

London Particular

The Dickens Fellowship Newsletter

CONFERENCE A reminder that the **AGM** takes place on **Fri 16 July** at 18.00 and the **Conference** is taking place over **Sat 17 – Sun 18 July**, both via Zoom. Events are free of charge; see website for full programme details. For the links, contact: dickensfellowshiptalks@gmail.com

Freedom at last In view of the relaxation (we hope) of the “imprisonment” of lockdown, I thought I’d refresh my memory as to the reactions to impending freedom of two famous Dickensian prisoners: William Dorrit (25 years in the Marshalsea debtors’ prison) and Alexandre Manette (18 years in the Bastille). The news is gently broken to Mr Dorrit that he is to be set free. ‘*Am I to understand*’, he asks, ‘*that I could – ha – could pass through the Lodge at this moment, and – hum - take a walk?*’ When reluctantly told by Arthur Clennam that he will in fact have to wait ‘*but a few hours*’ while the paperwork is completed, he reacts violently: ‘*A few hours, sir*’, he returned in a sudden passion. ‘*You talk very easily of hours, sir! How long do you suppose, sir, that an hour is to a man who is choking for want of air?*’

Dr Manette’s mental condition is far worse and his incarceration has been much more rigorous. Mr Lorry, the confidential clerk from Tellson’s Bank, imagines beforehand the conversation he will have with him: ‘*Buried how long? The answer was always the same: ‘Almost eighteen years.’ ‘You had abandoned all hope of being dug out?’ ‘Long ago.’ ‘You know that you are recalled to life?’ ‘They tell me so.’ ‘I hope you care to live?’ ‘I can’t say.*’

Good psychology in both cases – but I hope we can all be more positive than that!

Fancy eating out again after Covid? Dickens believed that ‘*there is no more certain index to personal character than the condition of a set of casters [cruet] is to any hotel.... I held up before {my friend} in succession the cloudy oil and fury vinegar, the clogged cayenne, the dirty salt, the*

obscene dregs of soy, and the anchovy sauce in a flannel waistcoat of decomposition.’ (A Little Dinner in an Hour from *The Uncommercial Traveller*)...

...or taking a sea trip? In ‘Our French Watering-Place’ (also from *The Uncommercial Traveller*), CD describes coming ashore in France off the steamer, an undignified experience: ‘*The road to the Custom-house is fenced off with ropes breast-high, and outside those ropes all the English in the place who have lately been sea-sick and are now well, assemble in their best clothes to enjoy the degradation of their dilapidated fellow-creatures. “Oh, my gracious! how ill this one has been!” “Here’s a damp one coming next!” “Here’s a pale one!” “Oh! Ain’t he green in the face, this next one!”*

An actor’s view of CD Jason Watkins, known for his part as Prime Minister Harold Wilson in “*The Crown*”, says Dickens is his favourite author (The Times, 27 Feb): ‘*Dickens constantly surprises and amazes. His characterisations are very real and hugely colourful. I wrestle with dyslexia, but recorded Barnaby Rudge for Audible in 2019. His descriptive passages are one thing, but the dramatic scenes are the best in any genre*.’ [I wish the interviewer had asked him to explain the cryptic comment on ‘His descriptive passages’. Ed.]

They should have read their Dickens! DF member Allan Clack noted an item in *The Economist* about the recently deceased Bernie Madoff, an American conman who operated an apparently respectable ‘Ponzi-style’ fraud, involving billions of dollars invested by wealthy, well-connected friends and socialites, lured by potentially high interest rates. He died of cancer whilst serving a life term in prison. The article referred to the massive frauds committed by Montague Tigg, with his Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company, which was a sophisticated front for investment in a non-existent company, offering high interest returns, in Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit*; also the celebrated Merdle in *Little Dorrit*, who was

regarded by everyone as a master entrepreneur and financial authority, but who was in fact a common swindler. The item refers to gullible investors who would have been aware of the dubiousness of Madoff - if only they had read Dickens.

Alas for Little Nell... Each to his or her own when it comes to the subject of Little Nell. Churchill's daughter, Mary, expressed her opinion and the following is taken from "*The Splendid and the Vile*" by Erik Larson: "On the blank pages at the back of her diary, Mary quoted books, songs and her father's speeches. She kept a list of the dozens of books she had read {aged 18} in 1940, which included Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, which she started but did not finish. '*Just couldn't take that ruddy Little Nell and her grandpop*', she wrote." Thanks to DF member Roberta Berryman for this.

Lockdown not so bad as we thought? Laura Freeman, a freelance writer and critic, laments, in *The Times* (21.6.21), the general pessimism about the effect of Covid on schoolchildren, i.e., their having missed out on a year's education. She says this can better be described as not "a lost harvest of talent" but "a generation lying fallow in anticipation of a better, bumper crop next year". She supports her case by listing several people who were deprived of education through illness or other causes: R L Stevenson, Proust, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, T S Eliot. She also comments: "You thought your teenager could whinge for England: no one did teenage self-pity and introspection quite like Charles Dickens. 'The deep sense I had of being utterly without hope now,' he wrote in *David Copperfield*, where the blacking factory of Dickens's youth became Davy's bottling shop; 'of the shame I felt in my position; of the misery it was to my young heart to believe that day by day what I had learned, and thought, and delighted in, and raised my fancy and my emulation up by, would pass away from me, little by little, never to be brought back any more; cannot be written.' But he did write it, and much else besides."

Urania Cottage – a new letter A letter, previously unknown to scholars, has been discovered by Dr Leon Litvack, principal editor of The Charles Dickens Letters Project (article in *The Times*, 26.6.21). This handwritten document, dated Oct 5 1851, shows CD deciding the fates of six "fallen women" who passed through *Urania Cottage*, the refuge that he helped administer. In the letter, the author tells Georgiana Morson, the matron, that he is enclosing a cheque for £45 to pay for the passage to Australia of three women

who had shown that they could read and write and perform domestic tasks. He also discusses two unnamed women who were considered not to have to earn the passage. 'It is indeed disheartening to hear of the conduct of your untoward charges,' he writes. 'But hope and perserverance {sic} will outlive all that a long time, and do some good in the end'. Dr Litvack said the letter demonstrated how Dickens rolled up his sleeves and got involved with the details of managing the refuge...

...Some of the women who lived at *Urania Cottage* were prostitutes, but other categories included 'starving needlewomen of good character', 'domestic servants who have been seduced' and 'two young women held to bail for attempted suicide'. If you are wondering what constituted being 'an untoward charge', Prof Michael Slater, in his biography of CD, explains how one recalcitrant inmate of *Urania Cottage*, Jemima Hiscock, 'forced open the door of the little beer cellar with knives and drank until she was dead drunk; when she used the most horrible language and made a very repulsive exhibition of herself'. Michael adds that CD dealt briskly with a small group of *Urania Cottage* women and their tales of unjust treatment by the staff. Isabella Gordon, the ringleader, was summarily expelled, as was one of her followers, 'a most deceitful little Minx' called Sesina who, Dickens wrote, 'would corrupt a Nunnery in a fortnight'.

Fagin tackles the housing crisis The Evening Standard (28.6.21) comments that 'some things never change. Charles Dickens's great-great-great-granddaughter has spoken out as a redevelopment of the building thought to have inspired Oliver Twist tries to minimise its affordable housing remit. Fitzrovia's Middlesex Hospital Annex, once the Cleveland Street Workhouse, is set to apply for permission to remove some of the 30 affordable homes promised to hospital staff. Lucinda Dickens Hawksley called the change "rather sickening", telling the Camden New Journal "the need for affordable housing is greater than it has been ... since the [war]". Please sir, can we have some more?'

'Wery good thing is weal pie, when you know the lady as made it, and is quite sure it an't kittens'. (Sam Weller, *Pickwick*); and it would be a very good thing for me if members could send in some more contributions, please, to: Alison Gowans, Danesdyke, 27A Ashcombe Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 3ET, or by email – aligowans17@outlook.com"