DICKENS AND THE POOR LAW

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"A decent provision for the poor," says Johnson, "is the true test of civilization." One might add that it is equally a test of statesmanship. Economic questions of labour and public finance, political ideals of liberty and fraternity, the spiritual need of humanitarian benevolence, sociological principles of racial progress, ethical demands of abstract justice—all these combine to make the prevention and cure of destitution one of the most complicated tasks of civilized government.

The difficulties inherent in the problem can very well be studied in the evolution of the English Poor Law. The English system of poor relief, like so many vital English institutions, has had a long and chequered history of irregular growth. Great abuses have sprung from small beginnings of ill-considered benevolence; complacency has sometimes given place to panic, and quiescent pessimism to frantic regulation; and obvious and necessary reforms have shaken the country like a revolution. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, for instance, was a piece of legislation which in its immediate effects proved to be little short of revolutionary. And it is the early working of this law that Dickens attacked in his Oliver Twist, written at the commencement of the Victorian era.

Some form or other of poor relief had already been practised in England through a period of a thousand years. Almsgiving was a Christian virtue, twice-blessed in that it secured immediate benefit to the recipient and future advantage to the giver. Though in early times the State made no direct provision for the poor, it supplied the necessary sanction for the collection of tithes, which in theory were to be devoted equally to the church, the clergy and the poor. The rise of the monastic orders led to more extensive almsgiving. Private benefactions also supplemented the charity of corporations. "Englishmen of the middle classes, then as now, usually reserved their more considerable charities until their death,"¹ failing apparently to realise that by doing so, as Bacon puts it, "they were rather liberal of another man's than of their own." Almost all this charity, however, was unorganised, indiscriminate, and in result mischievous. No distinction was made between

¹ Ashley, Economic History, 329.
genuine want and importunate idleness. The same set of brazen vagabonds might clamour and receive help at half a dozen monastic doors, while real infirmity and honest poverty went unrelieved. Indiscriminate charity proved to be more the cause than the cure of beggary.

The breakdown of feudalism, the ravages of the Black Death, and the ruthless working of economic laws of labour, wages and prices in an age when the science of economics was yet unborn, were other influences which aggravated the evil in the later middle ages. A rise in prices unaccompanied by an increase in wages drove many labourers into the easy profession of vagrancy; and the landlord class entrenched in Parliament aimed really at restraining the free movement of labour and keeping down wages while professing to discourage idleness and vagabondage. The police force of the country was far from efficient. The magistrates did not always have the heart to enforce the severe penalties for vagrancy prescribed, for instance, by the laws of Edward III.\(^2\) The philanthropic citizen could not on every occasion hold an enquiry into the moral character and the physical condition of casual applicants for charity. Though an Act of 1388 recognized, practically for the first time, the difference between able-bodied beggars and the helpless poor, very little was done to translate this distinction into the treatment given to the two kinds of mendicants; nor was any relief provided for the latter beyond the precarious support of casual, perfunctory or contemptuous charity. The ranks of the sturdy beggars went on swelling. Lawlessness and crime increased. Foreign royalties and cardinals of the Church of Rome were openly robbed on the highway. Increasing mendicancy and vagabondage were fast building up abundant raw material for social revolution.

The efficient despotism of the Tudors, however, would not suffer the disease to grow for want of drastic remedies, especially after the prohibition of maintenance and the dissolution of religious houses had flooded the land with vagrants. A series of Acts proceeded to apply stringent remedies. Justices of the peace were to issue to indigent persons written licenses to beg within prescribed areas; unlicensed begging was punishable by the stocks and by whipping. Able-bodied persons were forbidden to beg on pain of being whipped at the cart’s tail, while persons giving alms to them were liable to be fined. Counties, towns and parishes were to support their helpless poor by voluntary alms and to set “the sturdy vagabonds and valiant beggars” to work. An Act passed under Edward VI directed that in each parish

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\(^2\) “Almost all severities have been inflicted, except scalping.” Dr. Burn, quoted in Mackay, *History of the English Poor Law*, 13.
two collectors of alms should "gently ask and demand of every man and woman what they of thier charity will give weekly towards the relief of the poor, and the same is to be written in a book. And the collectors shall justly gather and truly distribute the same charitable alms weekly to the said poor and impotent persons, without fraud, favour or affection."\(^3\) But this voluntary charity seems to have flowed, if at all, in a very sluggish stream, for an early statute of Elizabeth’s reign authorised the justices to raise compulsory contributions for the relief of the poor.

The closing years of the sixteenth century marked an important stage in the history of English poor relief. Before then “most of the measures had been negative rather than positive. The orders concerning the repression of sturdy beggars were more prominent than those concerning the relief of the poor.”\(^4\) But now the problem began to be considered in a scientific light. Poverty was no longer classed as a crime, nor was repression considered the chief duty of Government in the matter. The relief of the poor had now grown to be too large and too complicated a task for private charity; it had become a national problem calling for the exercise of the highest type of statesmanship. And the maintenance of the poor was not merely a laudable act of benevolence, but was a selfish necessity as well, since the existence of a large number of poverty-stricken citizens was bad for the community as a whole. Poor relief therefore demanded scientific treatment on a large scale.

The first statesmanlike attempt to tackle the problem was made by the Elizabethan Act of 1601, which has supplied the basis of the modern English system of poor relief. This Act imposed regular local taxation for the maintenance of the poor. Each parish was to raise compulsory poor rates and relieve the helpless poor through the agency of local overseers, and was to provide work for all able-bodied persons who could not support themselves. Poor relief was recognized as a national duty; only it was to be carried out parochially. A clear-cut distinction was made between those who could not work and those who merely would not. Savage punishments were no longer considered to be a sufficient remedy.

The Elizabethan Poor Law did not destroy destitution, but it did prevent social revolution. It stood for two hundred years, but unhappily not without undesirable accretions. A Law of Settlement passed soon after the Restoration empowered local authorities to send back to their original parish such labourers as lost their employment and threatened to be a burden on the poor rates. The result of this unfortunate measure was that “the

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\(^3\) Quoted in Nicholls, History of the English Poor Law, I, 133.
fluidity of labour was checked and the working class deprived of personal
and economic freedom for over a hundred and thirty years." Adam Smith
declared that no poor man could reach forty years of age without suffering
oppression under the Settlement Law. An Act of 1722 laid down what
was called the "workhouse test": poor relief was to be provided only in
workhouses erected for the purpose. But this was not rigidly enforced.
Unscientific outdoor relief, lack of strong central control, sentimental weakness
on the part of justices of the peace, and jobbery and corruption among the
overseers combined to make poor relief in the eighteenth century a public
scandal. And soon it was to become also a grave national danger. The
workhouse test was largely abrogated in course of time, and the whole system
was rendered pernicious by the lawless law by which, in 1795, a handful
of Berkshire magistrates decided to adopt the fatal policy of making money
grants to labourers for supplementing their wages and raising them to the
level of subsistence. This was the notorious "Speenhamland Act," the
worst of the wrong turnings in the history of the English poor law. The
result was that employers of labour were no longer under the necessity of
paying a living wage, nor labourers of earning it. The self-reliance and
self-respect of the labouring class was destroyed, and the entire industrial
population was demoralized. As the poor rates were utilized for supplementing wages it was not the poor man, but the employer of labour, who really
obtained relief. And this "equalisation of idleness and industry," as Bentham
called it, placed an intolerable burden on the ratepayer.

At the opening of the nineteenth century, therefore, the English system of
poor relief was in a state of perilous chaos. The manufacture of pauperism
had become a national industry. Numberless Englishmen looked upon
parish relief as their birthright. In some localities relief was given practically
to the entire population. The country taxed itself to the tune of £ 7,000,000
a year for placing a premium on idleness and improvidence. Healthful
competition among workers was destroyed. Benevolence without insight
or foresight, administrative inefficiency, and a drifting fatalism had brought

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7 But chief thy notice shall one monster claim,
   A monster furnished with a human frame,
   The Parish Officer ....
   .... The sly, pilfering, cruel Overseer,
   The shuffling farmer, faithful to no trust,
   Ruthless as rocks, insatiate as the dust,
   *(The County Justice*, by John Langhorne)
the nation to the verge of economic and moral ruin. It was abundantly clear that social dissolution could be staved off only by the most drastic remedies courageously applied. And it was fortunate for England that the reformed Parliament of 1833 and the Whig ministries of Grey and Melbourne were able and willing to undertake this Herculean task.

Froude's remark that "the work of the Liberal statesman has been chiefly destructive" is eminently true of the Whig legislation that followed the Reform Act of 1832. The abolition of slavery, factory legislation, poor law reform, and municipal regulation, coming in rapid succession after the purification of the representative system of the country, spelt the destruction of so many serious and longstanding evils that any age or country could be proud of the achievement. The reform of the poor law, in both its legal and administrative aspects, constituted a radical measure of social legislation. "Few legislative achievements have had a more significant bearing upon the social and moral life of the people than the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. For this legislation the Whig ministers are entitled to unstinted credit. No Government seeking only popularity would have touched the question; no Government genuinely concerned for the social and economic welfare of the people could have evaded it."8

In 1832, after the Whig ministry had determined courageously to tackle the question of poor relief, Lord Grey adopted the characteristic British device of appointing a royal commission, to investigate and report upon the working of the poor law. A voluminous report was published in February 1834. A Bill was prepared embodying most of the recommendations of the Commission; it was treated in both Houses largely as a non-party measure, and it became law in August. The Act of 1834, like the report on which it was largely based, was strongly coloured by the utilitarian radicalism of Bentham.9 "The creation of a central authority with control over the local administration, the formation of Poor Law areas by reference to convenience and topography instead of to tradition and history, the recognition by the Commissioners of the principle that the executive officers should be paid, and the provision that the local authorities should be elected by the inhabitant ratepayers of the district, are all borrowed or adapted from the 'Constitutional Code'. "10

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9 "It would be difficult to find a better instance of that favourite maxim of our grandfathers that 'the pen is mightier than the sword' than the effect upon British institutions of the uneventful life of Jeremy Bentham, a shy recluse of unimpressive speech and appearance." Trevelyan, British History in the Nineteenth Century and After, 181.
The principles underlying the new poor law, and the machinery provided by it, may be briefly indicated. The central authority created by the Poor Law Amendment Act consisted of a Board of three Commissioners located in Somerset House who had practically unlimited powers over the local authorities. Assistant Commissioners and inspectors were appointed to see that the rules and regulations issued by the Board were carried out in practice. Parishes were to be grouped into Unions for the sake of large-scale treatment and administrative convenience. An unpaid Board of Guardians, consisting partly of justices of the peace and partly of members elected by the ratepayers, was to be the poor law authority in each Union. The executive work of poor relief was to be carried out by paid officials who were appointed by the Board of Guardians but were also directly subordinate to the central authority. Out-door relief for the able-bodied was abolished; relief for such people was available only within the four walls of the workhouses which were to be erected in each Union. In other words, an able-bodied man or woman had to decide between receiving all or receiving nothing—all, by entering the workhouse, nothing, if unwilling to become an inmate. The other leading principle of the new law was that of "ineligibility". As a reaction against the old system, which was considered to have made the life of the pauper far too comfortable, it now became an important principle of the new scheme that life in the workhouse should be less attractive than the least pleasant mode of independent existence. Able-bodied men in the workhouse had to earn their keep by doing work, which, however, was not to be of a "repellent" nature. Old people and children were to be separated from the able-bodied. The Malthusian bogey of the suicidal growth of population was responsible for a rigid segregation of the sexes; and the parting asunder of those whom God had joined was justified on the analogy of patriotic, hard-working men whom the exigencies of naval or military service kept away from their wives, and that of convicted felons incarcerated in gaol.

Finality was no more a characteristic of this Act than of the Reform Act of 1832; but it certainly marked a long step forward and in the right direction. It did confer great benefits on the country. It established uniformity, and strong central control, and rescued the administration of the poor law from the hands of bungling, sentimental amateurs. It greatly reduced the burden of the poor rates. It put an end to the unwholesome confusion between relief and wages; and it saved the poor working man from moral degradation and economic slavery. Once this Act had been passed there was no more fear of a reversion to the perilous condition of the previous age. The healthy process of reclamation now begun was, in course
of time, to be carried forward by the institution of national insurance and
old-age pensions, and by the organised exaltation of the dignity as well as the
remuneration of labour.

The long-range benefit of remedial legislation however, is not always
recognized at the moment, especially if patent, though unavoidable, hard-
ship is the immediate result. Such a large part of the population had so
long depended entirely on outdoor relief that its abolition was bitterly resented
as a sinister attack on the working class. The authors of the Report had
exaggerated the evils of the old system and laid themselves open to the charge
of disingenuousness. Until time and experience were able to suggest im-
provements, the lot of the aged and the sick under the new system was undeni-
ably cruel. Even during the passage of the Bill through Parliament a good
deal of opposition had taken shape in the country. Practically all the public
press, led by the *Times*, was against it. Cobbett denounced it as the
“Poor Man’s Robbery Bill”. After the Act was passed the Commissio-
ners set up by it were assailed as the “Bashaws of Somerset House”
and the “Pinch-pauper Triumvirate”. The workhouses attained an unwel-
come notoriety as the “Poor Man’s Bastilles”. In the early years of the
new poor law the administration of the workhouses did often fall short of the
requirements of humanity and benevolence. During his selectio neering
campaign in Newark in 1837 Gladstone “found a very strong, angry and
general sentiment, not against the principle of the poor law as regards the
able-bodied, but against the regulations for separating man and wife, and
sending the old compulsorily to the workhouse, with others of a like nature.
With the disapprobation on these heads he in great part concurred.”

Such were the circumstances in which the rising young author of
*Oliver Twist* felt himself impelled to impeach the poor law administration
of the country at the bar of public opinion.

A genuine love of the poor and the oppressed was so much a part of
the nature of Dickens that it strongly coloured all his work. He was the
foremost story-teller of his age; but a crusade against social oppression
and the tyranny of institutions was from the beginning a conscious and
important part of his story-telling. The scandals of debtors’ prisons, the
delays of the court of Chancery, the coils of red tape in which public offices
and their occupants were hopelessly entangled, the knavery of private school-
masters and private nurses, the cant and hypocrisy of pretended philanthro-
pists, the inhumanities of the petty tyrants in charge of workhouses, and

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the soulless regulation of factory life by gold-loving captains of industry—all these came in for well-merited castigation at his hands.

His *Oliver Twist* is a highly topical novel. Author and story were deeply influenced by contemporary conditions of the life of the poor in the south of England, particularly in and around the metropolis. It was the south that had been most thoroughly debased by the old poor law, and consequently it was there that the harshness of the new regulations was felt most acutely and seen on the largest scale. Dickens, like Johnson, was an enthusiastic Londoner, and he brought a profound knowledge and sympathy to the contemplation of the daily life of the city, especially that of its poorer denizens. He was familiar with every part of the new poor law. In the pursuit of his first profession of parliamentary reporter he must have been present in the gallery of the House of Commons practically during the entire debate. The Bill received the royal assent and became law in August 1834. *Oliver Twist* appeared in serial form in *Bentley’s Miscellany* from January 1837 to March 1839. Victoria succeeded to the throne in June 1837. The vagaries and the hardships connected with the early working of the Act, and the outcry against the harshness of the workhouse administration were familiar things to the young novelist. Their reactions on his sensitive mind were responsible for the strictures contained in *Oliver Twist*.

Among the features of the poor law that Dickens attacked in the novel the following may be mentioned: the theory and practice of outdoor relief, the working of the “ineligibility” test, care of the sick and the aged, the treatment of children, including baby-farming and pauper apprenticeship, the attitude of Guardians and Magistrates, and the conduct of parish officials.

Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle, lays down, in Chapter XXIII, the theory of outdoor relief, which many of the readers of the novel could not but suspect was the actual fact in the working of the poor law. Mr. Bumble is having a heart-to-heart talk with Mrs. Corney, the workhouse matron, over a bottle of port wine diverted to nobler uses from the workhouse infirmary.

“Mrs. Corney,” said the beadle, smiling as men smile who are conscious of superior information, “out-of-door relief, properly managed—properly managed, Ma’am—is the parochial safeguard. The great principle of out-of-door relief is, to give the paupers exactly what they don’t want; and then they get tired of coming.”

“Dear me,” exclaimed Mrs. Corney, “well, that is a good one, too!” “Yes. Betwixt you and me, ma’am,” returned Mr. Bumble, “that’s the great principle; and that’s the reason why, if you look
at any cases that get into them owdacious newspapers, you’ll always observe that sick families have been relieved with slices of cheese. That’s the rule now, Mrs. Corney, all over the country.”

Mr. Bumble, earlier in the chapter, cites the example of a couple of paupers to whom relief was offered and their ungrateful and perverse reactions to the generosity of the parish officials!

“We have given away, Mrs. Corney, we have given away a matter of twenty quarter loaves and a cheese and a half, this very blessed afternoon; and yet them paupers are not contented...... Why, here’s one man that, in consideration of his wife and large family, has a quarter loaf and a good pound of cheese, full weight. Is he grateful, ma’am? Is he grateful? Not a copper farthing’s worth of it! What does he do, ma’am, but ask for a few coals; if it’s only a pocket-handkerchief full, he says! Coals! What would he do with coals? Toast his cheese with ’em, and then come back for more. That’s the way with these people, ma’am; give ’em a apron full of coals to-day, and they’ll come back for another, the day after to-morrow, as brazen as alabaster........ The day afore yesterday a man—you have been a married woman, ma’am, and I may mention it to you—a man, with hardly a rag upon his back (here Mrs. Corney looked at the floor), goes to our overseer’s door when he has got company coming to dinner, and says, he must be relieved. As he wouldn’t go away, and shocked the company very much, our overseer sent him out a pound of potatoes and half a pint of oatmeal. ‘My heart,’ says the ungrateful villain, ‘What’s the use of this to me? You might as well give me a pair of iron spectacles!’ ‘Very good,’ says our overseer, taking ’em away again, ‘you won’t get anything else here.’ ‘Then I’ll die in the streets!’ says the vagrant. ‘Oh no, you won’t,’ says our overseer........ “Well, ma’am, he went away; and he did die in the streets. There’s an obstinate pauper for you!”

The principle of “ineligibility,” by which the new poor law sought to make life in the workhouse as unattractive as possible, comes in for an equally caustic description:

“The members of this Board were very sage, deep, philosophical men; and when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered —the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work. “Oho!”
said the Board, looking very knowing; “we are the fellows to set this to rights; we’ll stop it all, in no time.” So, they established the rule, that all the poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays. They made a great many other wise and humane regulations having reference to the ladies, which it is not necessary to repeat; kindly undertook to divorce poor married people, in consequence of the great expense of a suit in Doctors’ Commons; and, instead of compelling a man to support his family, took his family away from him, and made him a bachelor! . . . . The system was rather expensive at first, in consequence of the increase in the undertaker’s bill, and the necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers, which fluttered loosely on their wasted, shrunken forms, after a week or two’s gruel. But the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers; and the Board were in ecstasies.”

The Poor Law authorities spent a good deal of time and thought over the determination of the workhouse dietary; only they seem to have given the first importance to the necessity of discouraging people as much as possible from becoming inmates of the workhouse. The actual dietary adopted by the poor law commissioners bore a strong family resemblance to the workhouse diet of “three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays” described by Dickens. “The total food for able-bodied men in the week was as follows:

On three days: 12 ozs. bread; 1 ½ pints gruel; 5 ozs. cooked meat; ½ lb. potatoes; 1 ½ pints broth.

On three other days: 12 ozs. bread; 1 ½ pints gruel; 1 ½ pints soup; 2 ozs. cheese.

On Fridays: 12 ozs. bread; 1 ½ pints gruel; 14 ozs. suet or rice pudding; 2 ozs. cheese.

This was divided into three meals a day; women got slightly less, children over nine the same as women; children under nine were to be dieted at discretion.”

Gruel seems to have been the most potent weapon

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12 House, The Dickens World, 94, quoting from the Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1836.
on which the authorities relied for frightening people away from the workhouse.

Food is a matter of supreme importance, especially to those for whom there is no certainty about its regular or adequate supply. In the matter of food, as in others, the new poor law "put the screw on all paupers alike," and it was the children, the aged and the sick who suffered most. The children were rendered so spiritless by the new regime that they sank without protest into a chronic condition of semi-starvation. Oliver Twist, "asking for more," proved himself to be far more of an optimist than Mr. Micawber himself. A pauper child asking for an extra ladle-full of gruel appeared such a phenomenon that the master of the workhouse, his assistants, and the boys were all "paralysed with wonder". The pathetic, under-nourished condition of the paupers is again and again emphasized also by implication—almost everyone else is fat. "Mr. Bumble was a fat man." The Board consisted of "eight or ten fat gentlemen," presided over by "a particularly fat gentleman with a very round, red face." The master of the workhouse was "a fat, healthy man." The paupers appear almost to be trespassers who have had the audacity to force themselves into a world created for overfed men. When Mr. Bumble, for his own purposes, gave Oliver an extra basin of gruel, and two ounces and a quarter of bread, "Oliver began to cry piteously: thinking, not unnaturally, that the Board must have determined to kill him for some useful purpose, or they never would have begun to fatten him up in that way." When Oliver, goaded beyond endurance by coarse insults to his mother's memory, attacked a boy many sizes too large for him, and proceeded to defy the great Mr. Bumble himself, a theory was tentatively pronounced that he must be mad. "It's not madness, ma'am," replied Mr. Bumble, after a few moments of deep meditation. "It's meat. You've overfed him, ma'am. You've raised a artificial soul and spirit in him, ma'am, unbecoming a person of his condition, as the Board, who are practical philosophers, will tell you. What have paupers to do with soul or spirit? It's quite enough that we let 'em have live bodies. If you had kept the boy on gruel, ma'am, this would never have happened." All this is not mere exaggeration for the sake of effect. It was kindliness and real sympathy for the poor that made Dickens write frequently of meat and drink, and made him elevate the Christmas turkey almost to the dignity of a hero in some of his tales. "He was one of the few great writers of the nineteenth century who saw the world from the point of view of the urban poor, and did not merely sympathize a little remotely with their sufferings. It was for this reason that he put a comfortable dinner high in the scale of values." 13

13 Woodward, The Age of Reform, 536.
Food was not the only sore point. Children attach an exaggerated significance both to tenderness and to cruelty. The rascality of baby-farmers and the brutality of the masters of apprentices added a good deal to the terrors of the pauper children. Neglect and cruelty began practically at birth. When Oliver was ushered into the world the only persons who assisted at the function were "a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer, and a parish surgeon who did such matters by contract." And all the consolation that this superannuated Mrs. Gamp was able to afford to the dying mother was the encouraging information that she herself was a mother of thirteen, "and all on 'em dead except two, and them in the workhouse."

When the child was about a year old "the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved that Oliver should be 'farmed,' or, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor laws rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week." The incidence of mortality was very high in these institutions, "eight and a half out of ten," since the female Squeers in charge of the establishment diverted to her own purposes the little that the parish gave for the support of these unwanted infants. The leasing out of the pauper children as apprentices in such dangerous occupations as chimney-sweeping led again and again to public agitation; and in this as in other matters relating to the poor, Dickens rendered a great service by drawing pointed attention to the callousness of Union authorities and the indifference of magistrates.

The success of institutions of public utility depends very much upon the character and methods of the officials entrusted with the day-to-day administration. The central Poor Law Commissioners were too remote and too theory-ridden to realise the sufferings of the poor. The Boards of Guardians were not always guiltless of the callous indifference of which Dickens accused them; and their heaviest responsibility lay in the opportunities for petty tyranny that they afforded to their subordinates, the master of the workhouse, the matron and the beadle. The picture of Bumbledom portrayed in Oliver Twist probably did more than anything else to focus the searchlight of public attention upon the abuse of power by the subordinate officials connected with the administration of the poor law. Bumble, the beadle, is a tyrant, a toady, a hypocrite and a fraud. He bullies the paupers as readily as he cringes before his superiors. And when, in the end,
his knaveries find him out, the worst fate that the novelist can design for him and his spouse is that they should become “paupers in that very same workhouse in which they had once lorded it over others.” Then comes the unkindest cut of all, a reminder of the compulsory segregation of the sexes: “Mr. Bumble has been heard to say, that in this reverse and degradation, he has not even spirits to be thankful for being separated from his wife.” In demolishing Bumble, as in destroying Squeers and Mrs. Gamp, Dickens did much to remove a crying evil of the time.

Dickens was neither an economic theorist nor a practising politician. But one need not be a clergyman to denounce sin. He was a lay preacher, an unofficial reformer, a critic who left society better than he found it. When subsequently he founded the Daily News he declared it to be the policy of the paper to promote the welfare of the poor and the happiness of society. This motive of social service was present in his writings from the beginning; and it is unmistakable in Oliver Twist. Dickens was no student of the economics found in books, nor did he wish to be one. He had no use for theoretical principles which were powerless to prevent misery and want. “Go into the street,” says Johnson, “and give one man a lecture on morality, and another a shilling, and see which will respect you most.” When the lot of the poor under the new law was patently miserable Dickens was not prepared to draw any consolation from the fact that the economic theory behind it was probably irreprouachable. It was his conviction that the regulations were narrow and ungenerous in spirit and that the poor were subjected to a great deal of avoidable hardship. He believed that society was too often ready to consider every pauper as a blunder on the Creator’s part. He was disposed to agree with Goldsmith that

Laws grind the poor, and rich men rule the Law.14

The future author of A Tale of Two Cities was fully persuaded that it was no longer a tenable proposition that “the mass of the people have nothing to do with the laws but to obey them.”15

That Dickens had no positive programme of social reform, and that his works contain no reasoned analysis of political or economic principles, should not be taken as a detracion from the merit of his criticism. Like other Victorian prophets he conceived it to be his prime duty to lay bare before the scrutiny of the world the serious defects of administration and ethics which marred the usefulness of public institutions. He warned

14 The Traveller, 1. 386.
15 Bishop Horsley, 1795, quoted in Trevelyan, British History in the Nineteenth Century and After, 158.
doctrinaire politicians and self-righteous plutocrats that "the ledger of the Almighty is strictly kept." He reminded the workhouse authorities that

All constraint,
Except what wisdom lays on evil men,
Is evil,\textsuperscript{16}

and that man does not live on gruel alone. It was his opinion that laws should be salutary without being heartless and that philanthropy was a good part of the task of statesmanship.

In the hard times that followed the Industrial Revolution the poor found many champions among men of letters, but none more consistent, or more sincere, or more kindly than Charles Dickens. He was only a writer of fiction, but, according to the dictum of Browning, "fiction which makes fact alive is fact too." He did exaggerate, but with an unmistakable moral purpose. "Dickens had a singularly just mind. He was wild in his caricatures, but very sane in his impressions."\textsuperscript{17} Many of the evils that he attacked were soon swept out of existence, and he deserves full credit for his part in bringing about this happy result. A French critic has declared that "Dickens can be counted among the causes of moral order whereby England was spared a revolution."\textsuperscript{18}

It is eminently appropriate that a novelist whose works are so full of sympathy for the poor and affection for children and for Christmas should receive what is probably the most charming compliment ever paid to a man of letters, the tribute contained in the story of a small boy who asked: "Is Mr. Dickens dead? And will Father Christmas die too?"\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Cowper, \textit{The Task}, Bk. V.
\textsuperscript{17} Chesterton, \textit{Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens}, 158.
\textsuperscript{18} Cazamian, quoted in Andre Maurois, \textit{Dickens}, 4.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 3.