

## DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY "RECOLLECTIONS"

### CHARLES DICKENS

*"..here am I in London for the first time as a free man, and, to my own mind, master of my destiny.*

*..what a joy it was to walk about amongst the bustling crowds, reading stories in the faces of the passers-by, and identifying scores and hundreds of people with the creatures of the great fiction writers. Above all, the people whose life-long friendship we owe to the works of Charles Dickens declared themselves. I lived off the Goswell Road, and that fact alone predisposed me to recognise Mr. Pickwick in any spectacled, well-fleshed old gentleman of benevolent aspect. I tumbled across Sam Weller constantly. I was quite certain as to the living personality of one of the Cheeryble twins. When I knew him he was a tailor in Cheapside. It was merely by the accident of time that the shadows I identified with living men had assumed a dress dissimilar to that of the early Victorian era, and I think I may honestly say that for a month or two, at least, my London was mainly peopled by the creations of the author of Pickwick, Little Dorrit, and Dombey.*

*I never exchanged a word with Dickens in my life, but at this period, by some extraordinary chance, I met him twice. I knew his personal aspect well, for I had heard him read his own works in Birmingham. I was, indeed, a unit in the packed audience which greeted his very first professional appearance as a platform exponent of his own pages. That event took place at the old Broad Street Music Hall in Birmingham, a building which was superseded by the Prince of Wales' Theatre. It was not easy to mistake so characteristic a figure for that of any other man living.*

*There used to be in Cheapside, at the time of which I write, a window in which the Stereoscopic Company exhibited the latest achievements in photography; and it was my custom in the dinner hour, to spend some odd minutes in front of this display. I was impressed one day by a new life-sized portrait of Dickens, an enlargement by a process then quite novel. The hair and beard, I remember, had a look of being made out of telegraph wire; but the features were quite natural and unexaggerated. I had taken a good look at the picture, and had, indeed, so firmly fixed it in my mind that I can positively see it now, and could, if I were artist enough, reproduce it; when, having an unoccupied quarter of an hour still on my hand, I turned to stroll towards St. Paul's Churchyard, and there, at my elbow, stood the original of the picture. He was looking at it with his head a little thrown back, and somewhat set on one side, and his look was very keen and critical. I gave a start which attracted his attention, and, in the extremity of my surprise, I am afraid that I stared at him rather rudely. I looked back at the photograph, and I looked back at the living face of the great master of tears and laughter, who was then my reigning deity. I can only suppose that my face was full of a foolish wonder and worship, for when I had looked from Dickens to the portrait again, and then back to Dickens, the great man laughed, and gave me a little comic affirmative nod, as much as to say: 'It is so, my young friend'. With that he turned briskly, and walked away along Cheapside, leaving me wonder-stricken at what was not, perhaps, so very wonderful an adventure after all.*

*I rubbed shoulders with the great man again, within a month or two, on a coach which travelled from Thame to Oxford. I climbed that coach on purpose to enjoy the privilege of sitting next to him.*

*I came into contact with Dickens in a far different way in the course of that spring. It is a little boast of mine that I was the first person in the world to make acquaintance with Silas Wegg and Nicodemus Boffin and Mr. Venus. My name-father, David Christie, was chief reader at Clowes' printing office in Stamford Street, Blackfriars, and month by month as the proofs of *Our Mutual Friend* were printed, it was his habit to borrow the Dickens manuscript from Mr. Day, the overseer of the establishment, and to take it home with him for his own delectation before it reached the hands of the compositors. On each occasion, until I left London behind me, Christie would wire me always in the same phrase; 'Dickens is here', and I would go down to his lodgings in Duke Street and would read aloud to him the work fresh from the master's hand. It was written on long ruled foolscap on rather darkish blue paper in a pale blue ink, and it needed young eyes to decipher it. There were only a few of such nights, but the enjoyment of them remains as a remembrance."*

David Christie Murray 1847-1907

Charles Dickens 1812-1870