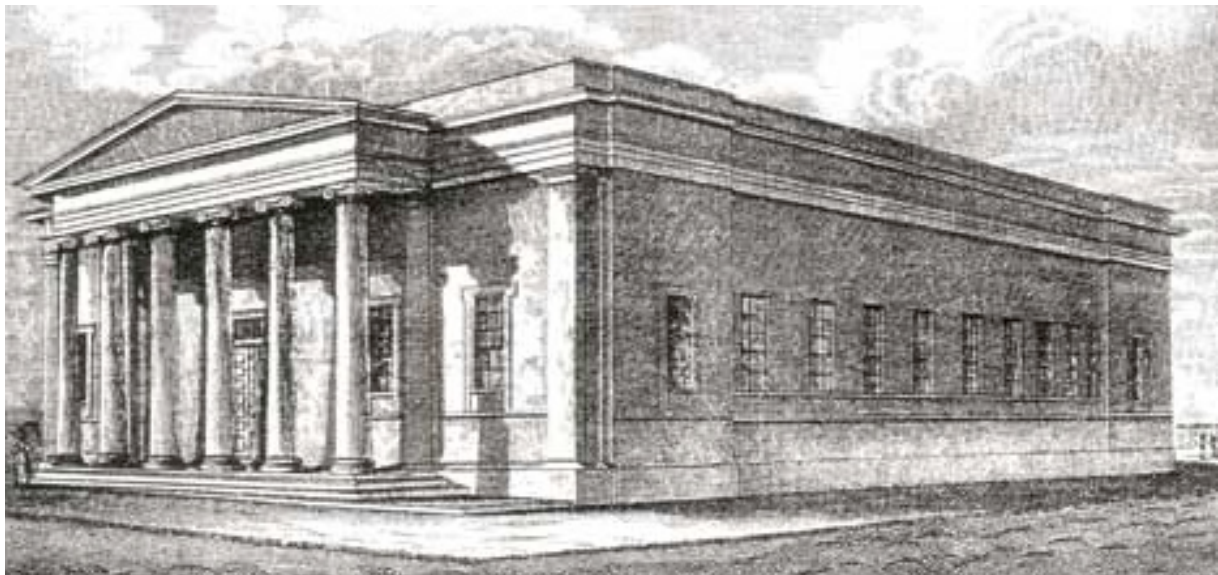


Aberdeen Larks ...



*A selection of stories and imaginings in celebration of
Conviviality and Charles Dickens.*



Dickens
 Fellowship

Annual
Conference
Aberdeen
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Introduction

This small but beautifully formed selection of stories forms the concluding part of Aberdeen's successful hosting of the annual international conference of the Dickens Fellowship. We felt that part of the conference should be about creativity and imagination, and its power to change lives and make the world a better place, something that Charles Dickens promoted throughout his life. In parallel with conference itself, the University Library, the City's Libraries department and members of the Lemon Tree Writers conceived of various projects, events and activities that would encourage writing and writers, young and old, in the City, Aberdeen University, across Scotland and beyond. In addition to the creative writing competition that produced this book, the conference saw a translation of Dickens into the Doric language, workshops for young writers and explored Bleak House and its influence on modern crime writing in a public discussion between the writer Ian Rankin and Jim Naughtie, broadcaster and host of Radio 4's 'the Book Club'.

The eight narratives that follow were judged the best submitted to the writing competition. The authors provided stories or pieces inspired by the work of Charles Dickens in all its forms, or 'Conviviality', the theme of the Conference. The diversity of Dickens' subject matter and the ideas he explored guaranteed the broadest range of styles and content displayed in this publication.

The judging panel was chaired by Jeanette King, Professor Emeritus of English at Aberdeen University, and also included poet and novelist Wayne Price, and children's story writer Richie Brown. The submissions came from across the globe and were of a high quality, but in the end the unanimous winner was 'A Necessary Evil' by J.M Stein. The panel felt that eight of the stories merited publication, on-line via the Dickens Fellowship world-wide network and here in this small edition. We hope you enjoy them all.

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Jen Stein, Competition Winner

A Necessary Evil

Stanley closed his dog-eared *Hard Times*, dragged his thoughts away from Dickens and back to the present and, heavy-hearted, slid his feet out of his old trainers and shoved them into the stiff, black lace-ups he wore for his shift at the supermarket. He cast a longing glance at the unfinished *Times* crossword. Then, on second thoughts, he crammed it into his coat pocket with the happy notion that he could find a quiet corner in the Red Lion later and finish it, cocooned with the comfortably distant background babble around him and a pint and a whisky chaser in front of him. Beth would quiz him on how many he had had when he got home, but she knew he needed some social time out in the pub after weathering another six hours in the supermarket. Maybe Tam would show up later and they'd go another feisty round on the topic of the SNP, or play a game of chess.

He reflected that most people he met at work were not unpleasant; it was just that, to him, they were unpredictable, and he found his own company less threatening than that of most others. People *en masse*, he decided, were not a good thing. Slouching down the hill with long, loping strides towards the neon lights, hands dug deep into his trouser pockets, coat flapping open like an academic gown despite the drizzle, he pondered that perhaps even a part-time job with virtually no responsibility was a bad idea. The next ten years of this until he could draw his pension stretched impenetrably ahead of him like the London fog in *Bleak House*.

He dreaded the atrophying boredom from putting his real life on hold while he was at the supermarket, where he did not want to be, among the soulless lights and nasal announcements, the mingled smell of cardboard, delicatessen and vegetables, the harsh clash of cold metal trolleys. But the small, repetitive activities of shelf-stacking, labelling, cleaning up of spills troubled him less than having to fit in among the aimless chatter and gossip of some of his workmates. 'We just don't connect as human beings,' he complained to Beth. 'They don't know who I am, the real me, and I can't fathom them.' She thought she understood and wished again that she could help Stan find a happier niche.

He often mulled over the supermarket encounters he found upsetting or puzzling long after a less sensitive person would have forgotten: the time when he walked away from an abusive customer, only to be told off like a naughty schoolboy by the store manager; the mothers who reached violent melt-down with their noisy, demanding children; the irritating requirement to offer a mechanical smile and, with exaggerated politeness, ask customers if there was anything else he could help them with today. Or the alarming time when a woman with an infant had had an epileptic seizure, falling and cracking her head on the floor. He wondered what had happened to her; if she had recovered; who looked after the baby.

And there were of course the quasi-comic, surreal interludes too: being a witness while they searched an outraged pin-striped city type who had stuffed a large packet of shrink-wrapped ham into his inside pocket; the man in the bakery department who kept showing him pictures of his hamsters. And the well-dressed woman with the don't-mess-with-me look on her face and a Saint Laurent handbag (according to Madeleine on the till) who, once a week, would buy at least three dozen small tins of beans and pork sausages; nothing else, just tins of beans and pork sausages. He wondered about these people, who they were when they were not in the manufactured world of the supermarket, and how life had led them to be who *they* were.

He shared this with Tam in the pub. Tam took a long draw on his pint, wiped his mouth and nose with the back of his hand, and snorted in amusement.

'No bad for entertainment then, yon shop.'

'No, but why *would* a man who looks like he's in a responsible job risk getting caught shoplifting?' Stan gazed into the middle distance across the bar like a bird-watcher waiting for a rare species, and then shrugged the subject away. He'd had enough of the supermarket for one day.

'Would he mebbe be cracking wi' the pressure o' bein' a high heid yin?' Tam weighed his head from side to side, pursed his lips.

'Christ knows'.

They sized up the chessboard while Stan considered his next move, jiggling his whisky glass.

‘See me noo, Ah’m happy bein’ a cooncil parky,’ Tam said. ‘Times werenae aye so guid and Ah dinnae need a high-powert job that maks me silly wi’ stress. Ah like my life simple.’

‘Mmm. Sure.’ Stan couldn’t argue with this. He had always envied Tam’s calm contentment. He demolished Tam’s bishop and sat back, wanting to find out more now. ‘You always been a gardener?’

Tam grunted. ‘No me. Ah’d nae work for as lang and Ah hadnae a clue about the gairdnin’. It niver crossed ma mind tae try for a job in the parks.’

‘So how did you get into this job?’

Tam hesitated and then plunged in. ‘It wis the broo, Ah suppose. No that they meant for me tae be a parky in particular, ye understaun. Naw, they jist wantit me tae get a job. But first aff they says if Ah went alang tae this...this *project* they called it, Ah’d get help tae be mair employable. And they phoned right there and then and made the appointment. It wis like this,’ he stabbed a forefinger in Tam’s direction, ‘if Ah wantit ony benefits Ah’d tae go and ‘get helped’.’ He stopped, his face thoughtful. ‘Well, and whit worried me, like, since the wife went aff Ah’d the bairn tae bring up and Ah was feart she’d be ta’en awa’ intae care.’

‘What happened, then, at this project?’

Tam was concentrating on the chessboard and didn’t answer at first. He moved a pawn before he sat back and looked up again.

‘Well, it def-in-ately wisnae whit Ah’d o’ chosen, ken whit Ah mean? Turned oot fine in the end, o’ course. But they classes in confidence building and interview skills and how to fill in this form and read that job description, well...’ He shook his head.

‘See, a’ they other folk there in this course: they seemed to think it wis great, but Ah couldnae just *think* masel’ intae being confident and, eh...whit wis the word? Oh aye - self-assured. Naw; and sittin’ in a classroom, it a’ put me in mind o’ bein’ back at the schuil. Ah just didnae feel Ah *belanged*. Ah just wantit someone to gie us a job and hae done.’

Tam drained his glass, rose to his feet scraping back his stool, and returned from the bar a few minutes later, slopping a couple of pints down onto the table. He watched

as Stan, careless now because he wasn't giving the game his full attention, moved his knight into danger.

They had never spoken much about their personal past lives in all the years they had known each other. But Tam was on a roll now and Stan leaned forward to hear better over the background chatter and laughter, hoping he'd go on.

'Schuil!' he said. 'Noo that wis somethin' else. Ah'm no daft but, see me, Ah think Ah jist wisnae ready for the schuil. The ither kids picked up whit tae dae richt aff and the teacher liked that. But Ah didnae. Ah got fed up, played aboot and got in the teacher's bad books and stopped tryin'. Ye dae, don't ye, if naebody thinks ye're ony good and ye spend hours ootside the classroom in the corridor? Ken whit Ah mean?'

'By the time Ah wis at the Secondary in yon big noisy classes Ah just felt stupit and Ah didnae see the point. It seemed the teachers were jist pleased if ye didnae cause trouble, and it wis pretty much a' ower.' He dropped his head and gazed at the floor a moment, thinking back. 'Tae be honest wi' ye, it endit up Ah wisnae there often as no. Wha *wud* keep goin' tae find oot how rubbish they are! Ah tell ye man, Ah wis in a bad place.'

Memories of the last school room he taught in came back to Stan. For him, kids like Tam had been another problem he couldn't deal with, however much he had started his teaching career wanting to meet the challenge. He recalled one lad, Somebody Jamieson, who, on his rare appearances in class was unkempt and taciturn and learned next to nothing about Wilfred Owen's *Futility*, Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* or Bronte's *Jane Eyre* or, come to that, any of the literature syllabus. It occurred to him that, had he stayed in teaching, it would have been interesting to introduce the class to *Lord of the Flies*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

But events had overtaken him. When the banking crisis threw his financial stability to the winds, Stan had, from necessity, considered returning to the career in teaching he had come to fear and detest and had so thankfully given up on inheriting a large portfolio of shares from his father. He had rejected that possibility: going into teaching as a young graduate, he had never considered that the adolescents to whom he hoped to impart his love of literature would not share his passion. He had expected

that they might perhaps not be as enthusiastic about Dickens or Conrad as he was; but he had had no inkling that, with the unerring instincts of pack animals, they would identify that he did not quite fit his teaching role, that he was somehow different from their other, generally robust, teachers, and would 'wind him up for a laugh' till he foundered on the rocks of mental breakdown.

The attrition had been long and painful. Not only was he prevented from doing the job he had wanted to do, namely teach, because of the overriding imperative of keeping order among those who had lost interest and were falling through the education system net, there was also an undercurrent of violence that often bubbled to the surface. His stomach still turned over sometimes at the memory of being cornered after school one day when six pupils had surrounded him, crowded him, sneering, ugly. 'We could duff you up noo...sir. And whit could you dae about it...sir?' Stan, white and shaking, had pointed out that, while they could without doubt hurt him, he might inflict damage on one or two of them in return and they would spend their adult lives with a criminal record for assault. It had taken him weeks to calm down enough to go to work without first making three visits to the toilet. The day one of the lads in fourth year had pushed him too far and he had resorted to the cane - still an option back then - was the day he had walked out and never gone back.

'If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen,' his grandmother had long ago advised. Remembering that advice, he had got out and stayed out of any workplace for years until he had felt the cold nip of recession and had gone to work in the supermarket. But he was aware that he was missing the stimulation of satisfying work.

'So...what were you thinking you'd do after you left school?' he asked Tam.

Tam shrugged. 'Onythin'. Even jist tae shut up ma old man. Frae early doors that old bastard tellt me time and again whit a waste o' space Ah wis and Ah'd niver amount tae onythin'.' He shook his head. 'Well, if he'd effin' treatit me different mebbe Ah'd hae done better.' His face cleared again. 'Mebbe even endit up wearin' pin-stripes!' He gave a short laugh and held up a calloused hand. 'But Ah'm no light-fingert like your fella in the supermarket, mind.

‘Well, and then efter a’ the confidence building course still nae job, so the broo sends me tae mair classes. They’d decidit Ah needit readin’ and spellin’ lessons. They must hae thocht Ah was thick because when Ah wis at yon employability project Ah didnae speak or write onythin’.’

‘Why was that?’ There had always been kids in his classes whose lack of output had frustrated Stan when all he had wanted to do was help them learn.

‘Feart. Safer tae keep the heid doon. Onyway Ah went tae the lessons because, as well as us needing the broo money, the wee lass wis stairtin’ the schuil and Ah wantit tae help her. No be wi’ her like ma old man aye wis tae me, ken.’

‘Mmm. They had you by the short and curlies anyway over the money, didn’t they. Hellish. But in the end maybe what you could call a necessary evil?’

‘Aye you could say that.’ He laughed. ‘But let me tell you this; Ah sat in they classes every Wednesday for months. At first Ah watched and listened and mebbe Ah’d speak and mebbe no. But pretty quick it seemed tae me Ah was nae worse than the ithers that just *soundit* better, so then it felt OK to join in. And naebody laughed or said Ah was haverin’. In fact Ah felt as if Ah belanged and they respectit me. Naw...they werenae lang findin’ oot Ah wisnae a complete eejit.’

Stan grunted acknowledgement of this and raised his glass. Ill-educated Tam might have been, but he had a sharp brain and had demonstrated well-informed interest in many topics over the years. And he had a suspicion Tam was about to trounce him, by no means for the first time in chess.

‘So - and this’ll gie ye a laugh - they suggestit Ah try for a qualification. Me! A kerwallification! Ah thocht they were takin’ the piss. Nae bother, they said, if it didnae work oot. But Ah actually got a few certificates frae the SQA. Ah’m tellin’ you Ah wis dancin’, man. That wis barry.’ His hand hovered over a pawn but then he struck with his queen. He would cuff Stan this time; he could see the next moves now.

‘So, awthegither Ah got quite a bit by daein’ it... Ah got tae feeling good *and* Ah got a job in the end, just when Ah’d gi’en up hope. A’ that classroom learnin’ and gettin’ the certificates must hae helped when the broo sent me for tae be interviewed.’

He lifted his glass to drink but then waved it at Stan and said, ‘Ye ken whit, Ah’m nae cleverer than afore...jist mebbe, well, Ah ken whit Ah can dae an’ Ahm nae worse than a lot o’ ithers. Aye, mebbe that’s whit it is. Confidence.’ A look of pride came over his face. ‘*And* Ah’ve learned a when o’ stuff about plants and gairdnin’ on the job. It feels good when Ah see things takin’ shape and mak things grow.’ He rubbed his chin in thought. ‘Mebbe Ah’ll even set up on my ain sometime. Be a big business typhoon.’ He laughed at his own malapropism.

Wandering back up the hill after closing time under a clear night sky, the last drips falling on him from the trees, Stan thought about the unpredictable route Tam’s life had taken. And his own, he realised: when he himself had been a new graduate he had never planned to work in a supermarket; that had never been in his sights.

‘Quite a journey,’ Beth commented when he told her what Tam had said. ‘Funny how things work out eventually.’ She dropped her eyes to the book in her lap. But after a minute she murmured, ‘Why don’t you write up Tam’s experiences as a story. Even see if you can get it published somewhere? Come to think of it, I bet you could write lots of stories about the folk in the supermarket too.’ Her eyes held his, her enthusiasm challenging him.

‘I don’t know their stories.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Turn what you do know into fiction. Writing stories would be a way of doing something you enjoy with what you come across in the supermarket. Look, you’ve got to be there and it doesn’t suit you, I know; but for now it’s a necessary evil.’ Her words, unwittingly echoing his own, hung in the air.

The idea took sudden hold, stilling him like a drip of cold water on his neck. That *would* be okay...something challenging after the long hours at work...a new outlet. A slow smile lit his face as his imagination took flight: maybe one day it would even boost his income.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bleak doing supermarket shifts a little longer.

J. M. Stein

About There

The stench of semi-digested kebab hit Alex's nostrils a second too late. A squelch sounded from beneath his left trainer.

‘Shit’.

He moved to scuffle his shoe against the edge of the kerb. Even the bumble-footed pigeons hopped away from the spewed up remains of frazzled lamb, crusted pitta and luminous red chilli sauce. The rain splattered what was left of the vomit across the pavement. Alex avoided it as he balanced on one leg to examine the sole of his trainer. With one too many special brews, he teetered backwards, knocking into the hunched up bundle of rags sheltering in the office doorway.

‘Jeez, what the fu...?’

‘You're one for words, I see’, the bundle unravelled to reveal the battered figure of an older man, in his late sixties from the grey hair and weather-lined skin, but Alex guessed they could be misleading. He had young eyes, twinkling eyes, pastel blue like a baby's. The man got to his feet with a creaking of joints, grasping hold of Alex's jacket for the final surge up. He peered into Alex's face and broke wind. ‘New here?’

Alex stepped back from the odour of sour Buckie, sweat and baked beans. ‘What makes you think I'm moving in? he asked. ‘I could well have a home to go to’.

‘No need to get shirty son’, the man wagged a warty finger at Alex. ‘Ex-squaddie are you?’

‘How d'you know? What's it to you anyway?’

‘Nothing, nothing. I can tell the type’. The man showed a mouthful of broken, black teeth that Alex supposed was a smile. ‘You should relax more. Inhale. Take deep breaths’.

‘Go bugger a sow you old fart’.

‘In...and out. In...and out. Nice...and slow’. The man breathed deeply and signalled to Alex to do the same.

‘Piss off’. Alex shoved the tramp against the wall. The man gave a wheeze and

clutched his chest. Alex took a couple of steps past him, but the wheezing got louder and he turned back.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine, fine’, the man croaked. ‘The city has taken everything else from me, why not my last breath too? You may well roll your eyes, but I had a wife once, and a son, somewhere’. He gestured the ‘somewhere’ with an attempted sweep of his arm. The movement brought about a fit of coughing and he spat a purulent gob of phlegm onto the pavement. ‘But I’m not bitter. No, I’m all right, as you say’.

‘I can see that. So what brought you here? Booze?’

‘Life’.

‘My mum always said, life's what you make it. What did you do, when you were married?’

‘You mean when I led a government issue existence, following rules, tugging locks, paying taxes and playing golf on Sundays?’

‘I meant what did you do. What was your job?’

‘There are some things, young man, that in certain circumstances, it is not considered polite to ask. Did your mother not teach you that?’

‘You leave my mother out of this you scrawny bastard’. Alex's fists flew up and he thrust his chest out. The old man backed off.

‘Calm down son, it's just a turn of phrase’.

‘Okay,’ Alex took a breath. ‘Do you have any fags?’ The man shook his head. ‘She was never much of a mother to me, anyway’, Alex admitted. ‘She's shacked up with a dick from Jamaica who's promised to shoot me in the arse. ‘It's nothing personal’, she told me. ‘He hates all soldiers. Wanker’.

‘But you're not in the army now’.

‘No. I got home from my last tour of duty to find my girl up the duff by some sweet talking ponce in an office suit with a red BMW.’ Alex tightened his fists then relaxed them. ‘I've done my time for what I did to him.’

‘Life's a bitch and then you die. The name's Horace, by the way. People call me Horse. I always was a bit of a cowboy’. The man gave a rueful laugh that changed

into a hacking cough. He wiped his mouth with his hand and held it out for Alex to shake.

‘Alex’, Alex said, shaking the man's hand. ‘Nice to meet you’.

‘Ditto’. The man's handshake was firm. When he let go, he tapped his right index finger against his nose. ‘Let's say for fun, I used to be a brain surgeon’, Horse gave a chuckle and Alex laughed with him. ‘I would be able to diagnose the tiny speck of shrapnel that is lodged in your brain stem, just beneath the cortex’. Horse pointed his finger towards the back of Alex's head. ‘Just about there’.

‘Get off’, Alex swiped the finger away.

‘And with my scalpel and forceps I would be able to cut through the tissue and nick it out. Swab, nurse’.

‘You are mad’.

‘It's in the limbic system, a primitive part of the brain designed to deal with emotions. Mistrust, fear, ANGER’. Horse raised his voice at the last word and Alex started.

‘I'm not fucking angry. What are you talking about, old man?’

‘Nothing. I was merely making a conjecture. The brain is a fascinating organ’.

‘I can't think what I'd do without it’, Alex sneered.

‘Indeed. I believe you are in want of this’. Horse delved in his pocket until he found a dirty envelope marked ‘Charlie’. He lifted the flap, took a sniff then offered it to Alex. He looked inside.

‘Coke? You don't carry fags, but you've plenty of powder. Where did you get it from?’

Horse shrugged.

‘Something else I shouldn't ask?’

‘Do you want it?’ Horse said.

Alex wiggled his fingers towards the envelope then drew them back and stepped away. ‘No way. I'm getting my life back on track’.

‘Really? So what are you doing here, trainspotting?’

Alex let the words ring round his ears. He pressed his hands to his head. ‘Helmand

Province', he said after a minute. 'Hell on earth. I was fine until then. We were on patrol when we hit a roadside bomb. I didn't get a scratch, but my mate Jimmy was only a foot away. He lost both legs and the ability to be a dad'.

'We give our all for our country', Horse bent his head and mumbled words of prayer.

'Life's a bitch', Alex repeated.

'And then you die', Horse reminded him. 'But we can enjoy one another's company while we can. Mind, I would get your head checked out before you go. A scan at least'.

'There's nothing wrong with my head'.

'No?' Horse offered Alex the envelope again.

'You're the one cracked up. You need your head examined, sniffing that stuff'.

'It's kosher, the real deal'.

'Where did you get the money for it? Playing the moothie outside the pubs til the filth moved you on?'

'A very nice old lady provided it'.

'I'm sure she did'.

'I chapped on her door and told her I was collecting for neurological research, which in a sense is true. When she got her purse out I snatched it from her, thank you very much. It must have been pension day. There were seven crisp tenners'.

'That is gross, stealing from grannies. You're sick'. Alex swung his arm to knock the envelope from Horse's hand. It landed in a puddle and the rain water soaked into the paper.

'Now look what you've done', Horse scrambled to his knees to rescue what he could of the powder before it dissolved. While he was crouched down, Alex raised his left foot and prodded him on the backside. The old man fell forwards, head first, with a crunch and a splash.

'You should thank me. I'm doing you a favour. That stuff will kill you,' Alex said as he turned his back on the tramp and walked off. The rain was battering off the pavement and further along the street he stopped to pull his jacket collar up over his

neck. He found a spot out of the wet under the railway bridge and shared a roll-up with a fellow traveller.

‘They call this the Heilanman's Umbrella’, the man said.

‘I'm from Coatbridge’, Alex said.

‘Shettleston’.

Alex stayed there two days, pissing in shop doorways and shouting obscene comments at anyone who looked at him. On the third night the aroma of vinegar drenched chips was too much. He clipped the schoolboy round the ears, took the bag and pushed him into the gutter.

‘Thanks mate’, he jeered as he swaggered off. He wasn't far along the path to getting his life organized he thought, but the chips tasted good. They were cut thick, the old-fashioned way, and wrapped in greasy newspaper. He licked his finger and dipped it to the bottom of the poke, salvaging the last crispy crumbs. When they were done he scrunched the paper up, ready to drop kick it across the road, hoping it would land on the parked BMW and smear the windscreen. His eye caught a smudged photo of a doctor with a white coat and a whiter smile. There was something about the eyes, even from the blurred print. He read the start of the caption.

Body in Glasgow gutter

Intrigued, he unfolded the paper.

identified as the once-eminant brain surgeon Horace Cartwright.

‘Jeez’, he dropped the paper on the ground. ‘No shit’. The photo stared back up at him. Alex rubbed the back of his head. His fingers stopped above the nape of his neck. ‘About there’.

Barbara Stevenson

The Night Owl

For the sole attention of Mr John Huffam Cranston of Melbourne, Australia; this 4th day of June 1879.

I am, Sir, your servant, Mr William Macready, Actor, of London, England.

As you will understand, your correspondence came to me as a considerable surprise, bringing back from the distant past, matters I thought I had quite forgotten. You will realise, Sir, I am now a very old man, in a stage of life when memory loses its power or, perhaps, becomes more selective about those matters it chooses to retain.

I am sad to say, my first thought was to not respond to your request, but then I recalled, with tears in my eyes, my dear lost friend and I feel I can do him the greater service by remembering rather than by forgetting.

Please forgive my faltering record and know that every word has been written with love for that friend, Mr Charles Dickens, and for your beloved mother, whom I knew as Miss Julia Mosley.

Here is the account for which you asked.

~~~~~

‘My dear fellow, I am forced yet again to implore you to desist from this foolish activity. To walk these streets in the hours of daylight is more than I would do without fear for my person, but at night. ....’ I recall Forster struggled at this point to find the words to explain the possible consequences. ‘..... at night, it is simply unthinkable.’

Dear Forster. He had made this same speech so many times. On other matters – matters of literary construct – he would be listened to and Dickens would frequently come to see the wisdom of his friend’s entreaty. But, on these confounded night-time rambles Dickens would not be moved. He simply resorted to that kindly smile which he could summon without appearing in any way condescending or patronising, and laid his hand upon Forster’s shoulder.

‘Please, Forster, you must not be concerned on my account. I have walked these streets since the age of twelve. If I could do so at such a tender age without once coming to harm, why should I now fear to walk where I can be of most use in this world?’

‘Because, Dickens, you are now a man of considerable means.’ Forster, I recall, became frustrated with having to rehearse yet again the ample reasons for his concern. ‘Every one of society’s lost and forgotten criminals and prostitutes can see it. You are no longer that twelve year old boy of no importance.’

Dickens still felt the very essence of London’s streets ran through his veins. In truth, of course, his fame and wealth had removed him far from such miserable society.

Make no mistake, I was with Forster on this. On certain occasions I allowed myself to join these nocturnal rambles and I feared for my mortal body and soul at every step. Yet, it is an unquestionable truth that Dickens would not have been the writer he was without that depth of feeling he had for London’s streets and the sorrowful humanity which peopled them. His characters were not merely a product of his imagination; every one, however grotesque, was drawn from among those he had encountered for himself. His genius – for that is certainly not too lavish a word – was to weld the characters together into a narrative which caused the reader to think deeply upon the frailty and brutality of society.

But, who am I, a mere actor, to attempt to measure the genius of the greatest man of his times; a man whom I was honoured to call my friend? I was almost twenty years his senior yet there was never a question that he was the leader among his wide circle of intimates. And now, alas, these past eight years, the light has gone out and we are left only with our memories and the words which even now shine from the pages with their brilliance. Almost forty years have passed since *Nickleby* and the wonderful gift he gave of dedicating the work to me. This appeared barely fifteen years after the child Dickens had walked the streets himself, a poor waif forced to the blacking-house by his feckless father, deprived of the education for which he longed. There, in *Nickleby*, he laid bare the world of London’s streets, as only one who had experienced them could have done.

But I digress from those strange events in the summer of 1846. Dickens had given up his editorship of the *Daily News* – one of his ill-starred ventures for which his boundless enthusiasm ran ahead of even his capacity for work. He was having one of his regular quarrels with publishers, to be paid what he was due.

In the spring there was a jubilant party for the Dickens' wedding anniversary, followed by another for little Alfred's christening. Dickens himself was lavish in his participation at the centre of all the celebrations but his mind and his soul were in tumult. He needed to write again; he needed to win back the popularity he felt was gradually ebbing away from him and he planned, in June, to take the whole family off to Lausanne for an extended period, during which he was confident he could concentrate on his work.

It was in that period, when I can only guess at the extremes of his mind, that he chose to venture into the dark London streets. It was the middle of May as a group of us had gathered for drinks at Devonshire Terrace, that Dickens announced he was to ramble the streets that night and he asked us all to join him.

We knew that if we would not go with Dickens, he would go alone and we all feared for his safety. The Irishman, Maclise, and his actor friend, Stanfield, both reluctantly agreed, as did I, to accompany him, out to the warmth of Devonshire Terrace and on, through increasingly narrow, enclosed and fetid streets, towards the river.

The three of us had long passed any place we knew or recognised or even wished to know. We might have been lost in some distant foreign land but Dickens knew exactly where we were. He greeted the occasional figure lurking in the shadows of a doorway and pointed to occasional hovels to tell us some desperate story of deprivation and injustice.

It was barely an hour before sunrise and we were somewhere down near to Hungerford Market. As my friend would have said, the stillness of death pervaded in that alley, which I finally recognised, behind the Adelphi Theatre. This was known to me as a place where I had played on many occasions.

'At last, Dickens,' I recall saying most wearily, 'I recognise this street, though I have only seen it previously in daylight'.

Dickens laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. ‘Indeed, Macready’ said he. ‘I thought the theatre would soon give you back your bearings.’

At that moment, Dickens stopped his raucous noise and moved towards the shadows of a doorway. He bade us stay a short distance up the alley and went alone to the figure in the shadows. We could hear nothing of what passed between him and this figure but we noticed the long dishevelled dress of a woman of the streets. She moved nervously and, for a moment, her long, unkempt hair fell to her bosom. She was young, nearly as tall as Dickens but thin and emaciated. Whatever passed between them was not for our ears and the young woman seemed to understand and appreciate that.

Finally Dickens came back to us, leading the frightened waif behind him.

‘Do not be afraid, child,’ he said gently, ‘these are my friends. No harm or ill-use will befall you.’

For all the bullish and downright careless treatment of which he was capable, his gentleness and care for this casualty of society was remarkable to behold. Clearly she had instantly and unconditionally trusted him.

‘Gentlemen, I fear I must leave you. Macready knows where we are and can lead you back to the Adelphi.’ The suddenness of this ending to our nocturnal adventure surprised us all.

‘But, Dickens, where are you going now?’ I asked. As I spoke I noticed the young woman – little more than a child, really – flinch at the name. Had she, I wondered, suddenly understood who this man was?

‘This woman is in need of help, Macready. She has been out here all night and no longer has anywhere to call home. I must arrange lodgings and assistance for her. Julia, these are my friends. Good night, gentlemen. Go safely towards the morning.’

That was all. We were dismissed to find our weary ways home, while Dickens took the frail young woman by the arm and led her away from us down the alley, into the darkness. When I think of it now, so many years later, it was indeed an extraordinary occurrence. Apart from the name – Julia – we knew nothing of this woman, nor of what Dickens intended for her. With anyone else – married with six children at home

– this whole matter would have been highly questionable, even scandalous. But, with Dickens, friends learned to judge his actions by quite different standards.

I need hardly say, Mr Cranston, that this frail young woman was indeed your mother. It was about a week before I saw Dickens again – at some theatre evening, I remember not where.

‘A most curious night we spent, the four of us.’

‘Ah, yes, and did I not tell you the whole experience would be enlightening?’

‘Indeed you did. And you were, as ever, as good as your word.’ I paused for a moment, considering how best to raise the matter uppermost in my mind. ‘And did the young lady – Julia, I believe you said – did she find lodging for the night?’

Of course I had not fooled him into thinking this was idle conversation.

‘Ah, Macready, if you wish to know more, why do you not just ask me? Of course, I may not tell you. Indeed, on this occasion, I cannot tell you all the details. Julia is but one of the countless sad creatures of this city. I fear unless something quite extraordinary is done, they will for ever remain the victims of our injustice. I did find her lodgings but could not keep her from having to pay the price of her misdeeds.’

I was startled by this admission, and not a little confused. ‘Dickens, are you saying she is in prison?’

He looked around us, measuring his words. ‘Yes, Macready, she has been in Tothill Fields these past three days and likely will remain there for many months more, for all the good it will do.’ Tothill Fields, as he enlightened me, was the Westminster House of Correction, full to bursting with petty criminals. ‘I can tell you no more for now but I *will* help her to turn her life around.’ There was a determination in his voice that I recognised from previous occasions when he took upon himself a particular plan. I knew the power of such single-mindedness.

Many months later I heard word, from Forster, that Dickens had written to that wonderful benefactress, Miss Coutts, just before his departure, setting out his plans for a place which would seek to give back to women lost in the depravities of London, a sense of their own worth. I realise now, as I look back, how extraordinary that idea was. It flew contrary to all the accepted assumptions about these women.

But Dickens saw things with much greater clarity. Women like Julia Mosley were, for him, real people, with feelings and hopes, just like you and me. You see, he could think himself back to that twelve year old boy; so alone, accorded so little worth, deprived of almost every means to lift himself up from the depths. And he knew their souls and their humanity beat within them as it had within him. In Miss Coutts he found a remarkable lady who grasped his vision as if it were her own; and, just as importantly, who had the wealth to bring it to reality.

What none of us really understood until very much later was that Dickens' walks through the darkened streets were like life-blood flowing through him. His perception was heightened like that of the owl, able to see the better in the night: always watching, studying, planning, so much more effectively in the night time than any other creature.

When he returned from Lausanne he was like a man renewed. Secure in Miss Coutts' moral and financial support, he began searching for suitable premises, finally alighting on compact little Urania Cottage, near the countryside in Shepherd's Bush.

I was with him in May 1847, a few days after he had found the property and he was excited much as a child struggles to contain itself on Christmas morning. It was all he wished to talk about. It was in that excited encounter that the name of Julia Mosley suddenly came up again.

'Julia will be so pleased. I must tell her when I go to see her. This will come at just the right moment.' He then seemed to realise that he might have said more than he intended, for this statement would need explanation. 'Oh. I'm sorry, you won't know Julia, will you?'

'But Dickens,' I said, 'have you forgotten? Is this not the Julia you introduced me to a year ago in the twilight of early morning, behind the Adelphi?'

'Of course. I had quite forgotten, you met her that night.'

'I would hardly say I met her. She hung in the shadows and you told us her name, but nothing more.'

Though he did not want to, he really could do no other than tell me the story. Julia had lived on the streets and in filthy boarding houses for five years. She was barely

twenty years old when we encountered her on that night and was already destined for a life of petty criminal activity and prostitution, to survive. I am deeply sorry to write to you of her in this way but it is the truth about the life she was forced to live and from which she saw no escape.

On the night we encountered her in 1846, she was trying to escape: from the police for a petty theft she had committed; from the boarding house owner for the rent which she owed; and from a particularly violent man with whom she had consorted for the few pennies it brought her. Mercifully, the police caught up with her before the boarding house owner or the pimp. No sooner had she served a brief term in prison than she robbed a gentleman in a backstreet inn, taking his silk handkerchief and a sum of money. That inept act landed her back in Tothill Fields through the summer and autumn of 1847. On her release, her fate would likely have been that of almost all other women of her kind in those days. She would have gone straight back to the streets, swapping one prison for another. Instead of this, Dickens had a very different plan for her. As soon as she stepped out of Tothill Fields she was brought into Urania Cottage.

I recall being invited by Dickens to go to the Cottage a month or two after it opened. It was bright, fresh, comfortable and homely and there was Julia almost unrecognisable in clean clothes, well-nourished and bright; so transformed from the poor soul of our previous brief encounters. Dickens, I remember, was almost inordinately proud of everything, including her.

I hope this, at least, will bring you some joy, to know that your mother, despite the desperate plight of her youth and young adulthood, did eventually have a period of comfort, during which she knew love and care and perhaps, I venture to believe, passed something of that on to you in your infancy.

You ask how your mother came to be in Australia, having recently discovered that she lived in England until the age of twenty-two. The truth is that the purpose of Urania Cottage, as conceived by Dickens and Miss Coutts, was to prepare young women who had no future amidst the strict mores of England, to go out to the Colonies armed with the qualities to make a life for themselves, more wholesome and

hopeful than the one they had left behind.

Julia was one of the first three women to leave Urania for a new life in Australia. They set out from London to make the long voyage in January 1849, with the blessings of those who had, in every way, been their saviours. I am gratified to learn that your mother was soon married: a state to which she could never have aspired in England. It is most regretful that you, Mr Cranston, ended up being orphaned at such a young age, your mother dying at twenty-eight and your father a mere two years later. I am sure, had she lived, Julia would have found a way gently to confide in you about her past, for she was a pleasant and open girl. Those fine qualities were nevertheless, perhaps, contributory to her downfall, for an innocent country girl arriving in London in the 1820s, with no parental guidance or protection, would soon be dragged down to the depths by a pleasant and open character; she would have had no defences against the depravities of the place.

This story has inevitably revealed to you a truth which may cause you distress, since nothing in your letter to me suggests anything other than that you believe your father to have been your natural parent. But dates do not lie or prevaricate in these matters. You say that you are to mark your thirtieth birthday in September this year. This means that you were born in September 1849. As your mother did not arrive in Australia until late in March 1849, it is incontrovertible that you were conceived in England, and in the latter days of your mother's residency at Urania Cottage. The regime at the Cottage was neither rigid nor harsh but I am certain a relationship of that nature would simply not have been tolerated.

I find myself in a most unenviable situation for, having raised this matter, I feel duty bound to attempt to offer you some form of explanation. I have always felt a deep and abiding affection for my dear friend and it pains me deeply to move towards what I feel I must say.

Charles Dickens was a man of honour who felt deeply for the plight of his fellows. He was a friend more true and loving than any I have known. As with any genius, he was flawed.

I think, Mr Cranston, we have to understand Dickens as a man driven by all the



turmoil within him. He would not have been that genius without it, but it came at a terrible price. Dickens loved women and he loved them in a range of different ways. He loved dear Catherine, his wife, once. Indeed, he loved and cherished her for many years as she bore him, with no little pain of body and mind, ten children. Eventually, that love turned to contempt – two aspects of his character which could be frighteningly close to each other. He loved his wife's two sisters in a different, perhaps deeper way. When poor Mary died so suddenly at the age of only seventeen, Dickens descended into a grief from which he probably never fully emerged. He loved Miss Coutts for her purity and generosity and as one of the few people who truly shared his vision.

I also have always been certain that he had a need for sexual fulfilment which, eventually, he found less available and desirable within his marriage. Did he go to those women whose condition he abhorred? Such speculation seems unworthy now, for it is certain that the good he wrought was so much greater.

But, in regard to your mother, I find it hard to avoid a curious fact. For she gave you – the baby she conceived in England and bore just months after landing in Australia – the names John Huffam. These, you may not realise, were the other Christian names of Charles Dickens. There is no doubt your mother was deeply indebted to Dickens for saving her from the depravities of the streets and giving her a chance at life and fulfilment. There is no doubt she felt a deep affection for him, as many women tended to do. Perhaps, Mr Cranston, it is simply in recognition and gratitude for the gracious acts of a remarkable man that you bear two of his names.

Perhaps... To speculate further on this matter would appear to me to add no enlightenment to a poignant story.

*I remain your servant,*

*William Macready*

***Jonathan Gurling***

## The Christmas Caroles

Dominic was shivering. He just couldn't get warm as he tossed and turned in the huge double bed. It wasn't just the cold of this chilly Christmas Eve. It was what he had just seen; or rather what he thought he had just seen.

Was he going mad? Was someone playing a joke on him? He liked to think, that even in his self-induced state of misery, the answer to both was a firm 'no.'

Then there was only one answer: he'd had too many drinks at the pub. Stupid he knew but it was the only Christmas spirit he was going to get this festive season.

He had set out with his workmates, Rick and Simon, to go for 'one and one only' and ended up on a pub crawl. The fact that he was at his parents for Christmas dinner and then going to see his estranged wife Carole and his beloved children Kathey and Craig did nothing to stop him from pouring whisky down his throat.

Carole, he thought, as he hid under the duvet. It was all Carole's fault and to think that he'd once loved her. His temporary anger made him brave, but when he heard the garden tree branches tapping lightly against the window he became like a frightened schoolboy again. Shivering and cowering, hiding in the long night shadows for protection.

Carole, and despite himself his heart softened. The truth was that despite his outward protestations, he still loved her, the children and the life they had had together.

He was a family man. He hated the single life he had been living for the past six months. He had never been one of the lads. As soon as he had seen Carole he had known that she was the one. Although she hadn't felt quite the same when they first met and had taken a little persuading.

They had started dating at 18 and were married two years later. Now after 20 years of marriage they were separated and he was alone.

The tapping on the window got more insistent and he tried to shut it out by thinking. Why had she kicked him out? What had he done wrong? But before he could answer these questions the tapping at the window had become frantic.

Dominic shivered again and went back to his questions. Deep down he knew the answers. He had devoted his life to his new love – work.

He had become so busy clinging onto his newspaper job that he never had time for Carole or their children. They would be old before he got to know them.

And with the inevitable pressure of working harder to avoid redundancy, doing the jobs of those poor souls who had already been pushed down that path, came the drink.

One at lunchtime became two, a couple after work became a legion, and Carole had had enough. Before he had just been ‘missing’ at work now he was ‘missing’ at the pub as well. When he was home he was either hung over or asleep and she had finally snapped.

The tapping at the window reached a crescendo and then, without warning the tree smashed through the glass.

Dominic jumped up, expecting to see the branches of the tree outstretched towards him, but instead there stood a vicar. Not any vicar, mind you, but the vicar who had married them - Father Finbar O’ Flaherty. It was also the vicar whose face he had seen on the door handle outside his house. The image that had sent him scurrying to his bed early trembling with fear.

‘No my son, you are not dead or even that drunk.’ He folded his arms piously across his chest, ‘You are very much alive my son.’

‘But you must be...’

‘Dead, my son, yes twelve long years this very night in fact. Ah but time goes by so quickly my son, so quickly.’

Dominic, open mouthed, looked at him in dread. He couldn’t think of any good reason why this vicar should be stood before him in full regalia. Stood as solid as any person he had seen in his life.

‘My son you are trembling. There is no need to be frightened. I am not here to harm you, but to help you ...’

Dominic’s mouth moved up and down but no sound would come out. All his words were frozen with fear at the back of his mouth.

‘Oh my son I can see that this has been a shock to you. Let me explain. Although I am in solid form I am the ghost of the said Father O’ Flaherty and the fact that I am in solid form is a good thing. Mmm a very good thing indeed.’ He paused as if thinking what to say next.

‘I know that you think that all ghosts are these wishy-washy creatures who float around wailing and weeping and generally causing mayhem.’

He took a step towards Dominic and Dominic backed right up to the headboard. The ghost stepped back.

‘It’s fine, my son, just fine. I’ll tell you the rest .These ghosts are the naughty ghosts, that’s why they’re transparent. They haven’t got permission to come back – they’ve escaped. Not like me. I have permission and this is why I’m solid,’ he finished proudly.

‘Solid,’ Dominic repeated like a man in a stupor.

‘Oh dear, dear Dominic, I just don’t seem to be doing very well here. It’s just that this is the first time I’ve been allowed back since I passed.’

‘Passed,’ Dominic repeated, still convinced that he was drunk.

‘Yes, if you behave yourself on ‘the other side’ then every so often, on the anniversary of your death, you are allowed to return to help someone in trouble. That is why I am here, to help you and Carole.’

‘But why us?’ Dominic asked, finally finding some confidence.

‘Because you were the nicest couple I ever married, and of course, I have known Carole since she was a young girl. You two were born to be together and stay together and now I am going to try and put you back together. There is still hope Dominic.’

‘Oh thank you, thank you.’ Dominic’s fear had been overcome by the thought of being with Carole again.

The ghost looked at him sympathetically and smiled: ‘A good start, Dominic, that you want to be with her again. But you will have to do it yourself. I can only stand by and support you from the shadows.’

‘I’d do anything, absolutely anything,’ Dominic insisted.

‘Good for you son. Now to business. You will be haunted by three Caroles ...’

Dominic’s face changed colour and his jaw dropped.

‘I don’t think, think I’m up for that,’ he whimpered.

‘Do you love Carole?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then to keep her you must do this. Without these three visits your marriage is doomed, doomed I say. Expect the first tomorrow when the clock strikes one.’

‘Can’t I have them all at once, Father, starting tonight? After all tomorrow is Christmas Day and I’ve got so much to do...’

The ghost silenced him with a raised palm. ‘Expect the second the next night at the same hour and the third upon the next night when the last stroke of twelve has sounded. Do not expect to see me again but I will be there. Remember, listen to the ghosts and follow them, no matter where they lead you.’

With that the ghost stepped backwards and disappeared through the broken window, which after his departure miraculously mended itself.

Dominic rubbed his eyes in disbelief and looked at the empty room. He must remember to stay off that hot-shot whisky in future.

But just in case it wasn’t the drink he left the light on and snuggled under the duvet.

He must have slept because he awoke to the tapping of the tree on the window and somehow the bedroom light had managed to switch itself off.

He was just about to get out of bed when a familiar voice said: ‘Don’t bother Dom Dom I’ll do it for you.’ And there in the eerie glow was Carole.

Not Carole as she was now but a young Carole as she was when he had first met her in the 1980’s, complete with her big hair and even bigger shoulder pads.

‘Hello, Dom Dom.’

There was no mistaking it was a young Carole. Nobody had ever called him Dom Dom except Carole when they had first met. And the voice, yes it was lighter, less care worn, but it was still her voice.

She smiled: ‘I am the ghost of Carole Past. Come, come with me.’

She held out her hand and he took it obediently like he had when they were

courting, and at the back of his mind he could hear Father O' Flaherty's final words: 'follow the ghosts no matter where they lead you.'

Carole led him down a short tunnel and there he found himself in his mum's parlour. It was just as he remembered it down to the calendar. He was startled because the date on the calendar was 24<sup>th</sup> December 1980.

'Shh,' Carole put her finger to her mouth. He could hear voices and happy laughter and there they were in the room. He and Carole, arms around each other and so in love. He had a lump in his throat. This was the night when they had got engaged.

'When shall we tell them?' Carole asked excitedly.

'Now, I can't wait until after supper.'

'Ok. let's do it now. Impetuous man,' she laughed.

'Carole just a minute. You know that I love you and I'll never let you down. Turn to drink or drugs or ...'

'Of course I do, silly.' She kissed him, 'Come on, let's go and tell them.'

And the couple left the room to a perfect future.

Dominic looked at the ghost and he felt tears rolling down his face. How could he have been so stupid to let things get so bad.

The ghost smiled sadly and took his hand.

Dominic woke up to find his face wet with tears but he knew that he had been there in the past with Carole. But what could he do? He couldn't go to her now. One glance at the clock told him it was 2pm; she wouldn't thank him for turning up now. Especially as he had missed Christmas Day.

He was distracted by a tapping at the window, and hoping it was Father Flaherty who had returned to tell him what to do, he went to investigate.

He flung open the window and a light breeze floated inwards, it wasn't a cold winter breeze but a warm, fragrant one. In fact it smelled just like Carole's favourite perfume.

And there before his eyes was Carole of today. Fuller in face and figure and the fresh face of before was replaced by one lined with pain and hurt. She smiled wanly:

'I am the Ghost of Carole Present. Come with me.'

‘I’d much rather stay here,’ Dominic replied, frightened of what she was going to show him. This was not turning out to be a very good night for him.

‘You have no choice but to come with me,’ she commanded and he knew he was beaten.

She took his hand roughly and soon they were flying and tumbling over the snow covered town. Then he found himself in the living room of Carole’s house. Carole was with her mum and the clock showed 4pm.

‘What a Christmas Day!’ Carole said, her voice trembling.

‘Well what you can expect from a man like Dominic. The sooner you divorce him the better.’

‘Oh mum it wasn’t always like this. He’s a good man really,’ Carole said in despair.

‘I know, I know – it’s the drink dear, and the pressure of modern life.’

Carole nodded but then a trace of anger crept into her voice.

‘But what kind of man would abandon his children on Christmas Day?’

‘A drunken one,’ her mother replied.

‘But I’m here,’ he shouted, ‘I’m here.’ The ghost took his arm. ‘They can’t see you...it’s too late.’

‘No, No,’ Dominic moaned, as the ghost took his pitiful frame away from the scene. He was startled. He was back in bed crying. He must go round to see Carole. It wasn’t too late. But then he remembered he had another ghost to see. He trembled at the thought.

The tapping roused him from his melancholy. He felt lifeless. What was the point? The second ghost had said it was too late, but then Father O’ Flaherty said there was hope. Who was right?

There was no time to think any further about that question. For the ghost was sat on his bed. It raised its face and was Carole. An older Carole, but Carole nonetheless. Her skin was lined, her eyes sunken and she was dressed from head to foot in black. She looked at him but didn’t smile. A cold sweat enveloped him...

‘You must be ...’, he hesitated, ‘the ghost of Carole yet to be.’

The ghost nodded, and in one quick movement she placed her skeletal hand over

his. And there he was outside the church where they had been married. The mourners were gathered in a huddle.

‘Mine..... my funeral?’ Dominic asked.

The ghost nodded and guided him to a group of men, among them his work colleagues, Rick and Simon.

‘Well it was only a matter of time before the drink caught up with him,’ Rick said, shaking his head ruefully.

‘Funny really’, Simon responded. ‘He drank to keep up with work and in the end he got the sack because he was always drunk.’

Dominic put his hands over his ears and the ghost pointed to a small gathering. As he got closer he saw that it was Carole and his beloved children.

‘If only he’d come back to me when I asked him that Christmas two years ago, things could have been so different,’ Carole said. ‘We could have been so happy.’

Dominic couldn’t take any more.

‘Is there any hope?’ he asked the ghost. She didn’t answer but merely pointed a finger at a gravestone which bore his name and date of demise.

‘But that’s only two years away,’ he began, and the ghost nodded.

‘You mean I only have two years to turn things around.’

The ghost didn’t answer. She just continued to point.

‘What should I do?’

There wasn’t an answer, and suddenly Dominic was in his own bed and yes it was definitely his own bed and his own cold room. There were no spirits lurking in the room and that gave him hope. He now had time to make amends and make this the best Christmas ever.

‘I will do it,’ he said out loud. ‘I will spend Christmas with Carole and my children; I will change my ways and the only spirit this Christmas and for evermore is going to be love!’

He ran to the chair to grab his coat, but of course he was too late, the spirits had been right. There was no hope. For Father O’Flaherty said there would be three spirits over three nights, which meant that Christmas Day was well behind them for



another year.

He couldn't wait another year and what was more important was that Carole might not choose to wait another year. She was so fed up of him.

Slowly he retreated to his bed and put his head in his hands. Not only did he not know what day it was, but he didn't even know what time it was.

Then he had a flash of genius and reaching into his pocket for his mobile he checked the time and date...8am on the 25<sup>h</sup> of December. It was Christmas Day! He hadn't missed it after all! Those wonderful blessed spirits had done it all in one night -done it all in one night.

Bless them; bless them and the amazing Father O' Flaherty. Thanks to them he still had time to spend Christmas with Carole and the children – if she'd have him. And there was only one way to find out.

One look at the scruffy ,crumpled figure in the mirror (well it was excusable, he had had a hard night after all) told him that he had better spruce himself up and have some breakfast, just in case her hospitality fell short of feeding him.

An hour later and he was ready to go when he realized he had been such a mess that he hadn't even bought any presents, and he certainly couldn't go anywhere without them.

After much driving around he finally found a garage that was open – he was ecstatic.

'Merry Christmas young man,' he beamed at the young shop assistant who looked at him as if he was either drunk or mad or both, but mumbled something back just to be festive.

'I'm looking for some Christmas presents...'

'Blimey mate, you've left it a bit late. You won't find much round here. All the forgetful husbands and fathers took the cheapest stuff last night on their way home.'

'Cheap, cheap, who said anything about cheap? I want the best, the biggest and yes the most expensive. This is going to be the best Christmas Day ever,' he bellowed.

'Ok, ok. I hear you,' The man replied, wondering what kind of scam this was and

whether it was some kind of Santa role reversal, so that instead of giving presents this man was just going to take them. And for the hundredth time this morning he wondered why on earth he had volunteered to work Christmas Day. No matter what the pay was, it just wasn't worth it if nutters like this were going to come in to rob him.

'Now young man, I can't keep calling you young man can I? What's your name?'

'Alan,' he replied nervously.

'Now Alan, show me what you've got.'

And with that Dominic proceeded to buy up the shop and even included something for Alan, who had in fact helped to wrap up the gifts. People were so much nicer to you when you were nice to them, Dominic reflected.

Now for the real test of seasonal goodwill, facing Carole. He couldn't say that he wasn't nervous as he pulled up outside the house, and his feet felt like they weighed a ton each as he strode purposefully up the familiar drive.

He rang the doorbell and saw Carole's face behind the window pane as she moved the blind to see who was there. She shook her head in disbelief before coming to open the door. He had known that she wouldn't keep him outside in the cold on Christmas morning.

'Dominic' she cried, 'I'm so glad you came. I had an awful dream about you last night...'

'Funny you should say that Carole,' he said, as he stepped into the house, knowing that at last he had come home for good.

***Sue Gerrard***



Ian Rankin and James Naughtie in conversation (Photograph courtesy of Nicholas Cambridge.)

Jim Smith as Tam O'Shanter  
at the Conference Ceilidh



Paul Schlicke and Tony Williams,  
Aberdeen & National Presidents  
of the Dickens Fellowship



## A Tale of Two Cafés

I always look forward to this holy day,  
a day of rest from the long hours at the office  
in the kitchen my wife and two girls are already busy,  
cleaning and preparing food for the day  
my mother sits in the corner,  
watches the bustle contentedly

I take a corner of a honeyed sweet  
kiss my wife - she smiles.  
tell the girls that we will visit the park.  
'can we go into the zoo, dad?' they ask, 'we'll see!'  
'Please?' they plead  
I nod, as I am putty in their hands!  
'I'm just going out to the .. '  
'the café.'  
'we know,' my wife replies and laughs.  
'I'll be back by ...  
'eleven!' the girls chorus - we all laugh!

with a broad smile of contentment,  
I zig zag down the narrow alley,  
deep in shade between the flat-roofed houses.  
stepping out into the bustling main street,  
I am momentarily blinded by the low sun.  
I cross the road,  
dodge a motor bike heavily laden with cages of chickens  
a Toyota taxi full of children  
I walk past the hardware store,

the halal butchers and the video shop.

I see my three friends in their usual café pavement seats.

we all shake hands and I take my customary place.

the owner comes out with my Turkish coffee

he knows just how I like it, strongly sugared,

we smile, shake hands,

ask each other about our wives

then the four of us chat about family life

we move on to more weighty matters

local affairs with their tangled webs of influence

the labyrinthine complexities of national politics

then, dominating every conversation

the progress of the insurrection

but now we converse in hushed voices

for the feared Mhukhabarat

like the rats, are everywhere

as we pause to light cigarettes

we become aware of an unusual sound

a steady whooshing becoming louder and louder

we look up to the right and are blinded by the sun

suddenly a large government helicopter bursts from the glare

we gasp as it hovers for a few seconds

high above the buildings opposite

with what looks like a barrel dangling below

it is released and slowly falls

as I watch I feel like it is me that is falling

the barrel disappears into the buildings

a massive explosion, a ball of fire  
a smothering cloud of smoke and dust

we sit stunned and deafened  
thunderstruck by the last few moments  
like automatons we stumble, deafened, towards the blast

picking our way forward with dread  
the devastation becomes greater down the alley  
that I had walked along carefree a mere hour before  
we climb over rubble into an open area  
where there had been a maze of buildings  
a deep crater, the dust still settling  
fire consumes everywhere  
my house, wife, two girls and mother  
many others, all completely obliterated!

out of my mind, I search for hours  
my knees bloody, my fingers torn  
bricks and rubble  
scraps of flesh, bone and blood  
until I look down and see a finger in the dust  
I see the ring with the blue heart stone  
that I gave my daughter just a week ago

after all the tears have been wrenched from my heart  
I take out my knife and unflinching  
cut the pinkie from my left hand  
I lay it beside my daughter's

from this moment  
my old life is finished

**Three years later .....**

Easter Sunday  
the promise of new life!  
a bright, crisp spring morning  
the café is bustling  
families with children,  
old friends, young lovers

I take a seat by the café door  
on a morning like this  
it is good to be alive  
the pretty young waitress brings my order  
'double espresso and croissant?'  
I reach out my hand to take the plate  
she sees the missing pinkie on my left hand  
her face clouds for an instant  
this always makes me think of my daughter!  
but then her smile returns, 'enjoy!'  
she sees me reaching into my pocket.  
'Oh no!' she laughs,  
    'I'll bring the bill after!'

*each moment in life  
is a crossroads at which  
we can choose our path.*

that smile was almost enough  
but I have already stepped  
over the edge of the precipice  
I look into her trusting eyes  
see a moment  
of startled incomprehension  
as I shout  
'Allah Akbar!'

time seems to stop

in an instant of stunned silence  
and incomprehension

I finger the switch now  
in the pocket of my bulky jacket

I close my eyes  
feel the low spring sun  
warming my face  
a momentary dazzle of  
blinding red and yellow  
all consuming blast and fire  
rip the final chapters  
from our book of life

for others, less lucky,  
they are rewritten  
in blood and pain

little does she know  
that I sway on the edge of a  
precipice  
as I look into her trusting eyes  
I force myself to close mine  
as I finger the switch  
in the pocket of my bulky jacket.

just as the often rehearsed words  
'Allah Akbar!' form in my mind  
my fingers feel something else  
which sends a shock wave through  
my resolve

the girl sees the turmoil in my face  
time seems to stop, then  
I say, 'something for you,'  
and reach out to place it in her hand.  
thinking it is a tip she looks  
but finds in her palm  
the ring with the blue heart stone

I smile at her,  
'it was my daughter's - treasure it!'  
She gives me a puzzled look  
I rise and walk slowly  
into the early spring sunshine

*Alan W Graham*



## Fashion

Dear Dodger,

Upon receiving an anonymous invitation to Huffam's Tailor Shop, of which Matthew Pocket was proprietor, I decided to write an account of my adventure with men who crave fine attire. You'll forgive me if I refuse to reveal any prices. I fear your sons will see the numbers, loiter there and liberate Londoners from these handsome handkerchiefs. That said, they can't be more intrusive than Noah Claypole who checks every piece of information in my articles for errors. I thank our esteemed editor Fagin for the opportunity to prove myself.

Huffam's Tailor Shop possesses a fine reputation though many enter the establishment with few precious possessions. On approach, I found it quite odd to view patrons in torn waistcoats, drab trousers, and uneven shirt-sleeves waiting outside. I naturally assumed Huffam's had regular customers capable of maintaining an enviable wardrobe. You'd be surprised how little I wear the clothes sweet Brownlow left me in my inheritance. The cravats scratch my neck and tears trace the folds of the fabrics. Yes, it's been five years yet I cannot dress in his finery. These buyers near our newspaper office on Wellington Street fail to look proper in any regard, but they smile despite their shabbiness.

The city fog parted as I moved towards the wooden door, the windows festooned with scarlet silk curtains. Crimson was the dominant color adorning most of the furniture: seat cushions, armchair rests, and upholstered ottomans. I addressed a young lady there when she shyly recovered her scissors. The reserve surrounding Esther Summerson, a seamstress of little means, was appealing

'Were you delivering the Dombey and Son shoe polish?' asked Esther, eyeing my ink-stained fingers. 'Mr. Pocket's heard rumours about Mr. Dombey's business skills...'

'Rest assured, kind lady,' I interrupted. 'I'm an established journalist.'

As you know, Artful, this was an exaggeration. Many a time *The Times* has clipped my creative wings by running stories similar to mine first. For instance, who wrote an

effortless editorial about Alderman Cute's cruel treatment of the poor before their Christmas edition? I did, but since Monks flatters Fagin so he'll approve his articles and I don't, it was buried. It never saw the light of day until it was discarded on New Year's Eve. Forgive me if I'm not in a rush to offer opinions on social justice anymore.

'Your employer promised I could write a feature for *The Morning Chronicle*,' I explained.

'He's busy with the orphans' said Esther.

'Orphans?' I said.

She brought me to a carpeted room where three lads looked at themselves in four attached mirrors. Every young man stood on a footstool assessing their new breeches and elegant top hats. The suits facing me bore real brass buttons, their extravagance enhanced by plaid neckerchiefs and gold watch-chains. It was a far cry from the customers Pocket had yet to help. Truthfully, I felt rather tasteless in my velveteen coat filched by Fagin for the sake of propriety. He didn't want me to 'look fresh from the workhouse.' He sees it in my eyes on occasion, the gangly gruel lover who lost his parents. I'm afraid it may be forever printed on my exterior. Such an expression was crystal-clear when I too gazed into the shop's glass walls.

I suppose your never-ending appreciation for our mutual friend Nancy would make you interested in a description of Miss Summerson. While not as attractive as our late beauty, her demeanor's quite appealing. A few facial scars mar the whole but she carries herself gracefully. This was very evident when a brusque visitor trudged into the shop to collect the aforementioned paperwork pile. He took care to blow street dirt from his gloves before handling them.

'Richard,' groaned Esther.

He paid her no mind and proceeded to push a piece of luggage off the table.

'Who went digging inside Pickwick's portmanteau?' questioned a man who could only be Matthew Pocket.

Pocket had a horrid habit of pulling his hair in frustration until it resembled a grey-haired lion's mane. His coat tails, however, flowed behind him as if he were a flying

magistrate. He picked up the opened leather bag. Then, he evaluated each of the fellows with concentrated stares. The tallest of them took a step down and I detected a hint of chalk dust near his collar. Out of the trio, he seemed the most slender. An air of regality surrounded him though he appeared a touch sickly.

‘Admit it was you, Smike,’ said Richard, his head buried in papers. ‘A Dothesboy drop-out always hungers for tales from a true gentleman.’

Smike stood erect without a quiver in his thin legs. The chalk dust was less noticeable as his stature grew.

‘A gentleman does his best to remain honest, even with only an ember of education,’ said Smike.

‘Don’t talk Nickleby to me,’ said Richard. ‘He’s a teacher in love with a penniless girl.’

‘His sayings are still apt,’ insisted Smike.

‘Education, especially Latin, seldom served me well,’ said Richard. ‘Now finance...’

‘Oh, how I wish you wouldn’t talk of money, dear cousin,’ sighed Esther.

‘I won’t, once these wills get ironed out and put me in good standing,’ said Richard.

He hit a page with frustration. I surmised that he was involved in the infamous *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce* battle Charley Bates covered in the *Chronicle*. Of course I won’t utter Charley’s name anymore since his resignation in order to tend sheep continues to bother you a great deal.

‘You’re not taking advantage of our half-off sale, Mr. Carstone?’ asked Pocket.

‘Not for all the birds in Miss Flite’s cages,’ replied Richard. ‘Charity suits? I think not. Why don’t you tend to that quiet consumer there?’

‘Mr. Oliver Brownlow,’ greeted Pocket. ‘Our flaxen, well-bred reporter. Just a minor mishap.’

The diversion didn’t irritate me. It proved far more interesting than Blathers’ protracted yarns about captured criminals. Those make me miss Bulls-Eye’s heavy canine pants.

‘I wonder, sir, why a gentleman would leave his luggage here?’ I asked.

‘Pickwick often pens spur-of-the-moment notes,’ explained Pocket. ‘Maybe he went

off to write. He's retired with an active mind and an adventurous spirit.'

'And he has the money to do such,' spoke up Richard.

Esther lent aid to the second footstool's occupant as he descended. His hair was dark, tousled, and perfectly complimented by a green shooting coat. Rather short, the fresh white stockings bunched around his crooked ankles.

'Careful, Jo,' cautioned Esther.

'Don't need no shill' for that, Richard,' said Jo. 'We poor 'uns go on travels a lot, I swept many streets, heard lots o' secrets. If I got the alphabet, might write them adventures. That's why I'm agree'un with this school man here. Education a good thing.'

'Well, you didn't achieve much living at a shooting gallery,' said Richard. 'It's no fine estate.'

His cousin put a palm against her breast, obviously troubled.

'Your fair Esther improve my state much,' said Jo in his charming version of English. 'An orphan feel rich if he with the right folks.'

He received an embrace from a melancholy Esther. She left to dry her cheeks while I remembered standing before my bed at Brownlow's the night I was formally adopted. Wearing his gold spectacles, Brownlow came into the room, curious about my actions. I told him that I was terrified this bed would deteriorate someday, that workhouse beds were better suited for strange boys with bony backs. Brownlow assured me that I was mistaken. When I lay across the sheets, his firm answer played persistently in my head but I stayed awake listening to creaky bedsprings.

'The dialogue of the destitute,' spat out Richard. 'London loves them little. Will you see me at the slop-shops, my children with Ada at an infant-farm? Heaven forbid those happenings!'

I'm aware, Dodger, that I should've spoken up then. Though I wasn't aware of the pasts endured by Smike or Jo, I'd be surprised if they spent nine years in a baby farm. Women nursed newborns without the luxury of mother's milk. Our wrappings were thin, tossed scraps stitched together. The children who were never weaned were buried in plots even the sympathetic would steer away from entirely. I remain unable

to record my first word or express any toddler excursions due to this parentless farm. This is a sad truth for a twenty-year old storyteller.

‘What of good character?’ cries the third in their party.

This man required no assistance in descending the footstool. His carriage was impeccable, broad-shouldered, his sight level with Mr. Carstone’s.

‘The author addresses me?’ mocked Richard. ‘The illustrious David Copperfield? The grand success story.’

‘Perhaps if you stuck with a single profession, you wouldn’t be rifling through those wills,’ said David.

‘Why are you here of all people?’ questioned Richard.

I wondered at this also. Though I hadn’t viewed him in person before this chance meeting, Copperfield was a renowned writer, well-respected in our circles. His presence spoke volumes and if I were him I’d be home writing volumes instead.

‘I have no father or mother,’ replied David. ‘Secured many a bottle with no security. Hard work brought me here. Hardness brought me here.’

How much are you acquainted with death, Dodger? Have I told you of the stench, sunken limbs, subtle differences in their facial features? Sowerberry’s left a black blot on my view of human bonds. Frozen frowns on immovable corpses showed me the permanence of partings. I understood why Sowerberry was an undertaker, why nobody came to protect me from abuse that made me desire a lifeless fate. In this world, death caught you. Here, hardness reigned.

‘Many lack patience to cultivate the character you mention,’ said Richard.

‘Assuming the orphan lives.’

‘I implore you, Mr. Carstone,’ said Pocket. ‘These were charitable donations from remarkable gentlemen.’

‘Cast-offs,’ dismissed Richard.

‘I’m certain Mr. Brownlow’s piece will persuade others,’ hoped Pocket under his breath.

‘Is it political?’ asked David.

When a literary master acknowledges you, you would be wise to make an

impressive response. Naturally, I faltered.

‘I have...no personal say... in the matter,’ I stuttered.

David cocked his head and inspected every inch of my form as Mr. Bumble did many moons ago.

‘The real secret of magic lies in the performance,’ quoted David from a source I couldn’t identify.

His bizarre assessment silenced me nonetheless. Did he suspect a lie, an unmentioned Twist? You’ve read my byline repeatedly, Dodger. Was it dishonest? I’ve interacted with Parliament members who permitted ghastly laws to pass without considering the plight of widows. The debtor’s prison in Marshalsea is packed with good-hearted families enduring inhumane treatment. Even *Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce* stays caught in a web of legal corruption. Am I to flinch for using my adopted title?

‘How did you come by these donations?’ I asked, hoping to change the subject.

‘Self-made and generous gentlemen,’ replied Pocket as he poked out his belly.

‘Might I converse with one of them?’ I said. I followed Mr. Pocket to the front, but I heard snippets of conversation behind my back.

‘He seem rather nice in that velvet co’,` remarked Jo. ‘What I would be wear’in if I writ letters.’

‘What writer would be interested in orphans?’ said Richard. ‘Probably an outcast willing to cover anything.’

‘He didn’t put on airs, not a one,’ complimented Smike.

‘I look forward to the article,’ said David, mostly to himself.

We passed the main showroom again where Esther was measuring the arms of an older buyer. Though he had a genteel air, he tried persistently to show her a sketch he’d drawn of his desired outfit.

‘Morning, Phiz!’ called over Pocket.

Phiz bowed and resumed appraising his sketch.

Within minutes, we were next to a door labeled ‘Philip Pirrip’. Pocket pounded out a distinctive knock on the wood.

‘I always have time for my tutor!’ yelled a voice on the other end.

Pocket led me inside a spacious office composed of a hodgepodge of items. Gold-edged law books were displayed in a full bookcase. Across from them was a pair of thick boots, carefully preserved. Yet the most peculiar things dealt with the trade of blacksmithing: tongs, a dusty anvil, and an array of utensils. The gentleman among them rose to shake my hand. He was average in height but his piercing blue gaze made me unsteady.

‘Are you a smithy, sir?’ I asked.

Laughter surrounded me, coming heartily from the persons of Pocket and Pirrip.

‘My friend Joe won’t give up until I am,’ replied Pirrip. ‘And leave the word ‘sir’ to Mr. Pocket. I am Pip alone.’

‘That isn’t very proper,’ I said.

‘How proper are you, Mr. Twist?’ asked Pip.

His inquiry halted my thoughts. I should’ve guessed then that a normal interview was no longer on the cards.

‘A small amount it would seem,’ I replied. ‘I was just called an outcast.’

Pip nodded as if I were imparting confidential information to a close friend. He reached into his desk, removed a familiar envelope, and pulled out its contents. I recognized the invitation that brought me to the shop.

‘Those boys in the showroom?’ said Pip. ‘Personally selected.’

‘For what purpose?’ I asked.

‘London needs to see them,’ said Pip. ‘Those who try to climb the ladder to the top.’

‘That’s not really them,’ I argued. ‘David...yes. But the rest are playing gentlemen. They’re...waifs...urchins...’

‘Orphans,’ continues Pip. ‘Like you.’

‘Yes, although I work for a highly regarded publication,’ I said.

‘And I slave away at a top law firm,’ said Pip. ‘It comes down to kindness, a chance given. Then it’s what we aspire to be, Mr. Twist, that shapes our direction.’

At that moment, Pip wasn’t making any sense. That is until I thought of another moment. You could narrate it as perfectly as me, Dodger, as many times as I’ve told you. It’s my own feature about a fallen boy and a bookstall-keeper who believed in

an orphan. The blood on this boy's brow suggested he wasn't well-off yet a gentleman took him to his house. For the gentleman, there was something about this Twist.

'Cast out the outcast others don't believe in,' continued Pip. 'Believe in an individual who may become more.'

'There's experience in your recommendation?' I said.

'I had an eventful life,' said Pip. 'As your Mr. Brownlow used to tell me.'

Pip's law books look sturdier than the bed whose stability I doubted.

'How much did he sell you?' I asked.

'Dozens ` replied Pip. 'I believe he spared a suit as well.'

Both men accompanied me to the main showroom. Every orphan except Richard wore a wonderful contribution made of the best cloth or velvet around. Pip handed me a burgundy jacket with bright buttons. Brownlow wore this jacket whenever he read at night. The garment bag was never opened before that day.

I set my belongings next to Pickwick's portmanteau, the unlocked box of a gentleman-writer who took every opportunity afforded him. A frail girl in white watched it closely. She held a pair of cufflinks in her palm.

'Are your parents around?' I said.

'No, they've died,' replied the girl. 'My grandfather owns a curiosity shop and I live with him. But it may close if I don't sell these.'

Again, I will not detail the price. Your sons may think I'm made of money but I possess very few pounds. She accepted them however. Dodger, after all our adventures together, illegal or innocent, I believe this was the greatest trinket I ever held.

'Thank you!' cried the girl.

'You're welcome....,' I began.

'Nell,' said the girl. 'And your name?'

I am.....

Humbly yours, Oliver Twist

*Monique Hayes*



## British Ocean Radio

Before they found themselves reading excerpts from *Macbeth* in a deep swell with a force nine gale battering the boat, the thespians had been safely in rep in the nearby seaside town of Grimtoft. Robert had persuaded them to come aboard and broadcast some culture to our expanding audience and their theatre wages must have been pitiful since they agreed right away, for the widow's mite that Robert offered them.

'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,' one of them recited, tremulously, 'Creeps in this petty pace from day to day...' and then he paused, clapping a hand to his mouth and breathing deeply, trying to fight back the rising bile.

'You're doing fine,' Robert mimed, encouragingly.

Then another blast of wind and wave slammed into the vessel which shuddered and shook, the actors lost all interest in *Macbeth*, and two of them fought pathetically for the door handle of the one toilet on board.

Robert's success in persuading the thespians to give this performance on the boat from which we broadcast to the East Coast shouldn't surprise anyone. Robert had confidence and enthusiasm; they were often misplaced, but they were infectious.

He had been a respected engineer at the BBC in London and had graduated through to production. He earned a reputation for work that was innovative and intelligent, even when addressing popular topics such as dance band music or sport. But he chafed at the confines of the BBC. 'They don't understand radio,' he once told me, 'which is unfortunate since only *they* are allowed to broadcast on it.'

Then, early in 1953, he took the bold step of resigning from the corporation. Bold, but not risky; he was able to find plenty of work as an engineer and even worked in the film industry from time to time. Yet he still wasn't entirely happy. 'Films – they're all spectacle and colour and showing off,' he once told me, 'they don't know how to make the most of sound. They're just *empty*.' He was a radio man to his bootlaces.

And then he went on holiday one August to Grimtoft, a bustling seaside resort on the East Coast. It wasn't the sun, sea and sand that he sought, but rather the freedom

of the waves. Old friends of Robert and his wife had moved to the town and they owned a small boat with an outboard. The two couples enjoyed several sun-warmed trips along the coast to quiet bays and arcing shingly beaches, and then, on another day, Robert and his friend Jim went further out for a spot of sea angling. As they relaxed amidst the gentle slapping of waves on the hull, Robert pointed to the dashboard of the little craft.

‘You’ve got a radio transmitter?’

‘Try to switch off, Robert. You’re on holiday.’

‘Could you transmit all the way to the shore from here?’

‘Not much point in having it if not, eh? The wife insists. In case I hit an iceberg or something.’

The sea. Supposing you put out to sea in a boat with all the necessary equipment and you broadcast radio programmes - illegally, of course. If the BBC squealed, and the authorities tried to stop you, you simply struck anchor and headed off into international waters where they couldn’t touch you, guv. Could there be greater freedom than sharing your art beyond reach of the law?

A few months later, Robert hired a small vessel (a former passenger ferry between two Scottish islands - it had a Gaelic name that Robert could never pronounce or remember) crewed by a pair of surly old sea dogs. He enthused a bunch of embittered old radio hacks who were no longer able to work at the BBC owing to age, ineptitude or intrusive alcoholism. ‘This will be a revolution!’ he told them at a preliminary meeting onshore, ‘Any questions?’

‘Is there a bar on the boat, old boy?’ asked Dempster Pontefract, a former BBC newsreader.

At first, broadcasts went out for just a couple of hours a day, Monday to Friday over lunchtime; ‘Get the housewives when they’re putting their feet up,’ Robert said. Dempster Pontefract was the first voice to be heard on British Ocean Radio (BOR), announcing ‘Welcome to a new world of wireless!’ to an audience that probably, at first, numbered a few dozen, all of them by accident as they twiddled the knob looking for the BBC’s Home Service.



Robert had equipped the boat on the cheap but he was canny and the equipment was good. The audience could hear everything.

Audience figures could only be boosted by the enticing prospect of a singer or presenter or newsreader throwing up live, and so advertising income grew. Robert was able to employ more powerful transmitters and expand the area to which we broadcast. More people heard more people being sick and more companies clamoured to pay for advertisements.

*Good afternoon. My name is Boothby Skuldale and before I come to perform for you on British Ocean Radio, I make sure I visit Wilson's Pharmacy in St Michael's Lane, Grimtoft, where they have everything you need for your health. And with a choice of three different seasickness pills, I can sing for you in complete safety!*

But what really brought British Ocean Radio to public fame and increased its audience and income were the official attempts to close it down. The BBC first became aware of the station after Skuldale's vomiting episode made some of the London papers, and a number of MPs and councillors and aldermen were outraged that an unlicensed radio station was broadcasting - with *advertisements* - to a vulnerable listenership. Police launches were despatched to the place from which the boat was broadcasting and Robert's salty old captain, Seadale, upped anchor and the boat bobbed off into open waters. The station necessarily went off the air for a few hours, but when broadcasting returned ('This is Dempster Pontefract, speaking to you from British Ocean Radio, the station they can't close down!') news coverage on BBC radio and television, and some dramatic front page pictures in the papers, ensured that the audience had doubled.

Advertisers were now clamouring to be a part of British Ocean Radio, but dealings with them still had to be discreet. At first, Robert had opened an office in a run-down corner of Grimtoft, but he eventually had to close that and operate instead through a network of shadowy 'reps' who visited companies, sold advertising, collected fees and even worked with the customers to draft the advertising copy. The authorities

knew who the advertisers were, of course, and so traps were sprung for the reps, but only one of them was ever apprehended and that was because he was suspected of being a Soviet spy.

The station's broadcasting hours increased - they had to, to include all the advertising that was being paid for - and so the talent began to be spread somewhat thinly. The launch, used generally to ferry out guest musicians and singers to the boat, began to ship out guest presenters as well. In poor conditions, though, the launch was not an option and programmes had to be presented by whoever happened to be marooned out there on the boat. Dempster Pontefract's drinking was difficult to prevent, especially when he was stuck on the boat for several storm-wracked weeks. But the thing that killed British Ocean Radio was Pontefract's growing friendship with Captain Seadale. The two had begun to get on so famously that Pontefract had even shared with Seadale the secret of his on-board stash of alcohol.

BOR didn't broadcast at weekends and, on one calm Friday, when programmes finished at 8pm, everyone except Captain Seadale piled into the launch and fled for the fleshpots of Grimtoft. Temptation on this rare quiet weekend on board was too much for the lonely seaman. He saw his way through a couple of bottles of spirits and at some point afterwards, as the wind rose, he raised the anchor. When asked about it later, he merely said, 'I don't remember nothing. I only remember going to the toilet. That's all.'

The ship drifted slowly and gently and grounded, at high tide, on a notorious reef and was left high and dry and hanging at an awkward angle when the tide dropped away. Most of the radio equipment was smashed into uselessness when the ship keeled over. When the news reached the BOR community, most were stunned into silence. Only Pontefract found his tongue; 'This is serious; I had a bottle of Laphroaig on the boat, you know.'

The boat was refloated and towed back to harbour. It was sold for scrap not long afterwards. Robert later explained that none of the equipment could be saved. BOR was finished. 'It was fun while it lasted,' he told me, 'but this idea of running illegal stations from a ship - it's daft. I blame myself. It'll never catch on. We're not

*pirates.'*

Robert got a job in his brother's hardware shop in Edinburgh and never worked in broadcasting again. Dempster Pontefract became the wine correspondent for a provincial newspaper. The real winner was Boothby Skuldale. To be The Singer Who Puked Live on the Wireless was to be stamped indelibly in the public consciousness. He became the British representative in the first Eurovision Song Contest and as late as 1963 he was headlining a tour, with The Beatles third on the bill. He slipped from public view after that, but by then he had a hefty shareholding in a pharmaceutical company that specialised in anti-nausea tablets. He was set up for life.

***David McVey***



Gerald Dickens performing at the Aberdeen  
Conference  
(Photograph Courtesy of Catherine Cevolli.)

## Selfie

Howard folded the newspaper in half, then half again and placed it on the small table at the side of the settee. He inhaled and exhaled, drummed his fingers on his knees, then tilted his slippers up and watched the toes wiggle underneath a well-worn paisley pattern. As he swivelled casually to look out the window, the sunlight streaming through the meek defences of the net curtains illuminated his face as if daring him to make a decision. He took the bait and turned to his wife who was watching television, consciously ignoring the hive of activity occurring in the corner of her right eye.

‘Let's go to the beach,’ he said as if asking for the salt to be passed.

Eleanor didn't avert her gaze from the screen. ‘I think I'm going deaf,’ she said. ‘I could swear I just heard you say ‘Let's go to the beach’.’

‘Very droll,’ replied Howard, leaning forward, hands on knees, elbows protruding. ‘Come on, let's go.’

‘What's brought this on?’ asked Eleanor, trying to discern something from his expression. Howard shrugged.

‘I would simply like to go to the beach. And I would be delighted if you would accompany me. I don't think there is anything particularly bizarre about that. It would be a convivial way to spend the afternoon.’ He paused, smiled and pointed at her with his index fingers. ‘Fit d'ya say, quinie?’

Eleanor glanced out the window that was framing him. ‘It is a nice day, I suppose. We shouldn't stay cooped up.’

‘That's the spirit!’

‘You are a very strange man,’ said Eleanor shaking her head and looking at her watch. ‘We'll need to be back by five at the latest, so just a little while.’ She paused, without looking up. ‘My programme's on.’

‘Don't worry, you will be.’ Howard stood up, took two steps and extended his hand to Eleanor. She accepted and allowed herself to be gently raised from the chair.

‘Don't call me quinie.’



\* \* \* \*

As they drove through the shadows towards a sun unobstructed by old, sternly looming granite they passed by where Terracotta used to be and, with cursory glances, homes they had previously visited with wine, gifts and smiles that were now, simply, houses they had previously visited.

Eleanor consulted her phone while Howard fiddled with the radio trying to find a song that could fulfil a seemingly constantly evolving set of criteria.

‘Lindsay's put some more pictures up.’

She waited patiently until the traffic lights next turned to red then held the phone towards Howard who glanced up from the radio and nodded.

‘Cocktails at the burj, lovely,’ Eleanor muttered to herself.

‘Which burj is that again, Howard?’

Howard laughed.

‘What?’

‘I don't know why you had to use my name. It's only us here.’

‘It's your name, I can use it if I like. Anyway, which burj is that? I always forget.’

‘Was it the tall one or the curved one?’ asked Howard, removing his glasses to flick a speck from the lens before holding them at arm's length for inspection.

‘The curved one.’

Howard replaced his glasses and accelerated across Market Street.

‘The Al Arab, I think.’ He paused. ‘Or the Khalifa. One of the two.’

‘Thank-you Howard. Very helpful.’

She turned to him, smiling with her eyes and received a similar sparkle in return.

‘Howard,’ he muttered under his breath with a shake of the head.

They reached the road leading up to the boulevard, joining the queue of stuffy cars containing shoppers or swimmers, players or bathers, walkers or skaters.

‘I told you it would be mobbed,’ observed Eleanor.

‘Yes you did, dear,’ replied Howard drumming the steering wheel.

‘First bit of sun and everyone heads to the beach.’ She turned to look at their

neighbours – a young family, kids in the back seats going berserk, then suddenly muted and afraid as the snarling, rage-filled faces of their parents snapped round to roar at them. Eleanor quickly turned back to face the road ahead. ‘Like moths to a flame – and now we’re a couple of moths as well.’

Howard accelerated rather quickly in order to cut in front of the distracted young family so he could turn left at the lights.

‘Ah yes, but at least us two moths *decided* to come rather being drawn here by some force we can’t fathom exerting its control over us.’

Eleanor mulled this over with an expression which suggested she had just had a nibble on a biscuit and was trying to decide if it was off or not. Decision made:

‘Some would say that’s worse, Howard.’

He went straight over the roundabout at the ballroom and drove towards the Don, casting his eyes out towards the blue.

‘Lot of boats,’ he remarked and proceeded to count up to eleven.

‘Eleven boats,’ he concluded. Eleanor didn’t respond. Well, she did. She said ‘yes dear’ which in their lexicon was an automatic retort to any banal utterance by the other and thus represented no response at all.

Eventually, the spaces between cars elongated as the area where people congregate because they must ‘do’ rather than just ‘be’ declined behind them.

‘I’ll get in here,’ said Howard, flipping the indicator and swinging into a space on the beach front. He turned off the ignition and adjusted the flat cap she had insisted he wore in the rearview mirror. As Eleanor checked in her bag for something, Howard squeezed her knee eliciting a little jump.

‘You ready?’ he asked, clicking his fingers lightly.

‘Mmm-hmm,’ she replied.

‘I’ll let you out.’

She swatted the idea away with a brisk movement of her hand, and checking nothing was coming, opened the door and stepped on to the road. Trotting around to the pavement, she joined hands with Howard and they began walking leisurely in the direction they had just come, towards the unravelling multi-coloured, bouncing

specks and screams in the distance.

They paused only to point out various items of human life to each other: surfers in the sea ('Must be nice for them it's not freezing for a change. Lunatics.');

a particularly large dog running at a terrific speed after a stick ('I bet it eats a lot.');

a particularly large woman eating a Burger King ('I bet SHE eats a lot.');

a group of kids standing on the wooden pillars that popped out of the sea ('What are they for, Howard?' - 'I think to show the depth of the tide' - 'Oh right. That makes sense.');

a small child running in zigzags with a kite (they smiled);

a stationary man controlling a drone thingy (they looked up at it uneasily).

They didn't reminisce about the times they had been here before – as children, as a couple before Lindsay came along, as a couple with Lindsay, with friends, with family. There is a time to reminisce and there is a time to simply enjoy the present and they both understood that today, right now, was most definitely the latter.

They passed a young couple who were sat on a bench. The girl was wearing an extremely short skirt and bikini top ('Eyes front soldier!' - 'Yes sir!' replied Howard militarily, clicking his heels together and they both chuckled).

A decision was made without words that they would keep a respectful distance from the main hub of dragging and shouting opposite the cafés with patrolling pterodactyl-sized seagulls overhead, and not go down *all those steps* to the beach itself with its insidious sand.

'Shall we sit?' asked Howard, pointing to a vacant bench verbalizing the plan. *No, he'd not rather sit in the shade* so they swerved toward it and sat down, Howard automatically hitching his trousers up at the knee. They looked out over the sea, through the living painting on display for them and into the distance. Silently, subconsciously, they batted thoughts back and forth, while savouring the invading calmness and the embracing heat from the sun; sounds respectfully died out and the people and dogs and children and waves slowed down to half-speed before finally transforming into a glorious shimmering blur dancing before them.

Howard squeezed Eleanor's hand and she inadvertently smiled. The young couple walked past and the girl, glancing at them with a smile, said something like, 'I hope

we're like that when we're older, Steve' as she nuzzled into his chest. Howard and Eleanor didn't distinguish them.

A noise from somewhere, too loud, too sharp, too close to be absorbed gently into the tranquil vision, delivered them promptly back to reality. But they sighed contentedly, grateful they had been permitted to go on the ephemeral journey at all.

'I always think boats parked like that are quite eerie,' remarked Eleanor after a time. 'Anything could be going on and you would never know.'

'Like what?'

'A murderer could be on the rampage,' said Eleanor in a genuinely sinister tone. 'Everyone on board could be dead.'

Howard turned to look at her profile with slight bemusement. Then he chuckled. The chuckle evolved into a laugh leaning him back into the bench and continued for a full two minutes. At first Eleanor was confused but she found herself laughing along.

'Oh dear,' said Howard as he removed his glasses and rubbed his right eye. 'You watch too many detective shows.'

Eleanor closed her eyes and nodded. They returned to a peaceful silence punctuated occasionally by Howard emitting a little chuckle every now and then.

'How are you feeling?' she asked without opening her eyes.

'Fine,' replied Howard softly. 'Couldn't be better. How are *you* feeling?'

The eyes opened. 'It's not me we have to worry about, is it?'

'I still do though.'

Eleanor felt him grip her hand tighter and rub it with the top of his thumb.

'Hey! I've got an idea,' he said, standing up with as much animation as he could muster.

'Another one,' said Eleanor.

'Let's take a selfie!'

'Aw, that's for the youngsters, Howard.'

'Go on! We can put it online and show Lindsay she's not the only one out and about.'

'She'll just say 'what a cringe mum!' '

‘So what! Get your phone out.’

Eleanor was already reaching for her phone even though she was telling Howard how silly it was and that she didn't want anyone to see them doing it. Ignoring her token protestations, he cupped his arm under hers and helped her from the bench.

They walked the few steps to the wooden railing above the breakers and turned their backs to the sea. Eleanor handed the phone to Howard and told him to ‘aim down and press that button.’

‘Wait!’ she hissed, suddenly trying to appear innocent as a family with two little yapping dogs and two young children with ice-cream covered faces walked past. ‘OK, now, quick.’

‘Can we not see ourselves on the screen while we're taking it, like Lindsay's?’ asked Howard as he awkwardly manoeuvred the phone around trying not to lose the button.

‘My phone doesn't do that,’ Eleanor said adjusting her collar.

Howard grunted a hopeful assumption that everything was set.

‘Right. Ready?’

Eleanor looked up at the phone and put on one of her nice smiles. Howard did a grin as wide as it was genuine.

‘OK, I'm ready. Now hurry up,’ she whispered through gritted teeth and static up-turned lips.

‘After three. One – two – three...Selfie!’

He pressed what he hoped was the button and laughed. Eleanor shook her head at the silliness of it all. ‘Give it here,’ she said sternly and Howard obediently handed her the phone. Eleanor pressed a few buttons.

‘Did it come out OK?’

‘It'll do,’ Eleanor growled with barely satisfied approval, but she continued contemplating the photo as Howard peered over her shoulder.

‘Ha! My first selfie!’ said Howard.

Eleanor *hmmmm-ed* then pointed to the time on the phone.

‘Shall we? The traffic will be hellish.’

Howard flicked his wrist round and comprehended what Eleanor had considerably

left unsaid. He nodded and they linked arms and began back towards the car in an entwined silence, finally broken when, after carefully stepping into the road, Howard opened the passenger door to let Eleanor in.

‘Glad you came?’

‘Yes, Howard,’ she replied, kissing him on the cheek before settling into her seat as he shut the door chuckling.

And she was.

\* \* \* \*

They got the gardener to help them upload the picture and Lindsay did indeed shake her head when she saw it.

‘Mum and Dad took their first selfie,’ she said, turning round her phone to her boyfriend as they drove back to their apartment through the thick, dry air of a Dubai summer night.

‘Awwwww,’ replied her boyfriend. He turned his head back to the road chanting, ‘Sel-fie! Sel-fie!’

Lindsay laughed and ‘liked’ the photo.

In the years and decades to come, Lindsay would grow to like the photo even more.

***Conan D'Agostino***

The Aberdeen Branch of the Dickens Fellowship was formed in 2013 as part book-group, part lecture series, part social group. Never lacking ambition, within a year the group had secured the honour of hosting the annual Dickens Fellowship conference, an event that is truly global in its reach. The season of talks and events runs from September to June and is open to all.

### **Aberdeen Dickens Fellowship**



Conference Committee from left to right: Neil Clapperton, Mhairie McCaffery, Alison Summers, Sally Lawton, Sandy Thom, Eric Summers, Marion Anderson, David Innes, Paul Schlicke (and “off camera”: Derek Stewart, Anne Penhale and Michael Steele)

(Photography courtesy of Nicholas Cambridge)

*Featuring short stories and other imaginings from:*

**J.M. Stein**

**Conan D'Agostino**

**Barbara Stevenson**

**Jonathan Gurling**

**Sue Gerrard**

**Alan W Graham**

**David McVey**

**Monique Hayes**



Free to those of good heart, and kindness of being, a memento of Aberdeen's  
international Dickens Fellowship Conference 2016.