

Charles Dickens, *Pictures of Italy*

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was born in Landport, Hampshire, in 1812. Dickens's father was a clerk in the navy pay office. He was well paid but often ended in financial troubles. In 1814 Dickens moved to London, and then to Chatham, where he received some education. In 1824, at the age of 12, Dickens was sent to work for some months at a blacking factory, Hungerford Market, London, while his father John was in Marshalea debtor's prison. In 1824-27 Dickens studied at Wellington House Academy, London, and at Mr Dawson's school in 1827. From 1827 to 1828 he was a law office clerk, and then a shorthand reporter at *Doctor's Commons*. His career as a writer of fiction started in 1833 when his short stories and essays appeared in periodicals. Among his most successful novels are *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *Hard Times* (1854), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), and *Our Mutual Friends* (1865). His works are characterised by attacks on the social evils, the injustice, and hypocrisy of Victorian Age.



Charles Dickens

In 1844, Dickens travelled to Italy with his family for several months. They visited such famous cities as Rome, Naples, Florence and Venice. The encounter with Italy's colourful street life captured his imagination. Dickens recounted this experience in his travelogue *Pictures of Italy*, published in 1846. Here the author portrays a nation of great contrasts: between imposing buildings and urban desolation, and everyday life beside ancient monuments.

A Spirit of Old Time

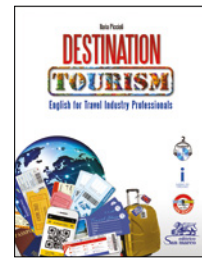
I had been half afraid to go to Verona, lest¹ it should at all put me out of conceit² with Romeo and Juliet. But, I was no sooner come into the old market-place, than the misgiving vanished. It is so fanciful, quaint³, and picturesque a place, formed by such an extraordinary and rich variety of fantastic buildings, that there could be nothing better at the core of even this romantic town: scene of one of the most romantic and beautiful of stories. It was natural enough, to go straight from the market-place, to the House of the Capulets, now degenerated into a most miserable little inn. Noisy vetturini and muddy market-carts were disputing possession of the yard, which was ankle-deep in dirt, with a brood⁴ of splashed and bespattered geese; [...] The geese, the market-carts, their drivers, and the dog, were somewhat in the way of the story, it must be confessed; and it would have been pleasanter to have found the house empty, and to have been able to walk through the disused rooms. [...]

From Juliet's home, to Juliet's tomb, is a transition as natural to the visitor, as to fair Juliet herself, or to the proudest Juliet that ever has taught the torches to burn bright in any time. So, I went off, with a guide, to an old, old garden, once belonging to an old, old convent, I suppose; and being admitted, at a shattered⁵ gate, by a bright-eyed woman who was washing clothes, went down some walks where fresh plants and young flowers were prettily growing among fragments of old wall, and ivy-coloured mounds; and was shown a little tank, or water-trough, which the bright-eyed woman – drying her arms upon her 'kerchief', called 'La tomba di Giulietta la sfortunata'. [...] It was a pleasure, rather than a disappointment, that Juliet's resting-place was forgotten. However consolatory it may have been to Yorick's Ghost, to hear the feet upon the pavement overhead, and, twenty times a day, the repetition of his name, it is better for Juliet to lie out of the track of tourists, and to have no visitors but such as come to graves in spring-rain, and sweet air, and sunshine. [...]

In the midst of it, in the Piazza di Bra – a spirit of old time among the familiar realities of the passing hour – is the great Roman Amphitheatre. So well preserved, and carefully maintained, that every row

GLOSSARY

- 1** for fear that
- 2** not pleased with
- 3** oddly picturesque
- 4** group of young birds
- 5** ruined



of seats is there, unbroken. Over certain of the arches, the old Roman numerals may yet be seen; and there are corridors, and staircases, and subterranean passages for beasts, and winding ways, above ground and below, as when the fierce thousands hurried in and out, intent upon the bloody shows of the arena. Nestling in some of the shadows and hollow places of the walls, now, are smiths with their forges, and a few small dealers of one kind or other; and there are green weeds, and leaves, and grass, upon the parapet. But little else is greatly changed.

[...]

I walked through and through the town all the rest of the day, and could have walked there until now, I think. In one place, there was a very pretty modern theatre, where they had just performed the opera (always popular in Verona) of Romeo and Juliet. In another there was a collection, under a colonnade, of Greek, Roman, and Etruscan remains, presided over by an ancient man who might have been an Etruscan relic himself; for he was not strong enough to open the iron gate, when he had unlocked it, and had neither voice enough to be audible when he described the curiosities, nor sight enough to see them: he was so very old. In another place, there was a gallery of pictures: so abominably bad, that it was quite delightful to see them mouldering away. But anywhere: in the churches, among the palaces, in the streets, on the bridge, or down beside the river: it was always pleasant Verona, and in my remembrance always will be.

Piazza Bra, Verona



ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 What was the market place like? | 4 Who accompanied him to Juliet's tomb? |
| 2 What had the House of Capulets been transformed into? | 5 What was the Roman Amphitheatre like? |
| 3 What did the narrator visit after Juliet's home? | 6 Did the narrator like Verona? Why/Why not? |

2 Find in the excerpt the words corresponding to the following definitions.

- | | |
|--|-------|
| 1 In very poor condition | |
| 2 A small hotel | |
| 3 No longer used | |
| 4 The place where someone is buried | |
| 5 The light and heat that come from the sun | |
| 6 In good condition or of good appearance, in spite of age | |
| 7 Underground | |
| 8 A series of columns placed at regular intervals | |