

CHARLES DICKENS

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MICHAEL SLATER

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CHAPTER 1

Early years

FROM PORTSMOUTH TO CHATHAM,
1812–1822

Do you care to know that I was a great writer at 8 years old or so – was an actor and a speaker from a baby – worked many childish experiences and many young struggles into Copperfield?

Dickens to Mary Howitt, 7 September 1859

THE EARLIEST specimens of any writing by Charles Dickens of which we have a record consist of a formal note of invitation and a facetious schoolboy letter. The first was written when he was ‘between eight and nine years of age’ (that is, 1820 or 1821) and his family was living in Chatham where his father, John, was an Assistant Clerk in the Navy Pay Office. The letter was written some five years later, when Dickens was ‘between thirteen and fourteen’, thus three or four years after the family had moved to London and just after John had retired from the Pay Office on health grounds and was embarking on a new career in journalism to supplement his pension. From the time between the dates of these two items no scrap of Dickens’s writing seems to have survived, though three notable samples of it that did once exist are mentioned by his great friend John Forster in his *Life of Charles Dickens*. While the Dickens family were still in Chatham, Forster tells us, the young boy wrote a tragedy called *Misnar, the Sultan of India* based on a favourite story of his. Then later, after the family had moved to London, he wrote a couple of character-sketches, one of an eccentric old barber obsessed with Napoleon, and the other of a deaf old woman who cooked for the family in Bayham Street. According to Dickens himself, writing in 1850 in the preface to a new edition of his first book, *Sketches by Boz*, *Misnar* had had its predecessors and/or successors in the form of ‘certain tragedies achieved at the mature age of eight or ten, and represented with great applause to overflowing nurseries’. As to the schoolboy letter, by the time Dickens wrote this he had perhaps already taken to the writing of ‘small tales’ for the amusement of his schoolfellows, one of whom later recalled that they had had ‘a sort of club for lending and circulating them’. It seems likely, then, that there was a fair amount of Dickens juvenilia which has not come down to us.¹

The note of invitation reads as follows: ‘Master and Miss Dickens will be pleased to have the company of Master and Miss Tribe to spend the evening on . . . [date, etc.]’. It is redolent of genteel middle-class life as it was lived in the early nineteenth-century with its little social ceremonies and mutual courtesies – just such a composition, in fact, as one would expect the children of Mr John Dickens of the Navy Pay Office and his lady to send to the children of Mr Tribe, owner and landlord of the handsome old Mitre Tavern in Chatham High Street, and a good friend of the highly convivial John. It was at the Mitre that the Dickens children, Charles and his beloved little sister Fanny, one year older than he, used sometimes to sing, ‘mounted on a dining table for a stage’, while their impresario-father looked proudly on.²

Five years later, in London, Dickens sent the following letter to a schoolfellow called Owen Peregrine Thomas:

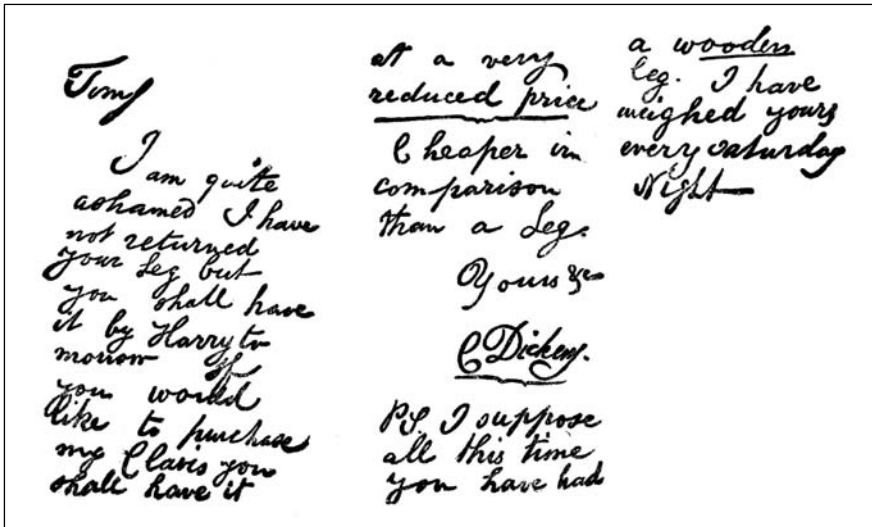
Tom

I am quite ashamed I have not returned your Leg but you shall have it by Harry to morrow. If you would like to purchase my Clavis you shall have it at a very *reduced price*. Cheaper in comparison than a Leg.

Yours &c

C. Dickens

PS. I suppose all this time you have had a *wooden* leg. I have weighed yours every Saturday night.



1 Dickens's schoolboy letter as reproduced by Forster

When he wrote this Dickens was a pupil at Wellington House, William Jones's 'Classical and Commercial Academy' in the Hampstead Road, and the 'Leg' and 'Clavis' to which he refers would have been standard Latin school-books. The letter is very much the work of the lively, fun-loving schoolboy so vividly recalled by Thomas and others who gave Forster their reminiscences of Wellington House Academy for his biography. Forster comments that there is 'some underlying whim or fun in the "Leg" allusions'. He does not, however, point out that this is, in the language of nineteenth-century playbills, 'positively the first appearance' in all Dickens's writings of a wooden leg, the subject of numerous comic allusions throughout his work, culminating in Silas Wegg's versatile appendage in *Our Mutual Friend*. It goes to the heart, in fact, of that fascination with the borderline between the animate and inanimate that is central to so much Dickensian comic writing. Forster, who reproduces the letter in facsimile, as I do here, does, however, note that 'in the signature the reader will be amused to see the first faint beginning of a flourish afterwards famous'.³

These earliest specimens of Dickens's writing belong to two very important phases of his early life. The first is a product of what he came to think of as the golden period of his Chatham childhood, when he was aged between five and ten years. The second comes from what we might call his rally, that took place between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, when his interrupted schooling was at last resumed, and he could once more publicly enjoy the status of a middle-class young gentleman after the humiliation of drudging in a blacking factory. Considered together, therefore, the two items derive considerable poignancy from our knowledge of the decidedly grim – albeit highly stimulating imaginatively – time that intervened between the writing of the childhood note and of the schoolboy letter. Some twenty-five years later this period was to inspire in Dickens some very passionate writing indeed, the so-called 'autobiographical fragment', which, as will become apparent in the next chapter, is our primary source of knowledge about what happened to him during that dark time. Now, however, we must go back to his very earliest years and the date when, long before he himself could write a word, he was a cause of writing for his father.

On Monday 10 February 1812 readers of *The Hampshire Telegraph* and *The Hampshire Courier* found this advertisement in their respective journals: 'BIRTHS – on Friday, at Mile-end Terrace, the Lady of John Dickens, Esq., a son'. It is a self-consciously genteel announcement placed by a man who, in 1785, had been born as the second son of upper servants in the household of John Crewe of Crewe Hall in Cheshire. He had apparently received a good education, probably thanks to Crewe, and since 1805 had been pursuing a successful career, with a steadily rising income, in the Navy Pay Office, his initial appointment there being also most likely owing to Crewe's patronage. He worked first at Somerset House in London and while there wooed and won

the petite and pretty nineteen-year-old Elizabeth Barrow, daughter of Charles Barrow and sister of his friend and fellow-clerk Thomas Barrow, who held the important post of Chief Conductor of Money in Towns. John had been posted to Portsmouth, thereby qualifying for an 'outport allowance' of five shillings a day in addition to his regular salary. His total income for 1808 had been nearly £200, quite enough on which to marry respectably. On 13 June 1809 he made a flying visit to London to marry Elizabeth, returning with her to the brand-new Portsea house he had taken at annual rental of £35. On 28 October 1810 their first child, Frances, always known as Fanny, was born there, her birth being announced in the local press in similar fashion to Charles's.⁴

Born on 7 February, Charles was baptised Charles John Huffham Dickens in the local parish church on 4 March. He was named after his maternal grandfather even though, two years before, that distinguished relative had been obliged to flee the country in disgrace, having been detected in systematically defrauding the Pay Office of the huge sum of £5,689, over several years. Happily, his exposure seems to have had no adverse effect whatever on the careers of either his son or his son-in-law. Charles's third given name, Huffham (a baptismal-register misspelling for Huffam), complimented his godfather, a prosperous rigger to the Royal Navy who lived in Limehouse. His business must often have required Huffam to visit Portsmouth Dockyard where he would have met John, who was doubtless happy to cultivate the friendship of so flourishing and well-connected a man.

During the first six years of Dickens's life his parents moved house no less than five times and it seems likely that this restlessness affected Dickens in his later life when he seemed to have some sort of need for constant changes of environment. Within four months of his birth John and Elizabeth moved to a lodging-house in Hawke Street, Portsea, 'a most respectable locality'. From there they soon after moved to more spacious premises in Wish Street, Southsea, where Elizabeth's recently-widowed sister, the twenty-six-year-old Mary Allen, came to join them, her annual £50 pension as the widow of a naval officer being doubtless a welcome addition to the household income. Dickens's earliest memory as told to Forster probably belongs to Wish Street though Dickens himself specified Portsea.

He has often told me that he remembered the small front garden to the house at Portsea, from where he was taken away when he was two years old, and where, watched by a nurse through a low kitchen-window almost level with the gravel walk, he trotted about with something to eat, and his little elder sister with him.

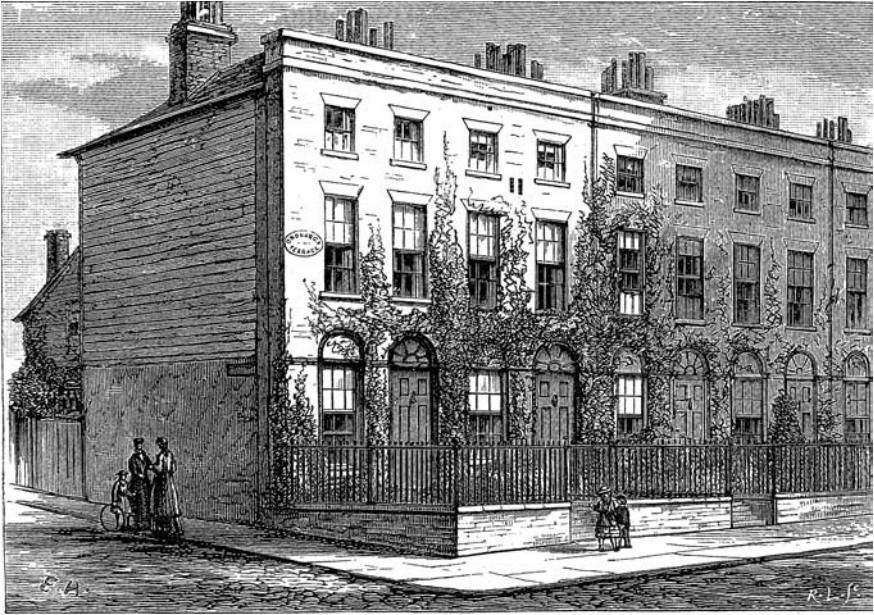
It was an idyllic memory that, over forty years later, and two years after Fanny's sadly early death from consumption, was to inspire Dickens to write a

brother/sister fantasy-piece called ‘A Child’s Dream of a Star’ for his journal *Household Words* (6 April 1850). His earliest experience of a sibling death took place, in fact, in Wish Street when his little brother, Alfred Allen Dickens, born in March 1814, died (of ‘water on the brain’ according to a notice in the local press) at the age of six months.⁵

Other memories of Dickens’s earliest years in Portsea and Southsea may be found in his journalism though we must always keep in mind that his essays are brilliantly *composed* pieces, the work of a master of language seeking to achieve particular effects – comic, humorous, pathetic, indignation-rousing, and so on. It is always risky, therefore, for biographers to take them as straightforwardly autobiographical, even though Dickens himself may have been happy for his readers so to interpret them. The purported memories of his earliest Christmases, which would have been in Portsea and Southsea, do seem very authentic, however, especially the description of his reaction to certain disturbing toys detailed in ‘A Christmas Tree’ (*HW*, 21 Dec.1850) – like the startling jack-in-the-box, ‘a demoniacal Counsellor in a black gown, with an obnoxious head of hair and a red cloth mouth, wide open, who was not to be endured on any terms’. So also does the incident described in his essay ‘New Year’s Day’ (*HW*, 1 May 1859) describing how he was carried downstairs in a woman’s arms on New Year’s Eve to be shown ‘a very long row of ladies and gentlemen sitting against a wall, all drinking at once out of little glass cups with handles, like custard cups’ and looking like his first idea of ‘the good people in Heaven, as I derived it from a wretched picture in a Prayer-book’.⁶

In January 1815 John Dickens was recalled to London and Dickens always remembered the family coming away from Portsmouth in the snow. The loss of the outport allowance meant a drop in John’s income but this was partly offset by a rise in his basic salary in respect of his ten years’ service. The family went into lodgings in Norfolk Street (now Cleveland Street), Marylebone, where a fourth child, Letitia Mary, was born in April 1816, John describing himself on the baptismal register not as a Government clerk but as ‘Gentleman’. Thus it was in his fifth and sixth years that Dickens had his first experience of the city that was to become the main setting for – and in a sense the main character in – most of his writings. His only published remembrance of this period, however, if it is indeed a genuine memory and not an invented comic set-piece, occurs in the already-cited essay ‘New Year’s Day’. There he describes how ‘a grim and unsympathetic old personage of the female gender’ frog-marched him to a huge toy bazaar in Soho Square and ordered him to choose a present costing not more than half-a-crown.⁷

At the end of 1816 John was posted to Chatham Dockyard and, after a brief stay in Sheerness, the family, which still included Mary Allen, moved into No. 2 Ordnance Terrace, a newly-built house advertised for sale as ‘commanding beautiful views’ and ‘fit for the residence of a genteel family’. Here they were to



2 Ordnance Terrace, Chatham. The Dickens family lived in the second house from the left

live for four years, waited on by two live-in servants, a young nursemaid called Mary Weller and an older woman called Jane Bonny. These four years, plus a further one in a smaller house in St Mary's Place, Chatham, seem to have been extremely happy ones for the young Dickens, and richly nourishing to the life of his imagination. Vividly detailed memories of places, people and incidents belonging to this time were to feed into his writings from his 'Our Parish' sketches in *Sketches by Boz* in the 1830s right up to the 'Uncommercial Traveller' essays he wrote for his second weekly journal, *All The Year Round*, in the last decade of his life. Particularly notable in this respect are 'Dullborough Town' (*AYR*, 30 June 1860) and 'Nurse's Stories' (*AYR*, 8 Sept. 1860). These were the titles Dickens gave the essays when he collected them in volume form but in the magazine itself they are indexed under the joint title 'Childhood Associations'. In 'Dullborough Town' he feigns to be returning for the first time since childhood to the town in which he had passed his 'earliest days'. He depicts Dullborough as an amalgam of the three Medway towns of Chatham, Strood and Rochester, and serio-comically evokes the glamour and excitement they had held for him as a child when they were, in Forster's phrase, 'the birthplace of his fancy'. In 'Nurse's Stories' he remembers another, and more sensational, source of imaginative stimulation in his childhood. From an amused but still responsive adult perspective he retells some of the comic/horrific bed-time