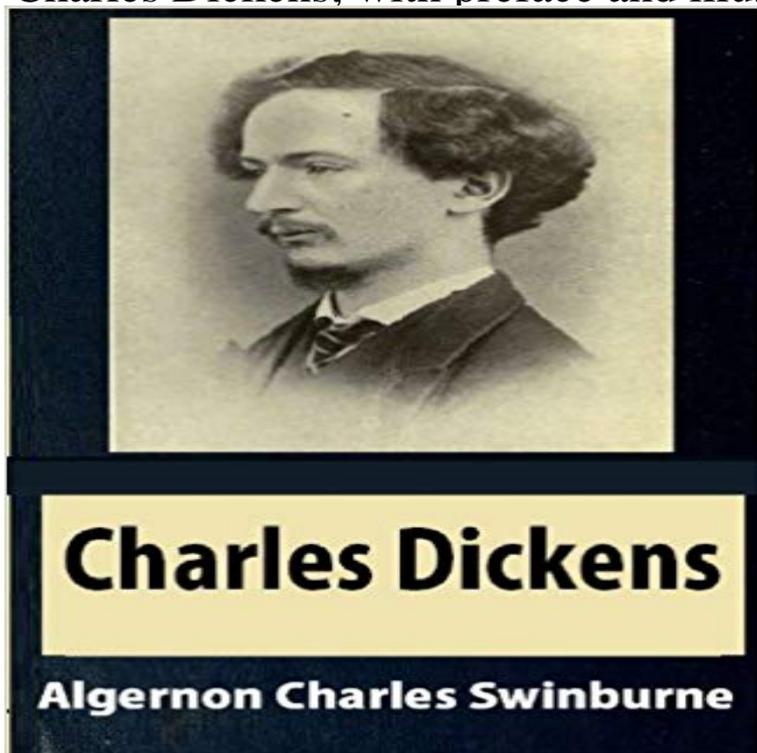


Charles Dickens; with preface and illustrative notes by the editor



IAS TO CERTAIN OF THE POETS
STRICTURES IN THIS VOLUMEIN a letter received from an esteemed friend of mine, the accomplished editor of the Quarterly Review who has a special right to speak upon the subjectit is suggested that certain remarks about other authors in the Dickens article might now be omitted. This alludes, I take it, to Swinburnes severe strictures upon Matthew Arnold and Andrew Lang. Well, if I had found it possible to follow my own inclination I might perhaps have considered the question of omitting these ebullitions of wrath. But as in the annotated copy of the Quarterly Review which Swinburne left behind him the strictures upon these two eminent writers have not been struck out, I cannot see that I have any right to omit them. He himself would certainly not have dreamed of doing so: andthat must be enough for me who knew his character so thoroughly. He held that what a writer has once printed can really never be recalled, as the literary ghouls are certain to dig it up. In view of this dictum of his, how can I be expected to strike out any part of the Quarterly article ? I might just as reasonably, when a new edition of the companion volume, A Note on Charlotte Bronte, comes to be issued, be expected to strike out Swinburnes equally severe strictures upon George Eliotindeed more reasonably, for the Bronte book was dedicated to myself. Those strictures upon George Eliot were not misunderstood in the antediluvian days when they appeared (1877) by the students of Swinburne familiar with his methods. Nor ought these later strictures to be misunderstood by present-day readers : they are so characteristic of his warm, impetuous nature. In a word, they must be taken simply as boy-like expressions of Swinburnes resentment against all those who did not fully agree with him as to the transcendent excellence of Dickens. Even

with myself, who, during an intimacy more than brotherly of nearly forty years, got nothing but boundless affection from him, he was sometimes apt to grow impatient when I criticised the quality of Dickens not very subtle humour, and contrasted it with Sterne's humour at its best. As to Arnold, no one will deny that Swinburne has on other occasions done full justice to his fine work in verse and prose. Indeed, Arnold himself once spoke to me with the deepest gratitude of Swinburne's appreciation of his poetry, and even went so far as to say that Swinburne's generous and glowing early essay had, at the time of its appearance, been the one thing needful to his being accepted as a poet first and a critic afterwards. And I am sure Arnold meant this, notwithstanding certain disparaging remarks of his about Swinburne that most unfortunately have been unearthed since Arnold's death. Arnold's attitude towards Dickens was irritating to many people, and to Swinburne intolerable. As to Andrew Lang, far abler pens than mine have recently been busy doing justice to his extraordinary powers, and (what is infinitely more important) his greatness of nature his rare goodness of heart. With regard, however, to his criticisms prefixed to the Gadshill edition of Dickens, it was, as in the case of Arnold, inevitable, I think, that they should have roused the indignation of a Dickensian so enthusiastic as Swinburne. I observe that one eminent critic and student of Dickens, Sir William Robertson Nicoll, has lately said, after doing full justice to Lang's criticisms of Sir Walter Scott, nothing could be worse than Lang's introductions to Dickens. They almost deserve the tremendous trouncing they received from Mr. Swinburne. It must be borne in mind that Swinburne was a borderer, and remained a strong borderer all his life. It was a fancy of his that though Englishmen are fully alive to the glory of Scottish humour, Scotsmen are often impervious to the humour of the Southron. It was as an angry borderer that Swinburne uttered the words about Lang being disqualified to express an opinion on ...

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