



The Battle of Life

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The Battle of Life: A Love Story is a novella by Charles Dickens, 1st published in 1846. It's the 4th of his five "Christmas Books", coming after The Cricket on the Hearth, followed by The Haunted Man & the Ghost's Bargain.

The setting is an English village that stands on the site of a historic battle. Some characters refer to the battle as a metaphor for the struggles of life, hence the title.

Battle is the only one of the five Christmas Books that has no supernatural or explicitly religious elements. (One scene takes place at Christmas time, but it isn't the final scene.) The story bears some resemblance to The Cricket on the Hearth in two aspects: it has a non-urban setting & it's resolved with a romantic twist. It's even less of a social novel than is Cricket. As is typical with Dickens, the ending is a happy one.

It's one of Dickens' lesser-known works & has never attained any high level of popularity, a trait it shares among the Christmas Books with The Haunted Man.

The Battle of Life Details

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Author : Charles Dickens

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From Reader Review The Battle of Life for online ebook

Sara says

A sweet little story from Mr. Dickens. I had a little chuckle because I had my boyfriend stolen by my younger sister when I was in my early twenties. I must admit that I did not take it with the same grace as Grace.

Teresa says

2.75

This will not go down as one of my favorite Dickens. While I liked the theme of the 'battle of life' being fought silently, some of the battle metaphors seemed overdone. There's nothing especially memorable about the characters, except for the servant Clemency, and the two sisters are annoying in their perfection. The debunking of the life-philosophies of the three older male characters was okay, except that much of the action happened 'off-stage'. The dialogue shines: I was happy –and relieved -- to be reading those exchanges, even that of the sisters.

Laura says

Opening lines:

Once upon a time, it matters little when, and in stalwart England, it matters little where, a fierce battle was fought. It was fought upon a long summer day when the waving grass was green. Many a wild flower formed by the Almighty Hand to be a perfumed goblet for the dew, felt its enamelled cup filled high with blood that day, and shrinking dropped. Many an insect deriving its delicate colour from harmless leaves and herbs, was stained anew that day by dying men, and marked its frightened way with an unnatural track. The painted butterfly took blood into the air upon the edges of its wings. The stream ran red. The trodden ground became a quagmire, whence, from sullen pools collected in the prints of human feet and horses' hoofs, the one prevailing hue still lowered and glimmered at the sun.

Free download available at Gutenberg Project.

Stephanie Martin says

Meh. The beginning was so promising, but the end was lame. It made me ultimately dislike all the characters but Clemency the ding dong servant. She was the most fully sketched, agreeable character. The teary young misses were total bores.

Thom Swennes says

Size is a question of perception. Published as a novella in 1846, *The Battle of Life* by Charles Dickens came into the world boasting a mere three chapters. One may think, after hearing this that such a short book could hardly be worth the paper and ink. The fact that the chapters are of hefty dimensions should hardly play a role. What should, however, influence a potential reader is quality. The three pregnant chapters of *The Battle of Life* are brimming with quality. Any author would be proud and swollen with pride to have fathered such an extraordinary and noteworthy child (as I feel sure Dickens was). The old axiom: “Less is more” would fit this narrative admirably. This is a love story to rival any written by Jane Austin or any of the Bronté sisters, with considerably less verbal baggage. I can’t see how anyone can fail to love Dickens and this short volume (word for word) his best.

Joey Woolfardis says

Regularly Dickens. It had his humour in smatterings and his characterisations at length. His profound dialogue and his joy with words, but the story lacks fluidity unlike most other things Charlie wrote, and it is not quite a story of the heart as it might at first appear. Still excellently Dickens, though, if altogether too brief.

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Kailey (BooksforMKs) says

Grace and Marion are sisters, saying goodbye to their childhood friend, Alfred, who has just come of age after growing up as a ward to the girls' father, Dr. Jeddler. Alfred promises to come back someday to marry Marion when he has finished medical school and made his fortune. The years pass, but their happy plans take a sorrowful turn, and it will take all their courage to survive the battle of life.

The best part of this book, by far, was the hilarious servant-girl, Clemency! She is awkward and kind, gentle and sweet, clumsy and odd, and deliciously funny. I was actually laughing out loud in public while reading about her antics!

Nobody but Dickens can balance such serious and funny material in the same story. The plot is quite full for such a short book, and I was completely surprised by the ending! I like that a lot of the story is told from the outside perspectives of side characters commenting to one another on the doings of the main characters. It gave a depth to the plot, and made for some interesting character studies.

I adore the sweet romances in this book, and I was so touched by the love of this close family, and their affection for one another. They are always ready to sacrifice for the other person and do all they can to make the other person happy. It's very emotional and precious.

Overall, another perfect Dickens book that I thoroughly enjoyed!

Jason says

Why do I continue to write reviews for everything I read when nobody reads the bloody things?

"Just because there's nobody there is no reason not to carry on the conversation."

Well, I suppose you're right, Miss Emily. Thank you. This was read in this compilation: A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Classics

This is not Dickens' best work. It's the fourth of his Christmas books, and doesn't live up to the expectations I set after reading the first three. It's considered a Christmas book because it came out at Christmastime, and not because there's a Christmas theme involved, though one small scene in the middle occurs during a Christmas gathering. It felt very loosely cobbled together, then chucked to the public. The battle of life part is a metaphor I didn't fully understand. Everything takes place on an ancient battleground that's long since grown over, and is nearly forgotten. Connections to it later in the story felt really forced. In fact, the first third of the book had me wondering what was going on, and where Dickens was going with it? I never really found out. I think he was just using the platform for a bit of social commentary that didn't have much to do with the rest of the story, but I could be missing something. I'm not going to reread it to find out.

Also, it's a love story, and a sappy one at that. (view spoiler)

"Awwwwwww!"

Gag me. You would think this was made for the Hallmark movie channel were it not for the fact that it was over a century ahead of its time.

I can't even say I enjoyed reading this one. Even Dickens' customary style of prose wasn't up to par. There were comic bits, and I liked the silly names of the lawyers (Snitchey and Craggs), and their pretentious mannerisms, and Clemency the simple housekeeper was silly enough, but all of it felt a little lacking. Most of his usual elements were there, but they didn't pack their usual punch.

Also, I don't recall any coincidences in this book. Is it possible it was written by someone else? A doppeldickens, maybe?

I'd suggest skipping this one unless you like sappy romance, and that's been ruined for you if you clicked on my spoiler.

Marina Cavallo says

Racconto che non mi ha entusiasmato tantissimo. Come al solito mi è piaciuta la particolarizzazione di personaggi semplici come la domestica Clemency e Benjamin Britain, ma soprattutto gli avvocati Snitchey e Craggs e le loro mogli sempre ostinatamente sospettose.

John says

A good plot once you can get to it. The meanderings and surplus verbiage get in the way. Not sure when saccharine was first produced but this tale makes me think that Dickens might have patented it. He does have this tendency, especially when focusing on young women. Not the maestro at his best in my humble opinion.

Morgan says

More like the Boredom of Life. I like the way Dickens writes, but this one wasn't very entertaining. I'm not convinced he could write short books well at all.

Sara J. (kefuwa) says

I took ages to finish this one. My brain just didn't engage on it as it did with the other Christmas stories. That said, getting to the last third wasn't so bad and there are some really nice turns of words in there to be read.

Bionic Jean says

The Battle of Life: A Love Story is a novella by Charles Dickens, which was first published for the Christmas season in 1846. It is one of his most uplifting Christmas tales.

The first Christmas book, “*A Christmas Carol*” had been enormously successful when he published it in 1843, and continues to be so. All his subsequent Christmas books also sold well at the time they were first published, but none has enjoyed the staying power of “*A Christmas Carol*”. This one, for instance, has never since attained any high level of popularity, and is now comparatively unknown. Only the first three continue to be popular. Yet Dickens’s name had become so synonymous with Christmas, that when he died in 1870 a costermonger’s little girl in London asked, “*Mr. Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?*”

Throughout the rest of the 1840s, Dickens continued to produce a “*Christmas Book*” each year. **The Battle of Life** was published in time for the Christmas of 1846, a year which had seen Dickens and his family travel to Switzerland. In this year he had also published his autobiographical writings, “*Pictures From Italy*”, but perhaps uppermost in his mind at this point, was working on his great novel “*Dombey and Son*”. Dickens was partway into the serialisation of this novel, which he would not finish writing and publishing for another two years.

The Battle of Life: A Love Story is the fourth annual Christmas Story out of a total of five. It was preceded by “*The Cricket on the Hearth*” and followed by “*The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain*”. All are speculative fiction, designed to entertain as many people as possible, and repeating what he called “*the Carol philosophy*” striking “*a sledgehammer blow*” for the poor, uneducated, and repressed. All five stories have a strong underlying message, which is presented in various moods and tableaux. It has been said that “*when he had a pill to offer he confected it expertly with spice and sugar*”, and we see much evidence of this

here. In **The Battle of Life** we see Dickens's typical style, a mixture of humour and good cheer, interwoven with an intriguing mystery.

The start of the story surprises us, with a dark description of a battlefield. The blood shed had stained all Nature red, and people were to remember the savagery of such a futile massacre for many years hence, though "*not a hundred people in that battle, knew what they fought for, or why*". This is portentous writing, which we will see developed in a future novel, "*A Tale of Two Cities*". It fills us with foreboding, and we are not sure what its place is here, especially since "*it matters little when, and ... it matters little where*". It seems to have been a senseless atrocity. But we remember the subheading to **The Battle of Life** as simply, **A Love Story**, and the very first words have also reassured us that this is "*Once upon a time*". This is Dickens, after all, with his optimism and happy endings, so we settle down to enjoy the story.

And indeed, the action soon shifts, and we see Dickens in his familiar lighthearted and whimsical mood. We are transported to an orchard "*where, on a bright autumn morning, there were sounds of music and laughter*", and two girls, sisters Grace and Marion, dancing without, apparently a care in the world. We then meet a good-natured widower, Dr. Jeddler, who is their father. In fact so jovial is Dr. Jeddler, that his entire philosophy of life seem to be to treat life as a farce, as nothing is worth taking seriously, but,

"to look upon the world as a gigantic practical joke; as something too absurd to be considered seriously, by any rational man"

"The same contradictions prevail in everything. One must either laugh or cry at such stupendous inconsistencies; and I prefer to laugh."

(Apparently Dickens was rather aggrieved when his publisher inadvertently called this character "*Dr. Taddler*", although either name seems to fit!) Dr. Jeddler clearly adores both his daughters, and they are both devoted to him - and love each other dearly too - all three living happily together in this unnamed English village.

This happy trio have two servants, Clemency Newcome and Ben Britain. Dickens's portrayal of Clemency is a joy,

"To say that she had two left legs, and somebody else's arms, and that all four limbs seemed to be out of joint, and to start from perfectly wrong places when they were set in motion, is to offer the mildest outline of the reality"

and provides much of the humour in these early chapters. Clemency's continuous repeated readings of the nutmeg grater and thimble, provide her with much to reflect on, and Dickens's recurring references to Clemency's elbows, which seem to be imbued with a life of their own, had me chortling out loud. Benjamin Britain (which surely also has to be a significant name) is a boastful sort, inclined to view himself as a great philosophiser on life, rather in the mould of the pub landlord John Willet in the earlier novel "*Barnaby Rudge*". He is rather disdainful and condescending toward the good-natured Clemency, but she takes it in good part. In many way she seems an early template or working out of the character of Clara Peggotty, in "*David Copperfield*", which Dickens was to write three years later.

The book is divided into three chapters, and in "*Part the First*", we meet another character, Alfred Heathfield. Arthur is Dr. Jeddler's ward, and is not only celebrating his birthday on this day, but also his coming of age. Also at the Jeddler's party are two crabbed old lawyers, Snitchey and Craggs, who both seem to be either devious or untrustworthy in some way, as so often in Dickens's tales. They are not as

malevolently evil as Uriah Heep in “*David Copperfield*” but easily a match for Mr. Vholes - or perhaps early incarnations of Tulkinghorn - both in the later “*Bleak House*”. Snitchey continually refers to himself as “*Self*”, but this does not come across as modesty, but more as a detachment from any human feeling; not self-effacing but setting himself above people.

Nor do other lawyers in Dickens, such as the barristers Stryver (in “*A Tale of Two Cities*”) and the lawyer Jaggers, (in “*Great Expectations*”) have many admirable qualities, but seem to be full of deviousness. Dickens had no love of, and little respect for lawyers, and his portraits are drawn from life. At the age of 15. Dickens was studying law as an attorney’s apprentice. He worked hard to master shorthand, reading lengthy legal texts, and becoming very bored. Dickens loved language, and yearned to use it somehow. In 1829 he became a court reporter for the Court of Chancery, and what he learned there fuelled much of his writing, even to such minor characters as these two, Snitchey and Craggs, only ostensibly here at this point in the story to transfer the Trust Fund.

We learn that this celebratory dinner for Alfred is also a farewell meal for him. He is about to leave both Dr. Jeddler’s house and the village, in order to complete his studies. Alfred is apprenticed to the Doctor, but he also hopes to seek his fortune in the world, so that he will be able to propose to the younger sister, Marion. Marion also seems to be drawn to Alfred romantically, and Alfred leaves in the hope that although not officially betrothed, they have an understanding. He entrusts Marion to her older sister Grace’s care, promising to return to win Marion’s hand in marriage. The end of the first chapter sees Alfred setting off to leave the village by stagecoach.

We have come a long way from the initial darkness of the blood spilled on the battlefield. We realise that that such a battle must be a metaphor. “**The Battle of Life**” in another sense, then. A battle involves sacrifice and loss. We sense a shadow of gloom, and are apprehensive. What could destroy the idyllic peace and harmony we have witnessed in this little family? What difficulties are to befall this small group of characters, for whom we already have such an affection (although maybe not so much for the shifty lawyers)? We have learned that Marion’s own birthday is the same day as the great waste of life, the battle of long ago, and wonder if this is significant. Is it then Marion’s “*Battle of life*” we are to follow? And what part is Grace to play in this? She plays a maternal role, seeming almost to be a mother to Marion, despite only being four years her elder. We have had much description of her kindness and fortitude; her character seems to be aptly named as so often with Dickens. What is the mystery, the subtext here? There is bound to be one.

In Part Two we learn more of these slightly unpleasant, yet aptly named lawyers, Snitchey and Craggs. Their offices are “*on the old Battle Grounds*”. We also meet their delightfully warring wives who are always warning their respective husbands not to allow themselves to be taken in by their business partner. All these four seem to thoroughly deserve each other, and provide much amusement for the reader. We also become aware through these little spats, that nobody here is truly malicious, just life-long complainers.

A subplot is developing with a dislikeable scoundrel of a new character, Michael Warden, whose affairs are in a bad way. Or is this merely a subplot? Dickens has a well-known habit of introducing little asides which seem to be inconsequential, only to thrust them straight under the spotlight, whereupon we find they were essential to the main story all along. (view spoiler)

We have two surprises which are the cause of much merriment in this section. (view spoiler) The snow falls thick and fast, just as it should in a Christmas story, and both characters and readers wait in eager anticipation. (view spoiler)

Despite catastrophic events, we hope for a good resolution, and Dickens seem to promise this at the

beginning of the “*Part the Third*” section, which takes place six years later,

“The sun burst suddenly from among the clouds; and the old battleground, sparkling brilliantly and cheerfully at sight of it in one green place, flashed a responsive welcome there, which spread along the country side as if a joyful beacon had been lighted up, and answered from a thousand stations.”

The day is Marion’s birthday and also happens to be the day of someone’s marriage. (view spoiler). A strange visitor in mourning arrives at “*The Nutmeg Grater*” Inn, one who seems uncannily familiar.

(view spoiler)

The Battle of Life: A Love Story is a “*Christmas Book*” only in a broadly thematic sense, and sometimes by indications of the time of year. It is not directly concerned with Christmas events. The setting of an English village standing on the site of an historic battle is drawn attention to by the characters themselves, who refer to the battle as a metaphor for the struggles of life, and we are aware of this fact right from the start, but not the details of how the lives depicted will be played out. In a letter to his friend and mentor, John Forster, Dickens hoped,

“to express both a love story in the common acceptation of the phrase, and also a story of love; with one or two other things of that sort”

and certainly the major events of this story comprise Dickens’s idea of the real battle of life: that of finding and winning the right partner, so that life will go ever onwards to the next generation. The story is similar to the previous one, “*The Cricket on the Hearth*” in its domestic rural setting, and also like this earlier one has a satisfying romantic twist at the end, though it is less of a social novel in its underlying theme. The Jeddler family and their acquaintances are all rather confused in their affections and intentions, and we are never quite sure who should end up with whom. There are sacrifices in love made, and “kindly cynical” Doctor Jeddler’s view of life is no longer that of a jester. We are drawn into the “*battle*” to make things all work towards the resolution; to the happy ending we expect from Dickens.

Unlike all Dickens’s other Christmas stories, there is no explicitly religious element, nor is there any supernatural content which so often aids the character’s change of heart. All Dickens’s Christmas books involve at least one character having a life-affirming change of heart, but this time it is without the aid of supernatural beings. There are no ghosts or spirits, although he does manage to create an ominous Gothic feel. There are many references to darkness, gloom and glimmers of light; mysterious strangers lurk in the shadows, things are not what they appear to be. Churchyards with phantoms and apparitions are in the mind of the characters, and much of the action seems to take place after dark. There is a sense of other-worldliness; a sense that one must not step over the threshold. There are unexplained noises, and disappearances, and questions which remain unresolved for many a year.

Dickens referred to his new story as,

“a pretty idea; and it is unlike the others ...”

and we see how a battlefield and site of hopeless brutality can be transformed over the years, becoming a place of healing and care; a place of families, and many different forms of love.

Some parts of this piece do now seem unfashionably melodramatic. Dickens loved his set pieces, and outright theatricality. These overly frantic histrionics seem a little self-indulgent for modern tastes, but were very popular with Victorian readers. Dickens had no reason at all to rein in his emotions at that time, and probably gave vent to quite a lot of inner impulses. It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to speculate on the significance of the initial “G” for Grace, which is also the initial letter of “Georgina” Hogarth, the sister-in-law who died so tragically young, and whom he so idolised. By the same token, “M” could well represent Mary, the other young sister, who was a much-loved and valued member of the Dickens household, and looked after his children.

The ending is a beautiful piece of writing, as Dickens steps back out of his picture, commenting that,

“Time—from whom I had the latter portion of this story, and with whom I have the pleasure of a personal acquaintance of some five-and-thirty years’ duration—informed me, leaning easily upon his scythe, that (view spoiler) But, as I have observed that Time confuses facts occasionally, I hardly know what weight to give to his authority.”

An ending such as this is sure to make me smile. **The Battle of Life; A Love Story** may be the least popular of the Christmas books, and does not tackle any great Victorian social issues such as *“The Chimes”*. But it is a charming little story nevertheless. It has been said to be flawed, and Dickens himself felt frustrated that he was not able to develop it properly under the constraints of the Christmas book format, writing to a friend two years later,

“I was thoroughly wretched at having to use the idea for so short a story. I did not see its full capacity until it was too late to think of another subject; and I have always felt that I might have done a great deal with it, if I had taken it for the groundwork of a more extended book.”

But it seems to epitomise what Dickens described for the rest of his life as *“the Carol Philosophy”*. This philosophy continues to be relevant, cutting through the materialism of modern Christmas celebrations to get to the heart of Dickens’s message. For Dickens this time of year is,

“a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.”

Surprisingly for such a short piece, Dickens commissioned four different illustrators for the first edition of **The Battle of Life: A Love Story**. They were Daniel Maclise, Richard Doyle, John Leech, and Clarkson Stanfield. All four artists engraved their illustrations on wood, and all four worked more in the caricatured style of Phiz than later editions of Dickens’s works.

My review here is of the *“Pears Anniversary Edition of the Christmas Stories”* from 1912; the set comprising one cloth-bound volume for each of his five Christmas Books. They are a matching set, with different coloured bindings, but each with gold-tooled lettering and the Pears cameo inset on the cover. **The Battle of Life: A Love Story** has illustrations by Charles Green, which are monochromatic and surprisingly very naturalistic. In fact they almost look like photographs. It is certainly not quite how we usually envisage Dickens’s characters whether comic, grotesque or romantic. Phiz is a hard act to follow! What is so delightful about this particular edition, apart from the fact that the book is over 100 years old, and still lovely to hold with no page discolouration, is the sheer number of illustrations. It is interesting to speculate, given the shortness of these novellas, and the plethora of illustrations, whether he intended them as family reading,

perhaps spoken or even acted out loud, around the cosy hearth of a family home.

My favourite quotation from this book? There are so many wonderful comic quips, but here is Dickens in a sage frame of mind,

“We count by changes and events within us. Not by years.”

Katie Lumsden says

Not my favourite of Dickens's Christmas novellas, but still a sweet story that I really enjoy.

Tristram says

”It's a World Full of Hearts”!

With these words, Doctor Jeddler, a father of two daughters, who is given to the frivolous philosophy of regarding the world as a *comédie humaine* in which nothing really matters, finally rejects his superficial notions by realizing that even though the battles people fight do not seem to make a whole lot of sense when viewed from a distance, with a mere onlooker's eyes, people themselves do have a heart and their feelings do matter to them and to those they love. What it took to make him change his view as to the seriousness and sacredness of life, is told in Dickens's fourth Christmas Tale, *The Battle of Life*, which was written in 1846.

Unlike the well-known *A Christmas Carol* and the two Christmas novellas following in its wake, *The Battle of Life* has never achieved a high degree of popularity, which I find quite deplorable because it is a more adult tale than, for example, *The Cricket on the Hearth* with its excursions into silliness. Apart from that, it is more balanced than *The Chimes*, which left me with the impression that Dickens just wanted to cram too much social criticism into too short a story. It may well be that *The Battle of Life* fell short of popularity because Christmas does not play a major role in the plot – with only one fateful plot event coinciding with a Christmas party -, and neither are there any ghosts or supernatural entities at work.

Even though this may be the case, we still have impressively poetic passages in this tale, as for instance the description of the aftermath of a battle that took place “[o]nce upon a time, it matters little when”:

”It was fought upon a long summer day when the waving grass was green. Many a wild flower formed by the Almighty Hand to be a perfumed goblet for the dew, felt its enamelled cup filled high with blood that day, and shrinking dropped. Many an insect deriving its delicate colour from harmless leaves and herbs, was stained anew that day by dying men, and marked its frightened way with an unnatural track. The painted butterfly took blood into the air upon the edges of its wings. The stream ran red. The trodden ground became a quagmire, whence, from sullen pools collected in the prints of human feet and horses' hoofs, the one prevailing hue still lowered and glimmered at the sun.”

Despite such a grim beginning, *The Battle of Life* is an optimistic story and also contains a lot of humour,

e.g. when it comes to the two lawyers Snitchey and Craggs and their nagging wives, or the good-humoured Clemency Newcome and the somewhat grumpy Benjamin Britain. If there is any criticism voiced by the narrator, it is apparently directed at people who think themselves so learned and endowed with reason that they fail to appreciate life for what it is worth. Not only Doctor Jeddler is an example of philosophy gone awry –

”A kind and generous man by nature, he had stumbled, by chance, over that common Philosopher's stone (much more easily discovered than the object of the alchemist's researches), which sometimes trips up kind and generous men, and has the fatal property of turning gold to dross and every precious thing to poor account.”

but also Ben Britain preens himself on his astuteness and patronizes Clemency Newcome as someone who has not one genuine thought of her own in her head, which is quite ironic in that it is Clemency whose common sense will later on ensure his material success in life and his happiness as a family man.

The Battle of Life is also a story of self-sacrifice to an extent which seems unbelievable and pointless. (view spoiler) So while the plot of *The Battle of Life* is not especially original and would not even stand a plausibility test (if there were such a thing), there is still the atmosphere, some of the characters (especially the comic relief ones) and the language that make Dickens's fourth Christmas story worth reading and place it, in my humble opinion, above the Chimes and the Cricket.
