



"MIRIAM DETERMINES TO BECOME AN ACTRESS"

HEROINES OF FICTION

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D. F. BARNETT.

revolt against her husband's hauteur. She is a sincere nature, and abhors the hollow, husband-hunting life which the hideous old coquette, her mother, has led her; and there are hints of noble tragedy in her love and pity for her husband's neglected daughter Florence. But the tender beauty of this reality is sacrificed to the gross ends of melodrama, and Edith's characterization ends in blue fire and muted violins, as we have seen. Still, she was the first semblance of a heroine that Dickens had contrived.

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In "David Copperfield" there are perhaps as many monsters as in "Dombey and Son," but they are not so merely monsters, and there are many more personalities. The first of these is David's poor, pretty young widowed mother, who in her hapless second marriage is very tenderly and truly portrayed, and the next are David's successive and contrasted wives, Dora Spenslow and Agnes Wickfield. Mrs. Steerforth, in her proud love of her son, is also a personality; so, in a way, is the faithful Peggotty; so is Miss Murdstone; so, in less measure, is Little Emily; so is Miss Trotwood; so is Rosa Dartle.

This is not saying that these personalities are not every one overdone, and at times each carried to the verge of monstrosity; but the autobiographical form of the novel seems somehow to have held the author in check, and saved him in some measure from his besetting sin of excess. It remains the best of his novels, the shapeliest, the sanest; and the necessity which he was in, through the form, of working out character inductively, kept him truer to what he had seen of life. In no other book, probably, did he draw so much and so directly from life. It was autobiographical in fact

as well as in form, and it was biographical through the introduction, with little disguise, of Dickens's father and family circumstance. Through subsequent study of its origins, the point where the fiction begins in most cases has been ascertained, but there is always a borderland where such figures move unconscious whether they are quite fiction or fact. No doubt they are always much more fiction than fact; the autobiography of David Copperfield is so transmuted that it is no longer Dickens's autobiography; and probably, if there was any living original for Dora Spenlow, Dora Spenlow bears her far less allegiance than Flora Casby, in "Our Mutual Friend," bears Dora Spenlow, whom Dickens ultimated in her.

All this does not in the least matter. The question is of the treatment of such a nature as Dora's, and the affair being that of a first love, in which anything fantastic may happen, the answer to the question seems to be that the author has given us here perhaps his first entirely living heroine. It is one of the saving facts concerning a talent who left his adorers several things to regret, that he had beyond any other novelist the inspiration of innocent young girlhood. At times it was almost *little* girlhood that inspired him, so sexless do such natures, or supernatures, as Florence Dombey and Esther Summerson and Little Dorrit appear. He predicates marriage of them, and contrives a shadowy wooing for them, however incredibly and almost shockingly; but Dora has sex, and the witchery of it; childish and slight as she is, she is a woman, with a woman's, not an angel's, charm. She is not more innocent than David himself, and she is quite as passionately in love, in their mutually innocent way, as he; she is as immediately in love, and wants him as badly as he wants her. I do not know in all fiction a purer study of young love, of the entirely human sort, than their courtship;

and it is a pity that it has to go off into the pathos of her early death after her marriage. It is true that it was no true solution of life's problem for David; and in the background all the while, is Agnes Wickfield, waiting for her innings. But a truer art than Dickens's, or Dickens's time (these things are apparently chonical, rather than personal, in great measure), would have recognized a higher duty than the reader's comfort in the situation. A child-wife is really quite as likely to live as to die; and she is apt to outlive her husband and to marry again. This was what David's mother did; and it might have been better for fiction to testify merely of the indefinitely continued marriage of the young lovers. That might not have done so badly. David was good, and Dora, after all, though she was spoiled, was sweet, and of a final good sense.