Martin Chuzzlewit (Dickens)

There is something reassuring about villains getting their due deserts, misanthropes learning the error of their ways and those of impeccable character finally being rewarded after so many trials. All very Victorian, but I like it. One can have enough of realism, and I never understood why escapism got a bad name. Who would not want to escape?

I did find Martin Chuzzlewit hard going at first. But have no fear, it hots up later.

Dickens introduces so many monstrous gargoyles at the start that one becomes rather desperate for heroes to emerge to give one purchase on the plot. But Dickens is never in a hurry to introduce his main themes. He is happy to orbit around for a hundred pages or two if it pleases him. The serialised form is, of course, to blame for that. Let no one accuse Dickens of being a fool by Dr Johnson's definition, i.e., someone who writes other than for money. (In contrast, I am one of the biggest fools of all time).

We get two for the price of one: there are two Martin Chuzzlewits, the older and the younger, the latter the grandson of the former. The older is wealthy and the story opens with him under siege from his many relatives, none of whom figure large in old Martin's affections, but all of whom are jockeying for his cash. What an unsavoury bunch they are. Old Martin is cynically suspicious of them all – and indeed of the whole population of the planet, bar the obligatory Victorian angel of perfection, and his protégé, Mary.

Many of this early gathering of gargoyles bear the name Chuzzlewit, or, if not the name, have family connections. Two, however, appear incongruous, namely one Tigg and one Slime, who are low-life scroungers without scruples or standards. They all but disappear from the story shortly after, but do not be fooled. Dickens has plans for them later.

All who bear the name Chuzzlewit, we are informed, are subject to the same family malady, being selfish, self-satisfied, avaricious, cynically distrusting of everyone they meet, but ever ready to swindle anyone. Young Martin is, perhaps, not so bad as all that – but selfish, inconsiderate and lacking in self-knowledge he certainly is. In these characteristics he has been well schooled by his grandfather, who raised him as a prospective heir – unwittingly an heir not only to his wealth but also to his character.

"*Martin's nature was a frank and generous one; but he had been bred up in his grandfather's house; and it will usually be found that the meaner domestic vices propagate themselves to be their own antagonists. Selfishness does this especially; so do suspicion, cunning, stealth, and covetous propensities. Martin had unconsciously reasoned as a child, 'My guardian takes so much thought of himself, that unless I do the like myself I shall be forgotten.' So he had grown selfish*."

It is made abundantly clear, through the mouth of Martin-the-Elder himself, that Mary, his constant companion and helpmate, will inherit nothing. This he has made unambiguous so that she should remain free of the poisonous effects of such expectation upon her character. (Unnecessarily, we observe, since she is – as noted – all perfection. But so cynical is old Martin that he cannot trust even her completely). Moreover, by this means, old Martin ensures that no one shall pursue Mary amorously in the hope of gaining his money indirectly, for she has no money or family of her own.

Obviously, then, young Martin and Mary fall in love. As a result, the Martins older and younger become embittered with each other, and the younger is disinherited and ejected. He lands up at the house of one Pecksniff, in the capacity of his student of architecture. In Pecksniff we have yet another gargoyle of Dickensian proportions, he being an utter fraud (having had no buildings erected) and, worse, the most oozingly, ingratiatingly, false old skinflint there ever was (other than in all other Dickens novels). In that house we meet our first hero, Tom Pinch, who is best summarised as a natural, but unconscious, master of all Christian virtues, especially humility – genuine, that is, not of the Uriah Heep kind.

Tom is treated like a servant by Pecksniff and his two (almost equally egregious) daughters – except that servants are paid. Tom plays organ in the local church, whereat Mary hears him and falls in love….with the music. For Tom, of course, it is her he falls for. So now we have the love triangle set up, though it only introduces a modulation of greater themes.

But what of the wider Chuzzlewit clan? The brother of Martin-the-Elder is Anthony Chuzzlewit, whose son, Jonas, is entirely without any saving graces; a cad, bully and avaricious egotist who openly wishes daily for his own father's death in order to inherit. When old Anthony dies we suspect Jonas may have had something to do with it.

We have no great love for Pecksniff's daughters whose sense of decency has, unfortunately, been taught them by their father, and hence is notable by its absence. Their names, Charity and Mercy, summarise quite nicely what they particularly lack. But even the bubble headed Mercy does not deserve what she has coming when she is foolish enough to marry Jonas (apparently largely to put her sister's nose out of joint).

In Mark Tapley we have one of Dickens's more inspired creations. Mark's Dickens-esque thing is to seek intolerable situations as a challenge to whether he can, despite all provocations to the contrary, remain relentlessly "jolly". He can, and does. Starting with Tom and Mark, the trio of heroes is completed by John Westlock. We meet him as he quits Pecksniff's house after coming to the end of his patience with the old fraud. He subsequently features as a convenient plot device to lend magnanimous assistance to Tom after he, in his turn, finally sees through the duplicity of Pecksniff and leaves….but not before the younger Martin Chuzzlewith has been unceremoniously thrown out by Pecksniff himself at the instigation of the older Martin.

Here we have the start of Pecksniff maturing his long-term ambition to bring Martin-the-Elder under his control for purposes of Pecksniffian enrichment. The reader – at least the reader as easily duped as myself – will be surprised at how malleable old Martin so rapidly becomes once within the domestic control of Pecksniff. The latter dares to even greater heights of ambition, in true Victorian melodrama style, in his campaign of importuning the virginal Mary at every opportunity.

"*As to consulting the wishes of her heart in such a case, it formed no part of Mr Pecksniff's moral code; for he knew what a good man he was, and what a blessing he must be to anybody*."

How could old Martin, formerly so solicitous of his female charge, stand by and let this be, we wonder?

Meanwhile the action has shifted elsewhere, namely first to London where the young Martin fled, and shortly to that upstart former colony, the so-called United States of America. There Martin has gone to seek his fortune after being rendered penniless by his grandfather's rejection. He is joined in the enterprise by the staunch Mark Tapley whose attraction to Martin is that Martin is so intolerably self-centred that by making himself Martin's "man" he sets himself a suitable challenge in the jolliness department. Young Martin's insufferable nature is illustrated by the following extract which refers to the privations they suffer whilst travelling steerage class on the voyage to America. It also illustrates the class divisions of the time, in which 'gentlemen' were near-universally held to be superior to common working men by birth and breeding, a matter absolute which set the classes irreversibly apart.

"*It's no trial to you, Mark, to make yourself comfortable and to bustle about. It's as natural for you to do so under the circumstances as it is for me not to do so. Why, you don't suppose there is a living creature in this ship who can by possibility have half so much to undergo on board of her as I have? Do you?*"

"*But what is the use of my putting such a case to you, when the very essence of what I have been saying is that you cannot by possibility understand it! Make me a little brandy-and-water, cold and very weak, and give me a biscuit and tell your friend, who is a nearer neighbour of ours than I could wish, to try to keep her children a little quieter tonight than she did last night, that's a good fellow*."

Their sojourn among the citizenry of the new republic paints a picture of the pioneer Americans as unflattering a portrait as I have ever read. Caustic, in fact. This deserves a brief digression. But first a couple of extracts so you get the measure of Dickens's distain for Americans.

"*Men were weighed by their dollars, measures gauged by their dollars; life was auctioneered, appraised, put up, and knocked down for its dollars. The next respectable thing to dollars was any venture having their attainment for its end*."

"*So it was with these gentlemen. He was the greatest patriot, in their eyes, who brawled the loudest, and who cared the least for decency*."

Dickens started Chuzzlewit the same year he visited America for the first time (1842), undoubtedly not coincidence, and published it two years later. He was feted in the most effusive manner when he arrived in the USA and was quite bowled over. But the novelty began to pall when he experienced what its like to be a celebrity in a nation apparently devoid of all social graces. Neither he nor his wife could do so much as take a glass of water without being observed by a throng. But there was worse: the manners of the citizens of the brash new nation were beyond what a Victorian gentleman – even one brought up in straightened circumstances – could tolerate. He began to find them overbearing, boastful, vulgar, uncivil, insensitive and above all acquisitive. In short, very similar to the picture of Americans that the English entertained into the twentieth century.

In his travel book, American Notes, Dickens describes Mid-Westerners at dinner as "*so many fellow animals*", who "*strip social sacraments of everything but the mere satisfaction of natural cravings*". He makes this very clear, and elaborates a great deal more in the novel. He also wrote in American Notes that, "*Washington may be called the head-quarters of tobacco-*

tinctured saliva. The thing itself is an exaggeration of nastiness, which cannot be outdone". That too figures large in Chuzzlewit.

But the ultimate falling out between Dickens and America was due to the American copyright law – there wasn't one. Which meant that, widespread though his works were in the USA, they were read for free in pirated editions about which he could do nothing. He began to complain about the matter but Americans saw it as an infringement of their commercial liberties by a representative of their old colonial masters, which got their backs up. Dickens's 1842 visit to America ended with both sides accusing each other of being vulgar money-grabbers. Nor did he endear himself to that nation when Chuzzlewit was published in 1844.

But by 1867 the American public had forgiven him. Perhaps 23 years was enough for an intellectual class to arise which was happy to attach his descriptions of their fellow citizens to those lesser people whom they were also keen to despise. However, he returned to the USA in 1867 and 1868. Although understandably worried about what his reception might be, he need not have been. With extremely well received public readings from favourites like A Christmas Carol he was right back to the celebrity status which was never again dimmed in the American mind.

However…we left young Martin and Mark Tapley back in an earlier USA where they found conditions just like Dickens did on his first visit. Make his fortune young Martin did not. What meagre resources he was able to muster were just enough to purchase a plot of land way out west which enjoyed the name of "Eden". Despite what one observes of Americans, these fictional ones were not devoid of irony. It turned out that Eden was a worthless swamp, infested by disease-bearing insects and foul vapours. Nothing could be done with it. Yet from this nadir came forth gold in another sense. Firstly, it afforded Mark Tapley with his greatest challenge yet as regards sustaining his jollity. Manfully did he succeed, including when his master, young Martin, fell dangerously ill.

Inevitably, Mark too became ill. And here we have one of the uplifting turning points (though cynics will cry "preposterous!"). Martin, alone and in despair, had no choice but to nurse his faithful servant, Mark, through his illness, as he had nursed him before. This experience was the making of Martin because he was forced, in the extremity of his predicament, to confront his own selfish behaviour hitherto. He emerged a man changed radically and permanently for the better. We read of young Martin's transmogrification thus,

"*It was long before he fixed the knowledge of himself so firmly in his mind that he could thoroughly discern the truth; but in the hideous solitude of that most hideous place, with Hope so far removed, Ambition quenched, and Death beside him rattling at the very door, reflection came, as in a plague-beleaguered town; and so he felt and knew the failing of his life, and saw distinctly what an ugly spot it was.*

Eden was a hard school to learn so hard a lesson in; but there were teachers in the swamp and thicket, and the pestilential air, who had a searching method of their own.

He made a solemn resolution that when his strength returned he would not dispute the point or resist conviction, but would look upon it as an established fact, that selfishness was in his breast, and must be rooted out. He was so doubtful (and with justice) of his own character, that he determined not to say one word of vain regret or good resolve to Mark, but steadily to keep his purpose before his own eyes solely; and there was not a jot of pride in this; nothing

but humility and steadfastness; the best armour he could wear. So low had Eden brought him down. So high had Eden raised him up."

By the generosity of the one American they met who was of noble character, they escape their quagmire prison and land back in England.

Meanwhile the truly horrible Jonas Chuzzlewit is hurtling towards his destruction, lured there by his own greed. The arch-rogue Montague Tigg - or Tigg Montague - has targeted Jonas as a likely candidate for his Insurance Ponzi scheme. Tigg knows his man: plenty of money to be relieved of, and utterly unscrupulous if it means profit. It is one of the more satisfying parts of the book to witness Tigg using Jonas's character flaws as the means to entrap him. Here is an extract which illustrates how Jonas is betrayed by his own villainous nature.

"*He determined to proceed with cunning and caution, and to be very keen on his observation of the gentility of Mr Montague's private establishment. For it no more occurred to this shallow knave that Montague wanted him to be so, or he wouldn't have invited him whilst his decision was yet in abeyance, than the possibility of that genius being able to overreach him in any way, pierced through his self-deceit by the inlet of a needle's point. He had said, in the outset, that Jonas was too sharp for him; and Jonas, who would have been sharp enough to believe him in nothing else, though he had solemnly sworn it, believed him in that, instantly*."

Jonas's fate is settled when the spectral Mr Nadgett, that proto-private eye, uncovers the evidence that Jonas murdered his own father. (There's a final twist to that one, but let it pass). So Jonas falls totally into the power of the satanic Tigg, who taps him for all he has. Jonas makes a bid to flee the country, but faces the ignominy of being coerced off the boat by Tigg through the agency of the omnipresent Nadgett. To corner a mad dog is a dangerous thing, and Jonas executes a plan to murder Tigg. No one weeps for the thoroughly wicked Tigg, nor will anyone weep for the unrepentant Jonas when he is eventually caught, cornered, arrested…and ultimately poisons himself (after initially failing to have the courage even for that).

The finale is reminiscent of that later genre, the murder-mystery novel. The chief protagonists (those still alive) are gathered together in one room by, in lieu of a detective, old Martin Chuzzlewit. There the surviving villain, Pecksniff, is firstly disabused of the notion that old Martin was ever in his power – that having been an act – and then his character and his deeds are savagely exposed and condemned for all to witness. And, then…happily ever after… young Martin marries Mary, John Westlock marries Tom's sister, Ruth, and Mark marries Mrs Lupin, proprietor of the Red Dragon. Tom gets the inheritance from old Martin when he dies and continues to be loved by all – except by Pecksniff.

But Tom does not get the girl – young Martin does. And we knew this in advance for Dickens has told us,

"'*You think of me, Ruth, said Tom, 'and it is very natural that you should, as if I were a character in a book; and you make it a sort of poetical justice that I should, by some impossible means or other, come, at last, to marry the person I love. But there is a much higher justice than poetical justice, my dear, and it does not order events upon the same principle.* '"

Mercy Pecksniff has been delivered from her abusive husband by his suicide and is kindly taken under old Martin's wing. As for the other Pecksniff daughter, Charity-the-Uncharitable, having taken callous delight in her sister's marital distress, rubs it in further by making a great to-do over her own impending marriage - to a poor gangrel creature who has seemingly had his will devoured by her. But Charity's karma is rebalanced when said betrothed fails to turn up on the wedding day, having fled to Van Dieman's Land (as it was still in 1844).

On the one hand, Dickens' plots are uplifting for their reward of sound characters and their punishment of the wicked, and I care not what the cynics might say else. But, on the other hand, we surely do not read Dickens only for the plot. His style, circumlocutious certainly, may no longer be to modern taste but it is to mine. The appeal of all novels, I suggest, is to extend our understanding of people and their motives, or to reveal in sharper focus that which we have dimly perceived but have never enunciated clearly ourselves. Or, often, the appeal is to find that which we had imagined to be unique to our own private thoughts is shared and appreciated by others – namely the writer, though expressed through an imagined character. Dickens is thick with such instances. Let me share a couple to close.

In this extract we find young Martin, before his conversion, saying his farewells to his beloved Mary before setting off on his ill-fated bid for fortune in America. But the "farewell" is merely the setting for an exposition of how blind the good natured are to its opposite in others, and likewise how blind those lacking in virtue are to virtue in another.

"*Was he thinking solely of her care for him, when he took so little heed of her share in the separation; of her quiet monotonous endurance, and her slow anxiety from day to day? Was there nothing jarring and discordant even in his tone of courage, with this one note 'self' for ever audible, however high the strain? Not in her ears. In had been better otherwise, perhaps, but so it was. She heard the same bold spirit which had flung away as dross all gain and profit for her sake, making light of peril and privation that she might be calm and happy; and she heard no more. That heart where self has found no place and raised no throne is slow to recognize its ugly presence when it looks upon it. As one possessed of an evil spirit was held in old time to be alone conscious of the lurking demon in the breasts of other men, so kindred voices know each other in their hiding-places every day, when Virtue is incredulous and blind*."

In the following little soliloquy we find Saint Tom explaining (and perhaps protesting a little overmuch) why he is no less happy for having failed to "get the girl",

"*It is sorrowful to me to contemplate my dream which I always knew was a dream, even when it first presented itself; but the realities about me are not to blame. They are the same as they were. My sister, my sweet companion, who makes this place so dear, is she less devoted to me, Ruth, than she would have been, if this vision had never troubled me? My old friend John, who might so easily have treated me with coldness and neglect, is he less cordial to me? The world about me, is there less good in that? Are my words to be harsh and my looks to be sour, and is my heart to grow cold, because there has fallen in my way a good and beautiful creature, who but for the selfish regret that I cannot call her my own, would, like all other good and beautiful creatures, make me happier and better! No, my dear sister. No. Remembering all my means of happiness, I hardly dare to call this lurking something a sorrow; but whatever name it may justly bear, I thank heaven that it renders me more*

sensible of affection and attachment, and softens me in fifty ways. Not less happy. Not less happy, Ruth."