanical changes as the last hundred years. People accustomed to movie pictures where life and death flicker past at the pace of 186,000 thousand miles a second find stagecoach literature slow.

This mutation of the forms of literature is a thing not fully recognized by the colleges and the academic authorities. If Shakespeare came alive again I don't think any publisher would let him put out a folio play called "George VI," meaning the European War; nor Dante a new picture of Hell with new dress circles; nor Milton a new *Paradise Lost* with a group of devils discussing the United States tariff. Indeed, instead of that, Shakespeare would have been making moving pictures, and Milton lecturing at Princeton.

ONE asks, what would have been Dickens's objection to a digest of his work? Well, in the first instance, there would be the natural repugnance of an author, great or small, in the case of Dickens a monomania, to see any alteration made in his work,—“a poor thing but mine own.” Isaac Newton was very touchy about the (Latin) text of his “*Principia*.” He wanted it such that it couldn't possibly be understood by people who couldn't possibly understand it. As a result, there is nothing left of it now except “Digests” to make it clear: no one reads the text. But not even Dickens could have foreseen that even tediousness takes on new forms. We can (our best authors can) be far more tedious than he is. But we have our own way of being tedious and his way is out of date. Granted then that Dickens can be, and may be, digested, let us ask, like Peter Piper with the peck of pepper,—how the thing is picked.

It would be interesting if a poll of Dickens people, those to whom Dickens's works have been a part of their lives, could be taken, to see how far they would endorse the selection of these four books, “*David Copperfield*,” “*Oliver Twist*,” “*Martin Chuzzlewit*,” “*Pickwick Papers*,” as best fitted to represent his work. “*Pickwick*,” I am sure, would be ratified by acclamation. It is, in a sense, in the kind of paradoxical sense that Mr. Chesterton used to love, Dickens's only book—that is, the only book of this particular Dickens. In fact, I can imagine that Chesterton would have gone so far as to



—Illustrations from the book.

say, “We mustn't say that Dickens wrote ‘*Pickwick*’: it is more accurate to put it that ‘*Pickwick*’ wrote Dickens.”

In other words, as soon as Dickens, to use his own off-quoted phrase, had “thought of Mr. Pickwick,” the character took hold of him and showed him how to do it. But he never did it again. Dickens, like all the rest of us, was fascinated by the things he couldn't do. He loved “plot,” and he wanted it as tangled as seaweed and as dark as sin. This came in part from his earlier theatre going, his craze for melodrama, and in part from the spirit of his age. . . . Dickens's plots grew and darkened till in the later books he had them all to himself. The reader let the plot go, content with the characters, skipping the shadow to read in the sunlight, fully prepared to have everybody turn out at the end to be somebody else.

Not so, with “*Pickwick*.” It is true that the great lawsuit, *Bardell vs Pickwick*, gathers the random occurrences for a moment to a focus. But this was just a happy accident, a rare piece of good luck. We may be sure that Dickens never planned it at the start. As a matter of fact, we know, in a documentary way, that he didn't. Everyone recalls how the “*Pickwick Papers*” arose out of the plan of Chapman and Hall, the publishers, to get someone to write up a running commentary for a set of mock-heroic sporting pictures to be prepared by Mr. Robert Seymour, an artist of their connection. We all recall how Dickens, great at “locomotion” but short on interest in sport, changed the idea to a “travelling club” and “thought of Mr. Pickwick,” and away they went. We all recall how the unhappy Seymour died by his own hand when the enterprise had just begun.

But years after Seymour's death, with Dickens at the height of his reputation, the plea was raised that Seymour was the real creator of *Pickwick*. Dickens was as furious over this implication as only Dickens could be. He wrote in emphatic detail to the *Athen-*

*aeum* (March 28, 1866) to say that at the time of Seymour's death only twenty-nine pages of "Pickwick" had been published, only about four more written, and beyond that "not one subsequent line of the book *invented*." The word *invented* speaks for itself. Dickens just rambled on. It is true that Bardell *vs.* Pickwick culminates in something like a plot but after all it falls notably short of it. Dickens having got Mr. Pickwick into the Fleet had no way of getting him out again, except by letting him pay to get out,—a sad lack of the "poetic justice" that was the stock in trade of the time. Indeed someone else invented, we mustn't say a better outcome, but a more artistic one, by having Mr. Alfred Jingle turn out to be the deceased Mr. Bardell, not brought to his end by "a crack from a peuter pot," but absconding from his wife. This released Pickwick in triumph. The theme was thus carried out in a little play put on while "Pickwick" was still running in its monthly numbers and presented, after the easy fashion of the time, without any with-your-leave or by-your-leave to Dickens.

But mainly "Pickwick" is just made up of glorious incidents and delightful environments, some, like some Kentucky whiskey, better than others, but all good. Most of us linger with chief delight on all that goes with Dingley Dell, with the White Hart Inn, and on the company of Mr. Jingle and Mr. Weller. Other scenes, especially in retrospect, are less vivid. Such a work therefore lends itself in an especial way to a "digest." In fact, as Mr. Chesterton again would say, the whole book "Pickwick" is just a "digest" of a "Pickwick" that might have been larger.

With Mr. Pickwick nominated by acclamation, I think that "David Copperfield" would be elected with but few dissentient ballots. This book, as we remember, was Dickens's "favorite child": and it is perhaps the story which of all his books has taken the widest and the firmest hold upon the public. For there is no dark plot to obscure it: no one, as far as I remember, is anybody else: only now and then, as in the case of Mrs. Annie Strong, does it break into that flood of tears that irrigate the chapters of Dickens's books; on its pages moves the immortal Micawber, and crawls the unforgettable Uriah Heep, and, for those who read it young enough, never was love's young dream, beautiful in its very blindness and in its ecstasy, more tenderly portrayed.

To me the only blemish in the book is the miserable creature Steerforth. Dickens was haunted with the idea of portraying a "gentleman," reckless, devil-may-care, brave, dissolute,—and

redeemed at the end by his death. Hence those two howling cads Steerforth of "Copperfield" and Eugene Wrayburn of "Our Mutual Friend." Wrayburn is redeemed by a knock on the head with an oar (not hard enough); Steerforth by being drowned (not wet enough). Dickens thought them great fellows. He loved in his "Readings" to "do the storm" and drown Steerforth. But in the literary sense both are sorry failures. Dickens could draw a freak gentleman like Mr. Pickwick, or nut gentlemen like the Brothers Cheeryble, or a walking gentleman like Nicholas Nickleby; but a real gentleman,—no. Or wait,—I'm wrong,—John



Jarndyce, that's one. But his own pet casting mold turned out a cad. . . .

The mention of Jarndyce makes me ask why not "Bleak House"? Why "Martin Chuzzlewit" and "Oliver Twist"? . . . And without doubting that countless people would follow Mrs. Aswell's choice, I would personally venture to dissent from it.

But let me start more at the beginning. Most of us agree that the great Dickens books which we read and reread are "Pickwick," "David Copperfield," "Martin Chuzzlewit," "Bleak House," and the "Tale of Two Cities." (The order is my own). . . . Very close to them, "Barnaby Rudge" . . . and then, without order, "Oliver Twist" and "Nicholas Nickleby," "Dombey & Son," and "Little Dorrit" . . . and then "Great Expectations" . . . then, below all the rest, "Our Mutual Friend" and, nowhere, "Hard Times." . . . All by itself the unfinished "Edwin Drood." . . .

I note with warm approval that Mrs. Aswell not only includes "Martin Chuzzlewit" in the digest but is not afraid to put in parts of the American scenes that gave such offense in America. The failure, the disillusionment, and ill-will that ensued from young Charles Dickens's famous visit of 1842 were due, as I see it, to Dickens himself. He had no eye to see. The vast epic of civilization on the march, of cities rising where the wilderness had been, was for him one great welter of crudeness, marshes, singing frogs, and people who spat tobacco. Seen with such distorted vision types of character that

should have been as forgivable as Mr. Jingle, as companionable as Mr. Micawber, are reflected as ague-ridden crooks. But the fault is all long since forgiven and forgotten. Americans read it for the fun of it, just as English people, after a first burst of aristocratic indignation, learned to laugh with the Yankee at King Arthur's Court, even if it partly meant Queen Victoria's. "Martin Chuzzlewit," well and wisely digested, is a notable feature of the book.

Of "Oliver Twist" I must not speak. I heard it read and read it as a child. But I don't think I ever laughed much. Starvation isn't funny, nor dens of theft and crime,—and the rest of the book easily forgotten. But let it pass. I am recording only a personal attitude.

**I**N any case, the other books might, if one tried it, be hard to digest. The "Tale of Two Cities" might boil down in history and "Bleak House" has so many variant strands that they might refuse to twist into a smaller thread. Few people, I think, will find anything but praise for the way in which this digest is digested.

The very publication of this comprehensive digest, which must sell on Dickens's merits or not sell at all, is another evidence of the extraordinary "survival" of Charles Dickens, of the appeal of his writings to general readers after the lapse of more than a century. The survival of the ancient writings which we call the "classics" rests rather on history and prestige,—the part they played in the advancement of the human intellect, than on their intrinsic interest to the readers of the day. I doubt whether many such readers want to read Livy or Virgil, and all that goes with Greek is hidden behind so dense a barrier of language, so heavy an atmosphere of awe, that it is like a God in a grove whom none dare question or disturb. The people, like myself, of the outgoing generation who spent years and years, the best years of their lives, in learning Greek, and who therefore have a certain right to speak, but who are neither clergymen nor classical professors are very few. If a skeptic, like myself, dares to say that the works of Homer and of Aeschylus are just primitive literature, he is ruled out of court for ignorance and blasphemy. So, too, in a lesser degree, anyone sufficiently candid to consider Dante's "Inferno" worse than Hell and Milton's "Paradise" well lost. Yet these also survive only on their historical value, their academic place, and by esteem rather than interest.

The same fate is now overtaking the works that are the "classics" of the booksellers, the great literature

of the earlier and middle nineteenth century, the marvelous expansion of the written word that came with the spread of democracy, education, and the mechanical power of the steam press and steam transport. It also, especially the part of it that stands for imagination, is fading fast on the horizon. Some of the great books survive indeed as links in a chain still lengthening, the work of Adam Smith or Malthus, Lyell's "Geology" and Darwin's "Origin"; others, for example, the great biographies and histories, Boswell, Napier, and Lockhart, survive as themselves sources of history; while a few survive on their sheer innate merit,—as notably the work of Macaulay and Dickens.

THESE last, in a sense, rise in eminence as they recede in time, as the distant mountains whose tall summits rise above the villages and towns lost from sight as soon as left behind.

Dickens, we say, is indeed notable as perhaps the sole survivor in fiction writing. Poetry survives better, since immortality may adhere to a single poem (Gray's "Elegy"), a verse, or even a line as when "Tears, idle Tears" may fall and "Poppies blow in Flanders Field." Fiction vanishes. Nor must we confuse booksellers' survival, counted by sales, with true survival, counted by readers. Booksellers would tell us that Walter Scott is as much alive as Dickens. But an author, lucky enough to reach Scott's one time eminence, can stay alive in a "presentation set" like a knight in stone in a cathedral.

We have a picture of the literary world of London, of a century ago, in the celebrated salon of Lady Blessington of Gore House in which appeared young Dickens as a rising star in a firmament that seemed already gloriously full. We have it from the pen of an American visitor to London, Mr. N. P. Willis,—a name once a household word in America, now scarcely a textbook reference, as forgotten as the things of which he writes. Here in the salon, as the uncrowned king of letters, as affable and as untidy as uncrowned kings can afford to be, is Lytton Bulwer (otherwise Bulwer Lytton). His novels top the market at one thousand and five hundred pounds apiece. Yet, except as revived in moving pictures, who now walk with Lytton beneath the doomed porticoes of Pompeii? Beside him in the salon is young Mr. "D'Israeli," newly prominent as the author of "Vivian Grey": "lividly pale," says Willis, "his eye as black as Erebus and with the most mocking and lying-in-wait sort of expression." Willis thinks "it is a great pity he is not in parliament." So does "D'Israeli." The pity was duly reme-

died. Yet who reads "Vivian Grey" now,—or who under seventy?

Willis talks of their literary values. "Bulwer gets fifteen hundred pounds a book, Lady Blessington four hundred, Mrs. Norton two hundred and fifty, Lady Charlotte Bury two hundred and Grattan three hundred." Who are they? He adds "Captain Marryat's gross trash sells immensely and brings him in five or six hundred a book."

Dickens, of course, outgrew all such salons and became as it were a salon in himself, ill content to be anything in a literary gathering except first,—with the rest nowhere. Egotism apart, it was his due place. For all those who seemed his rivals and his sup-

planters, Thackeray and Charles Reade, George Eliot and Anthony Trollope... and George Meredith,—where are they now, as far as actually reading readers who read for reading's sake?

Nor will they come again. No names and memories of our day will live as theirs did,—the Adam Smiths, the Mills, the Macaulays, the Ruskins, the Charles Kingsleys, and the George Eliots. They had first chance in a field newly opened. We move now on a broader front, with one name and reputation for a moment in the van, others lost in the crowd,—the best seller of today the forgotten book of tomorrow.

Dickens, to my thinking, is the most lasting name since Shakespeare.

## Jim Tully's Gallery

A DOZEN AND ONE. By Jim Tully. Hollywood: Murray & Gee. 1943. 242 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by THOMAS SUGRUE

A BOOK by Jim Tully, even when it is but a collection of pieces about friends and people he has known, is a respite from everyday prose. The former hobo handles words like a miser fondling money, revering them in the bulk as a source of unlimited power; paying them out stingily, for the sentences he needs to sustain his narrative. His sentences are lean and spare, like a fighter in good condition. His paragraphs are brief and attractive.

In describing the people who are his subject matter he employs the same parsimony. He tells one trait out of twenty, one anecdote out of a hundred, one biographical fact out of a thousand. Then swiftly he sketches a complete, detailed picture of the man as he is caught in a gesture, a smile, an act of graciousness. The result is an impression, a caricature, a sudden sidewise glimpse of the three-way person: body, mind, soul.

The people Tully writes about in this book are, with two exceptions, either friends or people he admires. Yet this does not mean that he presents them without their faults. Far from it; he turns their shortcomings up as casually as if he were spading the garden. And just as easily he finds virtues in those he does not particularly like. He is more than fair to Arnold Ben-

nett; he shows a sympathy for Charlie Chaplin, and an understanding of him, notable after such treatment as Tully received at the hands of Chaplin.

The Chaplin piece opens the book. It may seem at first glance that Chaplin is handled roughly, but the comedian has been so well protected in this matter for so long that most people have no more idea of his reality than what they see on the screen. Tully presents him as he is, a man permanently embittered by his early years of poverty and failure, completely cynical, entirely subjective, consistently unhappy. "Inept upon the screen, the helpless foil of invidious circumstance, in private life he was forceful, domineering, arrogant." With an untrained mind, no capacity for abstract thinking, no great cause or love, he lives in a void. Suddenly the picture becomes clear. Chaplin is in his heart, in real life, the lonely little vagabond he portrays on the screen; a misfit, an island of himself in the sea of the world's people, materialized by the centrifugal force of his nature. Clark Gable comes next, probably because Tully wants to point out that the idol of American women measures up to a prizefighter's definition of a man. The rest, in order, are Jack Dempsey, Diego Rivera, George Jean Nathan, Wilson Mizner, Jim Cruze, Arnold Bennett, Tod Sloan, Paul Bern, Walter Winchell, Henry Armstrong, and H. L. Mencken. Each is superbly done, and fairly. He cannot abide the charlatan in Mizner, the great wit, but he sees through the heel to the lonely, frightened soul within, and he is sorry for it.

It is difficult to pick out the best portrait. Those of Chaplin, Dempsey, Bennett, and Mizner are outstanding. All are entertaining and enlightening, even though their subjects in some cases have been written about extensively before.

