

## IN DICKENS LAND: A REVERIE

BY MICHAEL MONAHAN

DEAR, immortal Dickens! So the wise publishers have discovered a "revival" of interest in the Master of English story, and they are paying him the compliment of many new editions. As if it were not his province to lay his strong toll of grace on each new generation; as if he were not of those beloved Immortals who live on forever in the changeless romance of the young; as if, in fine, his world-wide audience had not been steadily growing in the space since his death until now it is by far the greatest that has ever done honour to an English writer. Truly, messieurs the publishers shall easily persuade us.

But I for one am glad at any rate to hear of this "revival," which never ceases, and to enjoy the publishers' accounts of those fine new editions of the old yet ever young Dickens. Books were *written* better in his day, no doubt; though Mr. Howells, who was once a daring young heretic on this subject and is now himself under the hand of time, will not have it so. But surely they were not *made* so well, at least for popular reading. And here the publisher is entitled to his bit of praise, however we may smile at that evidence of the ingenuity of the publishing trade, the Dickens revival. It will, I think, be always a safe venture to prepare for and to announce a "great revival of interest" in the works of Mr. Charles Dickens—especially with an eye to the new generation. Other authors dispute the fickle preference of the old, the disillusioned, and the too

mature—the young are always for Mr. Dickens.

And the sceptre shall not pass from him. Over three decades ago I first read my Dickens in the paper-covered books of the Franklin Square Library. They were ugly in appearance, clumsy to hold and, worse lack of all to a young reader, there were no pictures to give form and pressure to the story. But all this disparagement is the work of my later thought. Surely I was not then conscious of any fault or blemish in the Aladdin's treasure that had suddenly fallen to me from the sky. Pity the man who is not loyal to his first loves! I would give much to taste again the feelings of joy and rapture and wonder which then were mine while making my breathless course through those ungainly publications of the Franklin Square.

I was a boy then—God help me!—the sort of boy, I dare believe, the Master had much in mind; and a whole world of bitter experience lies between me and that happy time. Shall I ever forget the bare cold little room where I spent so many unwearied hours, hugging my treasure in both arms; often hungry, but forgetting it, fed as I then was with the food of romance; oftener cold, but unheeding that, too, warmed as I was with the glow of fancy? And the smell of the freshly printed pages as I turned them with trembling, eager hands (the door of the little room shut and I alone)—have I ever since known the like? Could the costliest book now yield me such a



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A NIGHT-TIME PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ORIGINAL "OLD CURIOSITY SHOP" IN PORTSMOUTH STREET, LONDON. THE UPPER ROOM ON THE RIGHT OF THE PICTURE IS SAID TO BE "LITTLE NELL'S" BEDROOM

thrill? Alas! could any spell, however potent, again make me free of the vanished kingdom of romance?

Oh, poor little room, which saw that miracle, the lighting up of a boy's imagination, the swelling chivalry of his young heart, the simple joy of his candid youth—I look back now with lamentable vision on the long way I have come, and I know I have met nothing so good in my journey. Would to God, little room, I might wake even now as from a vexed and sorrow-laden dream, to find myself that boy once again, sheltered by you and heedless of hunger and cold, could he but slake his thirst at the Enchanted Fountain!

. . . . .

And sure these blessed things of memory have played me a trick, or I am in very truth a boy again—dear God, do but grant it, a boy

again! for I would swear that just now a breeze of youth smote my cheek, and lo! in a trice I am whirled back into the past. Lost and breathless a moment, I soon find myself in a garden with my pretty mother, bolting furtive gooseberries and trying to look unmoved. . . . A wind arises and now I am in the house with Peggotty (I still feel the touch of her finger like a nutmeg grater), poring over the Crorkendill Book and Mrs. Gummidge (bless him for that name!). Barkis has just brought me in the cart and I am so proud to be a Yarmouth Bloater (oh, memory!). Isn't it fine to live in a house made out of an old boat and to hear the wind come creeping about it at night when you are snug in bed and just dropping off to sleep? . . . How sweet little Em'ly is, and oh, how I love her with

all the innocent love of my boyish heart!

The nights I lie awake, thinking about her and praying that she may come to no harm! . . . Mr. Murdstone is worse than ever since that day when he beat me and I bit him on the hand. His beard is very black and so thick that his skin looks blue after shaving—confound his whiskers and his memory! . . . My box is ready, Mr. Barkis is here again, and my mother comes out to say good-bye to me, with her baby in her arms. She would have said something more to me, I know, but *he* was there to restrain her. “Clara, Clara, be firm!” I hear his warning voice. But she looked intently at me, holding up her baby in her arms. So I lost her, so I saw her many a time afterward at school, a silent Presence at my bedside, holding up her baby in her arms. . . .

Comes a wooden-legged man stumping through my dreams and eyeing me fiercely. Was his name Tungay, and did he put a placard on my back reading “Take Care of Him—He Bites?” I must ask Traddles about this. . . .

The “horfling” and I have just parted in tears—she to St. Luke’s Workhouse and Mr. Micawber to the Fleet, still gallantly figuring on his insoluble problem. I am somewhat comforted in the assurance that Mrs. Micawber (*with* the twins) will never desert him. . . . Now I am in Canterbury. It is a fine day and the rooks are flying about the old cathedral. Here is poor Mr. Dick, still bothered about the head of Charles I, and the Doctor placidly at work on his dictionary (not having advanced a letter since the old days), and Uriah Heep deep in Tidd’s Practice. (“Oh, what a

writer Mr. Tidd is, Mr. Copperfield!” . . . How familiar seems this house, with the hallowed sense of early dreams! I enter and lo! what graceful figure is this coming down the stair to meet me, a bunch of household keys jingling at her waist? What was it about Agnes Wickfield that made me associate her always with the peace and radiance of a stained-glass window? . . .

How the scar flamed out on Miss Dartle’s pale cheek when Steerforth asked her to sing! . . . I hate that sneak Littimer, who always makes me feel as if I was too young (alas, too young!) . . . Yarmouth again and Steerforth with me, more handsome and fascinating and irresistible than ever. Yes, though he broke her heart, and mine, too—(I have never recovered from it!)—still do I forgive him for the old love I bore him. Let me keep the sacred pledge of my boyish faith, to remember him at his best, as he asked me to, that night when we left the old boat together and I marked something different in him; let me think of him as I loved to see him in our school days, lying asleep with his head on his arm. . . . So they found him after the great storm and wreck, lying at rest amid the ruins of the home he had wronged. . . .

Ours was the marsh country down by the sea, where I first saw the Convict, what time the guns were firing and the hulks lay at anchor near by. . . . Wasn’t it kind of dear old Joe to put that inscription over his bad and worthless father—

Whatsomever the failings on his part,  
Remember, reader, he had that good in his heart.

I saw that snorting old Pumblechook yesterday when I was on my way to

Miss Havisham's—he always makes me feel guilty, as if he knew something bad about me. . . .

What a strange lady Miss Havisham is, and why does she stay, dressed all in white and covered with old bridal finery, in a room where candles burn always and from which the light of day is shut out? . . . Oh, Estella, Estella!—how beautiful she was to-day! How I love her, and how she wounds me with her disdain! Yet once I plucked up courage to ask her for a kiss, and she slapped me on the cheek—I feel the sting of it yet! But my turn came when I whipped the prowling boy behind the brewery wall, and she, unseen by us both, had watched the battle. “You may kiss me if you please,” she said, with flushed cheek—how lovely she was in her conquered pride, and what a reward was mine! . . .

Ever the best of friends, ain't us, Pip? Dear old Joe! shall I ever forget when he came to see me at my lodgings in London and the trouble he had to keep his hat from falling? What a giant he was at the forge, though as gentle as a child! Surely Orlick soon found his master.

Beat it out, beat it out, old Clem,  
With a clink to the stout, old Clem! . . .

Bentley Drummle came to Mr. Pocket's school when he was a head taller than that gentleman and several heads thicker than most young gentlemen . . . I cannot believe that Estella will marry that fool and brute. . . . He came up the stairway as I held the light for him and looked at me with a peculiar expression. . . . “When the colonists rode by me on their blooded horses I said to myself, I am making a better gentleman nor any of you.” . . . How strange it was of Mr. Jaggers to ask

his housekeeper to show us her hands! . . . Good God! Could it be possible that this convict, yet my benefactor, was Estella's father? . . . I went to the forge and it was strangely quiet. The house was closed. I walked toward the little church and suddenly I met them, Joe smiling and awkward in his Sunday clothes, Biddy in her best attire. “It is my wedding day and I am married to Joe!” . . .

A broad stream of light united the judge and the condemned, reminding some there present of that greater Judgment to which all alike were passing and which cannot err. Standing for a moment, a distinct speck in that sea of light, the prisoner said, “My lord, I have received my sentence from the hand of the Almighty, but I bow to yours.” . . . A woman was sitting there alone—it was Estella! “We are friends?” I said. “Yes,” she answered, “and will continue friends apart.” I took her hand and we went out of the ruined churchyard together. The mists were rising as they rose on that morning long ago when I first left the forge. And in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her. . . .

Why, this must be Mr. Pecksniff's Architectooralooral Academy! I hear Mercy giggling on the stair. There is the portrait by Spiller, the bust by Spoker, and as I live, there is Tom Pinch still making a shame-faced attempt to learn the violin between the bedclothes. Poor Tom Pinch! Have I ever seen simple-hearted kindness and truth in the world without thinking of thee? Have I ever seen unctuous pretence and rascality without recalling thy master? And yet they say thy Cre-

ator could not draw a character according to nature—the fools! . . .

Yo-ho—a race with the moon. I am making that famous journey with Tom Pinch by stage-coach to London. But lo! we have not gone far when we overhaul Nicholas and Smike on the road, fleeing to London, too, after thrashing Squeers and turning loose the tender youth of Dotheboys. Shall we make room for them?—well . . . But have a care, coachman, that Jonas Chuzzlewit shall not get a lift with us, for we have a dreadful suspicion of *Something* he left behind him in the wood. . . . Who were those two that crossed the road before us just then and slunk away in the shadow, a big hulking fellow and a boy?—I'll wager it was Bill Sykes and Oliver Twist going to crack a crib—more of Fagin's deviltry! . . . Yo-ho! the lights of London!—and here we are at last at London Bridge, where, quite giddy and breathless, we get down with Tom Pinch and the others—did I say that we had also picked up Codlin and Short, Mr. Scrooge and Tim Linkinwater, and a silent gentleman who cracked his joints incessantly?—I catch a glimpse of Rogue Riderhood slinking about his evil affairs and still wearing that old cap like a drowned dog. Drowned! that was the word in flaring black letters which stared from a dead wall—I saw John Harmon, muffled to the ears, stand before it a long time. . . . Now in the lighted city, and who of all strangely assorted beings of fact or fancy should I see in close conversation but Mr. Jarvis Lorry of Tellson's and Mr. Tulkinghorn of Lincoln's Inn Fields! No doubt they are talking about the strange disappearance of Lady Dedlock—I wonder if that boy limping past them,

unheeded, who looks so like Poor Jo, could throw any light on it. . . . But what grotesque figures are these under the corner lamp, with bonneted heads, bobbing at each other in eager colloquy? My life! it's Miss Flite and Sairey Gamp (dear Mrs. Gamp! thou, too, art said to be of an unreal world, yet do I hold thee dearer than all the joyless realities of their realism). I catch a few words—"the man from Shropshire"—and I surmise they are gossiping about the strange end of that unfortunate suitor of Chancery, who dropped dead on his one thousandth interruption of the Court. . . .

Plash-water weir mill lock of a balmy summer's evening and a rough fellow dressed like a bargeman, with a red neckerchief, who looks strangely like the schoolmaster Bradley Headstone. Was that the careless, handsome Eugene Wrayburn who went on before? Hurry, for God's sake, ere murder be done—you have not seen that man, as I did, smash his desperate hand against a stone wall. Hark! a blow!—another!—a splash—we are too late. But look! Lizzie Hexam is there before us, rowing her boat with a firm nerve and practised skill. Now thanks to God for that old time, and let me but save his life, even though it be for another! . . .

At Dr. Blimber's select academy for young gentlemen, and Master Bitherstone has just asked me, in a crisis of wounded feeling, if I would please map out for him an easy overland route to Bengal. I listened distractedly, for my mind was fixed on the New Boy. And who is this tiny chap sitting sadly alone while the grave clock seems to repeat the Doctor's greeting: "How—is—my—lit-tle—friend, how—is—my—lit-

tle—friend?” Oh, thou rejected of men and critics, let the world deny thee as it may, I call Heaven to witness that I was once as thou; that I wept true tears over thy young sorrows; that no child of my own house is more real to me than Paul Dombey. . . .

Mr. Richard Swiveller has just confided to me the extraordinary dilemma in which he finds himself—we were having a modest quencher, which induced the confidence. Mr. Swiveller’s creditors have increased at such a rate that the principal thoroughfares are now closed to him, and in order to get only across the way, he is obliged to go into the country. I should have heard more on this interesting subject but for the sudden appearance, at the door, of a small person—Mr. Swiveller humorously called her the Marchioness—who made frantic gestures, importing that his presence was required in the establishment of Sampson Brass, Barrister-at-law. . . . Little Nell was dead. No sleep so calm and beautiful, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God—not one that had lived and suffered Death. . . . (And this, too, they have rejected, because, they say, it is blank verse!) . . .

Have you ever heard the legend of Bleeding Heart Yard, where Mr. Panks collects the rent and the Patriarch benevolently airs his bumps?—

Bleeding heart, bleeding heart,  
Bleeding away!

Mrs. Plornish (who translates the Italian so elegantly) told it to me not long ago, but though it was very

sad, I have forgotten it. Perhaps because I was watching the eager eyes of John Baptist Cavaletto and wondering what he knows about one Rigaud whose moustache goes up and whose nose comes down. . . . I am sure that if Arthur Clennam had not given his heart to the young lady, and there had been no such thing as her engagement to *Another*, the rain would still have behaved just as it did—that is, it would have fallen heavily, drearily. But oh! I did not think so then. . . .

“Amy, is Bob on the lock?” . . .

I see an old man with white hair standing at the head of a rich banquet table and looking strangely upon the two long lines of astonished guests. Then I see Her go swiftly to his side and lay her hand on his arm, without shame, proud of him, loving him. And in her true eyes I see the fulness of that love through which the human reaches the divine—that love which, among English writers, Charles Dickens has best figured and expressed. . . . “Ladies and gentleman, I am called the Father of the Marshalsea. It is, ahem, a title, hum, hum, I may say earned, ahem, earned, by a somewhat protracted period of, ahem, residence. On this account it is, ahem, customary for visitors and, hum, hum, students, to make me a little offering, which usually takes the form of, ahem, a slight pecuniary donation. This is my daughter, ladies and gentlemen. Born here, bred here!” . . .

The roaring of many voices, the upturning of many faces, the rushing on of many footsteps in the outskirts of the crowd, until the mass heaves like a great wave and flashes away. . . . Fifty-three!

They said about him in the city



that night that his was the peaceful-est man's face ever beheld there. . . . It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.

So they pass in review before my fond memory—the people of Dickens: a wonderful procession, fantastic, varied, extraordinary, not surely of this world, perhaps, but then of a better one—the magic realm of the master wizard of English story. And yet I am glad that I read him as a boy—that he belongs with so much else that is precious to the enchanted period of life. Rich as that genius was, and on many counts without a rival, one must I fear break with the charm when the illusions of youth are past. This is less the fault and loss of Dickens than our own.

Therefore, loving Dickens as I do,

I am yet not ashamed to confess that since boyhood I have re-read but few of his books—one of these was the *Tale of Two Cities*, and either the drinker was changed or there was something alien in the draught. I do not own a set of them, not even the old Franklin Square novels, which, a ragged regiment, have long since fluttered away into that dear and irrecoverable country where lie the lost treasures of youth. So I can honestly say that in the foregoing pages I have jotted down, without art or method, and without reference to the books themselves, some memories still fresh after thirty-odd years—it is perhaps given to few authors to possess us with such lasting recollections. Yet if I were to lose all these, I should not be beggared: there would still remain a world of Dickens in my remembrance.

## M-U-D

BY JOHN OXENHAM

*This poem is to appear in "High Altars," Mr. Oxenham's new book describing the battle-fields of France and Flanders.*

This is an Ode

To

M-U-D—Mud!

Mud the ubiquitous,

Mud the iniquitous,

Mud—you're the limit in life's vast adversities!

Mud the all-prevalent,

Mud the malevolent,

Mud! to the deuce with your ill-timed perversities!