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THE DRAMATIC POWER OF DICKENS.

W. E. Edmonds
DEGREE CONFERRED

1907

"The works of Milton cannot be comprehended or enjoyed unless the mind of the reader co-operate with that of the writer." These words of Macaulay on the author of "Paradise Lost," apply quite as aptly to the creator of "David Copperfield." What then was the bent of Dickens' mind when he began to write those works of fiction which are the glory of the Victorian Age? An answer to this question is found in the Biography, where we learn that the ambitious young attorney's clerk spent most of his spare evenings at the theatre. At that time indeed Dickens had decided upon a theatrical career, and his daily drudgery in the office, was endured only in the hope of release so soon as he found his chance upon the stage. As an amateur he acted frequently, and toward the end of his life, his success as a public entertainer, owed much to his undoubted gifts in this direction.

It was in those early years when high ambition and the vague consciousness of real ability made him restless, that he applied to the manager of the Covent Garden Theatre for an opportunity of showing what it was in him to do. The accident of illness interfered with the appointment granted him, and owing to some start in journalism the application was not renewed. It is abundantly clear that Dickens came very near entering the actor's profession, and so close is his connection with the theatrical world, that he cannot regard this incident as a mere detail in the story of his youth.

It revealed a natural inclination of mind which was destined, however, to find an outlet into a still broader channel.

And now having glanced at the man, let us look more closely at his work. In 1836 Dickens published his first book "Sketches by Boz." In these "Sketches," in the best sense of the word, we catch a glimpse of the young writer's future glory.

They contain, as one critic has said, the "germ" of all Dickens. "Here we have the Beadle and all connected with him, London streets, theatres, shows, pawn-shops, Doctors Commons, Christmas, Newgate, coaching, the

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River. Hardly a topic associated with Dickens in his maturity is missing from these earliest attempts."

In the next year "Pickwick" was published, and in that memorable year of the girl Queen's accession, Dickens may be said to have found his public.

Naturally, in such a series of etchings as these two books presented one would not expect to discover much evidence of dramatic power. Yet even in them there is one element of the drama which must by no means be overlooked. The term Manners applies to that medium or atmosphere which colours both action and characters. In some dramas and in certain species of literature, time and place are so purely imaginary and so much a matter of indifference, that the adoption of a purely conventional standard of manners is quite allowable and may even be desirable. Where, on the other hand, as more especially in that kind of comedy which directs its shafts against the ridiculous vices of a particular age or country, the likeness of the manners represented to what is more or less known, must possess the ^{highest} ~~very~~ significance.

Of this latter class was the work of Dickens. The early Victorian Age saw the rise to power of the Upper and Lower middle classes, and it is of the latter especially that the novelist principally treats. Of a lower rank of society he was perhaps as well acquainted, but it figures much less prominently in his books.

It was an age, harsh, ugly and coarse. Cruelty, brutality, drunkenness and grossness ran riot, and every-where the gallows and the debtors' prison cast their dark shadows over the land. "It was an age," says one writer, "in which the English character seemed bent on exhibiting all its grossest and meanest and most stupid characteristics. Sheer ugliness of every day life reached a limit not easily surpassed; thick headed national prejudice, in consequence of great wars and British victories, had marvellously developed; aristocracy was losing its better influence, and power passing to a well-fed multitude, remarkable for a dogged practicality which, as often as not, meant ferocious egotism. With all this, a prevalence of such ignoble vices as religious hypocrisy and servile snobbishness."

And to this life so cruel and unlovely, Dickens holds up the mirror. He leads us into the dingy courts and wretched alleys of London, or down its crowded streets with the hum of traffic, or the wail of misery in our ears: while among barges and ships, and below gloomy arches the dark river glides on its solemn stillness laden with its burden of sin and woe.

Occasionally however, he breaks away from London fog and mystery, into that vague entity of peaceful hamlets, sunlit meadows and bright sky, which the citizen but dimly knows as the country. He gives us exquisite pictures of the lone church yard with its sad memories, the forge-lit sky looking down on roaring furnace and grimy workers, and the wild sea-beach with its simple pathos of toil and danger. But it is only to return to that stage whereon the deepest tragedy and the broadest comedy are hourly played.

I have said that the element of "Manners" finds a place in the first two books. In the next, "Oliver Twist," there is something more. Here we find some attempt at "Construction," and we touch at once upon Dicken's principal weakness. The novelist's love for the stage proved, in many cases, an ill and not a good, for many a fine passage is marred by dialogue only too characteristic^{ic} of the world behind the foot lights. "Nicholas Nickleby" is marked by the same defect.

"The Old Curiosity Shop" shows decided improvement in this respect over its predecessors. Unity of action is better observed, and the story moves to its close in a manner, at once happy and serene. Almost the same praise may be accorded to "Barnaby Rudge" which is marked by a departure into historical fiction.

Passing over "American Notes" and the "Carol" we come to "Martin Chuzzlewit" which was completed in 1844. Here all sense of unity is thrown to the winds, and apparently the novelist had no properly defined plan when he began to build. It is necessary, of course, to bear in mind, that the works of Dickens appeared in monthly instalments, and this may account for much in the way of faulty construction.

"Dombey and Son" shows considerable dramatic power. It is marked by the choice of a moral theme, and in construction, is a decided advance

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upon the author's previous work. There are really two novels here, the first and best, ending with the death of Little Paul.

Two years later, "David Copperfield" appeared, and in this genuine masterpiece of fiction, Dickens' genius reached its climax. The action is free, broad and sustained. Though much is improbable, not to say impossible, the very strength of the story sweeps aside all criticism. Here as in "Black House" which appeared three years later, we have some striking examples of the novelists' use of coincidence, that time-honoured device of the stage.

Omitting reference to "Little Dorrit" and "Our Mutual Friend," neither of which demands our serious attention, we come to another historical novel "A Tale of Two Cities" which, despite the fact that the dialogue has lost much of its freshness, is more artistic than "Barnaby Rudge." "Great Expectations" which appeared in 1861, is one of the best constructed of all Dickens books, and "Edwin Drood" which was begun nine years later, was cut short by the authors' lamented death. "An Author" says M. Alexandre Dumas fills" as he advances in life, can conceive and execute works of stronger tissue, than when he began; in a word the matter he can cast into his mould will be nobler and richer, but the mould will be the same." How eminently true is this of Dickens. The great novelist never learned how to develop "situation," and later where he gained in technique, he lost in freshness. A great situation must be led up to, step by step; there must be a regular advance, toward which character and incident must contribute their proper proportion, and here, let it be said in all kindness, is just where Charles Dickens failed.

In concluding this part of our subject, it might be well to glance for a moment at Dickens' treatment of the "dénouement." Nowhere should the close be other than a consequence of the action itself. However sudden or even surprising may be the dénouement, it should not be unprepared but like every other part of the action, should preserve its organic connection with the whole.

Tried by this canon how do the works of Dickens fare? I need not ask. Think of those grand closing scenes. Always a lover of poetic

justice the novelist gives his readers full satisfaction. The Villains get their just deserts, full measure and running over. On the other hand, see how the weak and abused, the downtrodden and misunderstood receive their appropriate rewards even here. Surely never have such grand finals appeared even on the stage. We laugh, but the laugh is a kindly one, for we know when we consult our inmost hearts, that not ^{would} for worlds ^{we} have it otherwise.

Another feature of the drama which determines in ~~no~~ slight degree, the effect produced in the finished work, is one quite as important as choice of subject, conception of action or method of construction. I refer to "characterization," for upon the invention and conduct of his ^{an author} characters ^{must} always largely depend for his ultimate success.

And what of Dickens' characters? They are so numerous, so varied, so representative of the times in which he lived, that it is difficult to individualize. They have been called caricatures. Be it so, call them caricatures if you will, but you must grant that they are caricatures of great force, full of robust fun, tough in texture, and able to stand by themselves.

On the stage where all goes with a snap, consistency of character is not so important as distinctness of drawing. The attributes of a character may be somewhat incongruous if they make the character itself, more readily recognizable. Dicken's love for theatrical effect, then, as well as the manner in which his books were published-monthly instalments in twenty parts-could not but effect his characterization. Again we must remember that Dickens was an idealist. Realism in Literature had not yet come into vogue, and even had the popular author begun his career a half century later, we cannot believe that he would have written other than he did. Anything, however true it might be, that would bring a blush to the cheek of innocence; anything that would pander to a love of vice or sensuality, Dickens carefully and religiously eschewed; ^{and} though compelled time and again to skim the surface instead of plunging into the heart of things, who shall

toward tales of horror and crime. That crime should have loomed so large ~~large~~ in the author's mind is, I think a matter for some regret, but here again Dickens was undoubtedly influenced by stage tradition. Monk, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Bill Sikes, Mr. Carker; they are all somewhat too mechanical. In his characterization of less thorough-paced scoundrels Dickens strikes a truer note and reveals himself as a satirist of no mean ability. His satire covers a wide field, education, charity, religion, social morality, legal procedure, the machinery of politics and the forms of government, "Bumble" and "Squeers" are representatives of vile institutions and are treated accordingly. Dickens has been charged with exaggeration respecting the figure of the Yorkshire school-master and yet we have heard how one northern pedagogue wrote to the author threatening him with prosecution for libel.

In the case of that most accomplished of modern Pharisees, "Mr. Pecksniff," the charge of exaggeration is not unfounded. Yet what a work of art the picture is! In the same catalogue we have the "Umble Uriah" and "Mr. Stiggins." The Humbug was Dickens' delight and he always treats him as if he loved him. Nor can we forget those blustering lights of the legal world. Here Dickens was thoroughly at home and the pictures he gives us are vividly realistic. There is no need to enumerate; the characters, one and all, are copies from life.

As the ^{limb}limb of a higher social class, Dickens was not successful. Indeed what little work he did in this sphere, is overshadowed by that of Thackeray. The eccentric, the fantastic and grotesque, most surely caught his attention, and he delighted in presenting to his beloved public, such creations as "Mantellini" and "Captain Cuttle," "Quilp and Silas Wegg." How he must have gloried in "Wilkins Micawber," that bright vision of breezy optimism and chronic impecuniosity!

Nor must we omit the children, those little ones Dickens loved as his own, those droll or pathetic little figures which, though often dim and dream-like, yet have power to move us to laughter and tears, "Oliver, Little Nell, Little Paul, Tiny Tim and young David" here they come trooping by; though idealized they are not forgotten; through a mist of tears shines the brightness of their memory.

Dickens characters "caricatures?" Would that we had more such caricaturists among our writers of to-day, novelists whose characters should excite in us the liveliest detestation of everything mean and base and the love of everything that is true and beautiful and good.

And this leads me to speak of one other element of dramatic power which, though appearing in the very earliest of Dicken's books, I have here reserved until the last. I refer of course to that rare quality which Dickens shares with nearly all the greatest of English writers, the divine gift of Humour. It was in short, Dickens greatest asset, the salt without which all his work would lose its savour.

In the display of this genial power, lay the secret of the young novelists' earley success.

"Without his humour," one critic truly remarks, " he might have been a vigorous advocate of social reform, but as a novelist assuredly he would have failed. Only because they laughed with him so heartily, did multitudes of people turn to discussing the question his page suggested. Humour is the soul of his work. Like the soul of man, it permeates a living fabric which, but for its creative breath, could never have existed."

In his first books, the "Sketches" and "Pickwick", Dicken's humour discovers itself in the broadest form of farce. In his later works it soars to greater heights and takes on that illuminative aspect inseparable from humour in its highest form. Farce is entertaining, humour is suggestive. Dickens was master in both fields and traverses either with equal facility. There would be no end in selecting passages in illustration, though I cannot omit mentioning those two well-known scenes which for genuine humour have seldom been surpassed, -Mr. Smallwood giving his friend Jobling a dinner at the chop-house, and the Father of the Marshalsea entertaining his old pensioner Nandy.

Closely connected with and indeed we might say inseparable from, humour is that elusive quality we call "pathos." Pathos is something which requires the most delicate handling lest it degenerate into mawkishness or cheap sentimentality. Because of that life-long love for the stage already noted, Dickens could not well escape this subtle

Pitfall, and into it he fell head-long again and again.

And yet of true pathos, Dickens has abundance. Those scenes portraying life in the squalid debtor's prison, those touching pictures of childlife in the under world, the tenderness that captured the heart of the great public in the "Christmas Carol," that truly marvellous scene of the Cheap-Jack whose child is dying in his arms, while he plays buffoon before the crowd for daily bread. These touches of the most exquisite pathos have rarely been equalled in the pages of fiction. By tenderly and lovingly striking the chords of human emotion, Dickens was constantly rousing the better feelings of his readers, and that, after all, is a good test of the writers dramatic power.

The writer's dramatic power! that phrase I fear, suggests much more than I have, within the limits of this brief essay, attempted to set down. I have thought that it would make my paper too long, to do more than hint at the more prominent characteristics, and in consequence, many excellences have had to be passed over in silence: faults too, left for others to discover. Yet even now I can scarcely tear myself away from the subject in hand. If a novelist has dramatic power we should naturally expect to find evidence of such in his most finished work. If so, Cadit quaestio, and I trust that it will not be taken a miss if I conclude by throwing into the form of a monologue, three short scenes from Dickens' acknowledged masterpiece, "David Copperfield" All three scenes are laid in the ancient fishing village of Yarmouth, and the first may require just a word of introduction.

David and Steerforth had gone down from London by the evening train and as they reached the home of the Peggotty's they glanced through the window and caught sight of Daniel clasping his niece in a fond embrace, while he stretched out a brawny hand to his happy nephew, Ham. Lifting the latch they entered, and were greeted in joyful tones by the old sailor whose honest weather-beaten face beamed with triumphant delight.

Scene.-1- "The Betrothal."

"Mas'r Davy! Its Mas'r Davy!" In a moment we were all shaking hands with one another, and asking one another how we did, and telling

one another how glad we were to meet, and all talking at once. Mr. Peggotty was so proud and overjoyed to see us, that he did not know what to say or do, but kept over and over again shaking hands with me, and then ruffling his shaggy hair all over his head, and laughing with such glee and triumph, that it was a treat to see him.

"Why, that you two gent'lman-gent'lmen-growed-should come to this here roof to-night, of all nights in my life, "said Mr. Peggotty," is such a thing as never happened afore, I do rightly believe! Em'ly, my darling, come here! Come here my little witch! Theer's Mas'r Davy's friend, my dear! Theer's the gent'lman as you've heerd on Em'ly. He comes to see you, along with Mas'r Davy, on the brightest night of your uncle's life as ever was or will be, Gorm the t'other one, and horroar for it!" After delivering this speach all in a breath, and with extraordinary animation and pleasure, Mr. Peggotty put one of his large hands rapturously on each side of his niece's face, and kissing it a dozen times, laid it with a gentle pride and love upon his broad chest, and patted it as if his hand had been a lady's. Then he let her go; and as she ran into the little chamber where I used to sleep, looked round upon us, quite hot and out of breath with his uncommon satisfaction.

"If you two gent'lmen-gent'lmen growed now, and such gent'lmen-" said Mr. Peggotty. "So th'are, so th'are!" cried Ham. "Well said! So th'are. Mas'r Davy bor- gent'lmen growed-so th'are!" "If you two gent'lmen, gent'lmen growed," said Mr. Peggotty, "don't excuse me for being in a state of mind, when you understand matters, I'll arks your pardon. Em'ly, my dear!-She knows I'm a going to tell," here his delight broke out again," and has made off. Would you be so good as look arter her, Mawther, for a minute?" Mrs Gummidge nodded and disappeared. "If this ain't," said Mr. Peggotty, sitting down among us by the fire," the brightest night O' my life, I'm a selfish-biled toe and more I can't say. This here little Em'ly, sir," in a low voice to Steerforth," -her as you see a blushing here just now-" Steerforth only nodded; but with such a pleased expression of interest, and of participation in Mr. Peggotty's feelings, that the latter answered him as if he had spoken. "To be sure," said Mr. Peggotty. "That's her, and so

she is. Thankee, sir." Ham nodded to me several times, as if he would have said so too. "This here little Em'ly of ours," said Mr. Peggotty, "has been, in our house, what I suppose (I'm a ignorant man, but that's my belief) no one but a little bright eyed creetur can be in a house. She ain't my child; I never had one; but I could'nt love her more. You understand! I could'nt do it!" "I quite understand," said Steerforth. "I know you do, sir," returned Mr. Peggotty, "and thankee again. Mas'r Davy, he can remember what she was; you may judge for your own self what she is; but neiter of you can't fully know what she has been, is, and will be to my loving'art, I am rough, sir," said Mr. Peggotty, "I am as rough as a sea Pork^ypine; but no one, unless, mayhap, it is a woman, can know, I think, what our little Em'ly is to me. And betwixt ourselves," sinking his voice lower yet, "that woman's name ain't Misses Gummidge neither, though she has a world of merits." Mr. Peggotty ruffled his hair again with both hands, as a further preparation for what he was going to say, and went on with a hand upon each of his knees.

"There was a certain person as had knowed our Em'ly, from the time when her father was drowned; as had seen her constand; when a babby, when a young gal, when a woman. Not much of a person to look at, he warn't, said Mr. Peggotty, "something O' my own build-rough- a good deal o' the sou-'wester in him-wery salt-but on the whole, a honest sort of a chap, with his 'art in the right place." I thought I had never seen Ham to anything like the extent to which he sat grinning at us now. "What does this here blessed tarpaulin go and do," said Mr. Peggotty, with his face one high noon of enjoyment, "but he loses that their 'art of his to our little Em'ly. He follows her about, he makes hisself a sort o' servan^t to her, he loses in a great measure his relish for his wittles, and in the long run he makes it clear to me wot's amiss. Now I wish myself, you see, that our little Em'ly was in a fair way of being married. I could wish to see her, at all events, under articles to a honest man as had a right to defend her. I don't know how long I may live, or how soon I may die; but I know that if I was capsized, any night, in a gale

of wind in Yarmouth Roads here, and was to see the town lights shining for the last time over the rollers as I could'nt make no head against, I could go down quieter for thinking 'there is a man ashore there, iron-true to my little Em'ly, God bless her, and no wrong can touch my Em'ly while so be as that man lives!'" Mr. Peggotty, in simple earnestness waved his right arm, as if ~~he~~ were waving it at the town lights for the last time, and then, exchanging an nod with Ham, whose eye he caught, proceeded as before. "Well! I counsels him to speak to Em'ly. He's big enough, but he's bashfuller than a little un, and he don't like. So I speak. 'What! Him?' says Em'ly. 'Him that I have know'd so intimate so many years, and like so much! Oh,uncle! I never can have him. He is such a good fellow! 'I gives her a kiss, and I says no more to her than ' My dear, your right ~~to speak~~ to speak out, you're to choose for yourself, you'r as free as a little bird.' Then I aways to him, and I says, 'I wish it could have been so, but it can't. But you can both be as you was, and wot I say to you is, Be as you was with her, like a man.' He says to me, a shaking of my hand, 'I will!' he says. And he was honorable and manful-for two year going on and we was just the same at home here as afore!"

Mr. Peggotty's face, which had varied in its expression with the various stages of his narrative, now resumed all its former triumphant delight, as he laid a hand upon my knee and a hand upon Steerforths', (previously wetting them both, for the greater emphasis of the action) and divided the following speech among us: " All of a sudden, one evening-as it might be to-night-comes little Em'ly from her work, and him with her! There ain't so much in that, you'll say. No, because he takes care on her like a brother, arter dark, and indeed afore dark, and at all times. But this tarpaulin chap, he takes hold of her hand, and he cries out to me, joyful, 'Look here! This is to be my little wife!' And she says, half bold and half shy and half a laughing and half a crying, 'Yes Uncle! If you please. '-If I please!' cried Mr. Peggotty, rolling his head in an ecstasy at the idea; "Lord, as if I should do anything else!-If you please, I am steadier now, and I have thought better of it, and I'll be as good a little wife as I can to him, for he's a dear, good fellow!" Then Misses Gumidge, she claps her hands like a play, and You

come in. There! the murder's out!" said Mr. Peggotty-"You come on! It took place this here present hour; and here's the man that will marry her the minute she's out of her time."

Ham staggered, as well he might, under the blow Mr. Peggotty & dealt him in his unbounded joy, as a mark of confidence and friendship; but feeling called upon him to say something to us, he said, with much faltering and great difficulty: "She warn't no higher than you was, Mas'r Davy-when you first come-when I thought what she'd grow up to be. I see her grow up-gent'lmen-like a flower. I'd lay down my life for her-Mas'r Davy-Oh! most content and cheerful! She's more to me-gent'lmen than-she's all to me that ever I can want, and more than ever I-than ever I could say. I-I love her true. There ain't a gent'lman in all the land-nor yet sailing upon all the sea that can love his lady more than I love her, though there's many a common man-would say better - what he meant."

Scene -2- The Flight.

"Theer!" said Mr. Peggotty, cheerily. "Theer we are, Misses Gummidge! Mrs Gummidge slightly groaned. "Lighted up, accordin' to costom! You're a wonderin' what that's fur, sir! Well its fur our little Em'ly. You see the path ain't over light or cheerful arter dark; and when I'm here at the hour as she's a comin' home, I puts the light in the winder. That, you see," said Mr. Peggotty, bending over me with great glee, "meets two subjects. She says says Em'ly, 'My Uncle's theer!' Fur if I ain't theer, I never have no light showed."

Why, this here candle, now," said Mr. Peggotty, gleefully holding out his hand towards it, "I know very well that arter she's married and gone, I shall put that candle theer, just that same as now. I know very well that when I'm here o' nights (and where else should I live, bless your tarts, whatever fortun I come into!) and she ain't here, or I ain't there, I shall put the candle in the winder, and sit afore the fire, pretending I'm expecting of her, like I'm a doing now. There's a babby for you," said Mr. Peggotty, with another roar, "in the form of a Sea Porkypine! Why, at the present minute, when I see the candle sparkle up, I says to myself, 'She's a looking at it! Em'ly's a coming! There's a babby for

you, in the form of a Sea Porkypine! Right for all that," said Mr. Peggotty, stopping in his roar and smiting his hands together; "fur here she is!" It was only Ham. The night should have turned more wet since I came in, for he had a large sou'wester hat on, slouched over his face. Where's Em'ly?" said Mr. Peggotty. Ham made a motion with his head, as if she were out side. Mr. Peggotty took the light from the window, trimmed it, put it on the table, and was busily stirring the fire, when Ham who had not moved, said: "Mas'r Davy, will you come out a minute, and see what Em'ly has got to show you?" We went out. As I passed him at the door, I saw, to my astonishment and fright, that he was deadly pale. He pushed me hastily into the open air, and closed the door upon us. Only upon us two. "Ham! what's the matter!"

"Mas'r Davy!-" Oh, for his broken heart, how dreadfully he wept! I was paralysed by the sight of such grief. I don't know what I thought, or what I dreaded. I could only look at him. "Ham! Poor good fellow! For Heaven's sake tell me what's the matter!" "My love, Mas'r Davy—the pride and hope of my heart—her that I'd have died for, and would die for now—she's gone!" "Gone?" "Em'ly's run away! Oh Mas'r Davy, think how she's run away, when I pray my good and gracious God to kill her (her that is so dear above all things) sooner than let her come to ruin and disgrace! The face he turned up to the troubled sky, the quivering of his clasped hands, the agony of his figure, remain associated with that lonely waste, in my remembrance, to this hour. It is always night there, and he is the only subject in the scene. "You're a Scholar," he said, hurriedly, "and know what's right and best. What am I to say indoors? How am I ever to break it to him, Mas'r Davy?"

I saw the door move, and instinctively tried to hold the latch on the outside, to gain a moment's time. It was too late. Mr. Peggotty thrust forth his face; and never could I forget the change that came upon it when he saw us, if I were to live five hundred years. I remember a great wail and cry, and the woman hanging about him, and we all standing in the room; I with a paper in my hand, which Ham had given me; Mr. Peggotty, with his vest torn open, his hair wild, his face

and lips quite white, and blood trickling down his bosom (it had sprung from his mouth, I think), looking fixedly at me. "Read it, sir," he said, in a low shivering voice. "Slow, please. I don't know as I can understand." In the midst of the silence of death, I read thus, from a ~~p~~lotted letter.

"When you who love me so much better than I ever have deserved, even when my mind was innocent, see this, I shall be far away." "I shall be fur away," he repeated slowly. "Stop! Em'ly fur away. Well!" "When I leave my dear home-my dear home-oh, my dear home!-in the morning-" the letter bore date on the previous night: "-it will be never to come back, unless he brings me back a lady. This will be found at night, many hours after, instead of me. Oh, if you knew how my heart is torn. If even you, that I have wronged so much that never can forgive me, could only know what I suffer! I am too wicked to write about myself. Oh, take comfort in thinking that I am so bad. Oh, for mercy's sake tell uncle that I never loved him half so dear as now. Oh, don't remember how affectionate and kind you have all been to me-Don't remember we were ever to be married-but try to think as if I died when I was little, and was buried somewhere. Pray Heaven that I am going away from, have compassion on my uncle! Tell him that I never loved him half so dear. Be his comfort. Love some good girl, that will be what I was once to uncle, and be true to you, and worthy of you-and know no shame but me. God bless all! I'll pray for all, often on my knees. If he don't bring me back a lady, and I don't pray for my own self, I'll pray for all. My parting love for uncle. My last tears and my last thanks for uncle!"

That was all. He stood, long after I had ceased to read, still looking at me. At length I ventured to take his hand, and to entreat him, as well as I could, to endeavor to get some command of himself. He replied "I thank ye sir, I thank ye!" without moving. Ham spoke to him. Mr. Peggotty was so far sensible of his affliction, that he wrung his hand; but, otherwise he remained in the same state, and no one dared to disturb him. Slowly at last he moved his eyes from my

face, as if he were waking from a vision, and cast them round the room. Then he said in a low voice: "Who's the man? I want to know his name." Ham glanced at me, and suddenly I felt a shock that struck me back. "There's a man suspected," said Mr. Peggotty. "Who is it?" Mas'r Davy "implored Ham. "Go out a bit, and let me tell him what I must. You't ought to hear it sir." I felt the shock again. I sank down in a chair, and tried to utter some reply; but my tongue was fettered, and my sight was weak. "I want to know his name!" I heard said, once more. "For some time past, "Ham faltered," there's been a servant here, at odd times. There's been a gen'lm too. Both of 'em belonged to one another." Mr. Peggotty stood fixed as before, but now looking at him. "The servant," pursued him, "was seen along with our poor girl-last night. He's been in hiding about here, this week or over. He was thought to have gone, but he was hiding. Doen't stay, Mas'r Davy, doen't!" I found Peggotty's arm round my neck, but I could not have moved if the house had been about to fall upon me. "A strange chay and horses was outside town this morning, on the Norwick road, a' most afore the day broke," Ham went on. "The servant went to it, and come from it, and went to it again. When he went to it again, Em'ly was nigh him. The t'other was inside. He's the man." "For the Lord's love," said Mr. Peggotty, falling back and putting out his hand, as if to keep off what he dreaded. "Doen't tell me his name's Steerforth!" "Mas'r Davy," exclaimed Ham, in a broken voice, "It ain't no fault of yourn-and I am far from laying of it to you-but his name is Steerforth, and he's a damed villain!"

Mr. Peggotty uttered no cry, and shed no tear, and moved no more, until he seemed to wake again, all at once and pulled down his rough coat from its peg in a corner. "Bear a hand with this! I'm struck of a heap, and can't do it," he said impatiently. "Bear a hand and help me. Well!" when somebody had done so. "Now give me that theer hat!" Ham asked him whither he was going. "I'm a going to seek my niece. I'm a going to seek my Em'ly. I'm a going first to stave in that theer boat, and sink it where I would have drowned him, as I'm a livin' soul, if I had had one thought of what was in him! as he sat afore me," he said

wildly, holding out his clenched right hand, "as he sat afore me, face to face, strike me down dead, but I'd have drowned him, and thought it right!-I'm a going to seek my niece." "Where?" cried Ham, interposing himself before the door. "Anywhere! I'm a going to seek my niece through the wureld. I'm a going to find my poor niece in her shame, and bring her back. No one stop me! I tell you I'm a going to seek my niece!"

Scene-3- The Catastrophe.

"As we struggled on nearer and nearer the sea, from which a mighty wind was blowing dead on shore, its force became more and more, terrific. Long before we saw the sea, its spray was on our lips and showered salt rain on us. At last we arrived at the town and obtaining accommodations at an old inn I went down to look at the sea. On reaching the sands I found weeping women bewailing their husbands; grizzled old sailors shaking their heads as they looked from water to sky; ship-owners excited and uneasy; even stout mariners disturbed and anxious as they gazed on the rolling billows.

The tremendous sea itself, confounded me; as the high watery walls came rolling in, and at their highest, tumbled into surf, they looked as if the least, of them would engulf the town. As the receding wave swept back with a hoarse roar, it seemed to scoop out great caves in the beach. Undulating hills changed to valleys; undulating valleys (with a solitary storm-bird sometimes skimming through them) were lifted up in hills, while great masses of water shivered and shook the beach with a booming sound like heaven's great artillery.

Suddenly I was startled by the cry, "A wreck! close by!" All eyes were strained seaward. At first I could distinguish nothing. Then a half dressed boat-man, standing next me, pointed with his bare arm (a tattooed arrow on it, pointing in the same direction) to the left. Then O great Heaven, I saw it, close in upon us!

One mast was broken short off, six or eight feet from the deck, and lay over the side, entangled in a maze of sail and rigging; and all that ruin, as the ship rolled and beat-which she did without a moment's pause, and with a violence quite inconceivable-beat the side as if it

would stave it in. Some efforts were even then being made, to cut this portion of the wreck away; for, as the ship, which was broad side on, turned towards us in her rollings I plainly described her people at work with axes, especially one active figure with long curling hair, conspicuous among the rest. But, a great cry, which was audible even above the wind and water, rose from the shore at this moment; the sea sweeping over the rolling deck, made a clean beach, and carried men, spars, casks, planks, bulwarks, heaps of such toys, into the boiling surge.

The second mast was yet standing, with the rags of a rent sail, and a wild confusion of broken cordage flapping to and fro. The ship had struck once, the same boatman hoarsely said in my ear, and then lifted in and struck again. I understood him to add that she was parting amidships, and I could readily suppose so, for the rolling and beating were too tremendous for any human work to suffer long. As he spoke, there was another great cry of pity from the beach; four men arose with the wreck out of the deep, clinging to the rigging of the remaining mast; uppermost, the active figure with the curling hair. There was a bell on board; and as the ship rolled and dashed, like a desperate creature driven mad, now showing us the whole sweep of her deck, as she turned on her beam ends towards the shore, now nothing but her keel, as she sprung wildly over and turned towards the sea, the bell rang; and its sound, the knell of those unhappy men, was bourne towards us on the wind. Again we lost her, and again she arose. Two men were gone. The agony on shore increased. Men groaned, and clasped their hands; women shrieked, and turned away their faces. Some ran wildly up and down along the beach, crying for help where no help could be. I found myself one of these, frantically imploring a knot of sailors whom I knew, not to let those two last creatures perish before our eyes.

They were making out to me, in an agitated way-I don't know how, for the little I could hear I was scarcely composed enough to understand-that the life-boat had been bravely manned an hour ago, and could do nothing; and that no man would be so desperate as to attempt to wade off with a rope, and establish a communication with the shore, there was nothing left to try; when I noticed that some new sensation moved

the people on the beach, and saw them part, and Ham come breaking through them at the front.

I ran to him- as well as I know, to repeat my appeal for help. But, distracted as I was, by a sight so new to me and terrible, the determination in his face, and his look, out to sea-exactly the same look as I remembered in connection with the morning after Em'ly's flight-awoke me to a knowledge of his danger. I held him back with both arms; and implored the men with whom I had been speaking, not to listen to him, not to do murder, not to let him stir from off that sand! Another cry arose on shore; and looking to the wreck, we saw the cruel sail, with blow on blow, beat off the lower of the two men, and fly up in triumph round the active figure left alone upon the mast.

Against such a sight, and against such determination as that of the calmly desperate man who was already accustomed to lead half the people present, I might as hopefully have entreated the wind. "Mas'r Davy," he said, cheerily grasping me ~~by~~ both hands, "If my time has come, 'tis come. If 'tan't, I'll bide it. Lord above bless you, and bless all! Mates, make me ready; I'm ^{um} a going off!" I was swept away, but not unkindly, to some distance, where the people around me made me stay; urging, as I confusedly perceived, that he was bent on going, with help or without, and that I should endanger the precautions for his safety by troubling those with whom they rested. I don't know what I answered, or what they rejoined; but, I saw hurry on the beach, and men running with ropes from a capstan that was there, and penetrating into a circle of figures that hid him from me. Then I saw him standing alone, in a seaman's frock and trousers: a rope in his hand, or slung to his wrist: another round his body: and several of the best men holding, at a little distance, to the latter which he laid out himself, slack upon the shore, at his feet.

The wreck even to my unpractised eye was breaking up. I saw that she was parting in the middle, and that the life of the solitary man upon the mast hung by a thread. Still, he clung to it. He had a singular red cap on-not like a sailor's cap, but of a finer colour; and

as the few yielding planks between him and the destruction rolled and bulged, and his anticipative death-knell rung, he was seen by all of us to wave it. I saw him do it now, and thought I was going distracted, when his action brought an old remembrance to my mind of a once dear friend.

Ham watched the sea, standing alone, with the silence of suspended breath behind him, and the storm before, until there was a great retiring wave, when, with a backward glance at those who held the rope which was made fast round the body, he dashed in after it, and in a moment was buffeting with the water; rising with the hills, falling with the valleys, lost beneath the foam; then drawn again to land. They hauled in hastily. He was hurt. I saw blood on his face from where I stood; but he took no thought of that. He seemed hurriedly to give them some directions for leaving him more free-or so I judged from the motion of his arm-and was gone as before.

And now he made for the wreck, rising with the hills, falling with the valleys, lost beneath the rugged foam, borne in towards the shore, borne on towards the ship, striving hard and valiantly. The distance was nothing, but the power of the sea and wind made the strife deadly. At length he neared the wreck. He was so near, that with one more of his vigorous strokes he would be climbing to it, when a high green, vast hill side of water, moving on shoreward, from beyond the ship, he seemed to leap up into it with a mighty bound, and the ship was gone!

Some eddying fragments I saw in the sea, as if a mere cask had been broken, in running to the spot where they were hauling in. Consternation was in every face. They drew him to my very feet -insensible-dead. He was carried to the nearest house; and, no one preventing me now, I remained near him, busy, while every means of restoration was tried; but he had been beaten to death by the great wave, and his generous heart was stilled for ever.

As I sat beside the bed, when hope was abandoned and all was done, a fisherman, who had known me when Emily and I were children, and ever since, whispered my name at the door. "Sir," said he, with tears

starting to his weather beaten face, which, with his trembling lips, was ashy pale, "will you come over yonder?" The old remembrance that had been recalled to me, was in his look. I asked him, terror-stricken, leaning on the arm he held out to support me: "Has a body come to shore?" He said, "Yes." "Do I know it?" I asked then. He answered nothing.

But he led me to the shore. And on that part of it where she and I had looked for shells, two children-on that part of it were some lighter fragments of the old boat, blown down last night, had been scattered by the wind-among the ruins of the home he had wronged- I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school.- James Steerforth.