

**For my dear friend, Mitchell Wainwright**

### **THE STRANGER**

Having finished my night walk in search of interesting faces and voices whose owners might be fashioned into new characters, I am looking forward to an early breakfast of coffee, gammon, sausages and eggs in Ludgate. It is a day in mid April and the night has been chilly. Now the sun is powering up and might even become strong enough to release the miasmas which have been hibernating in the Thames these long, dreary months. I linger on Westminster Bridge admiring the boats, barges and wherries putting in from or setting out for Tilbury and the Channel beyond, and am enchanted by the fragments of the sun dancing on the slow river. The heated voices of the sailors, dockers and bargees come up like the cries of seabirds. Somewhat heated myself from my exertions, I undo my overcoat to admit the last caresses of the night-breeze. The Houses of Parliament stand inscrutable in anticipation of renewed blasts of hot air; the offices of government in Whitehall, those impregnable bastions of timelessness, wait patiently for yet another stagnant day.

It has been - as far as inspiration, if not exercise, goes - a rather fruitless night. The streetwalkers know me well and never bother to approach. At about two o' clock, I watched with interest a brawl outside a public house but could not ascertain its causes in the tumult of oaths emitted by its participants and aiders and abettors; it might have been one of those odd circumstances which set my narrative sinews to flexing; but, alas, the bobbies soon arrived to clear the pavement and have the door of the tavern barred. I walked on along the street and into others which apart from the occasional constable, pure-gatherers and cabs were empty, making perfect dark tunnels for the echoes of my footfalls. At one point, I sensed I had a follower. A robber? A swift turn of my head revealed however only a scuttling cat.

London, that frowsy old beast, had gradually settled down to a fitful slumber amidst many noises off, unattributable to any physical phenomenon, cries as from a troubled sleeper dreaming perhaps of debts; of the means to feed the dear ones another day more; of ways to elude or delude the landlord; indeed, of the very point of such a chevvied existence. And yet it would soon tumble out of bed, unrefreshed, preferring - just - its bustle, gloom, stench and soot to the cold darkness everlasting below it.

I cannot sleep; at least, not by choice at night when I should. The sights, smells and sounds of the city haunt and tease me as soon as I close my eyes. If sleep comes, it comes in briefly, uninvited, like a sudden shower in spring; as I sit by the fire with the newspaper; as I wonder at table what might be for pudding; as I settle back in a cab or stay for a while on a bench in Green Park. And the strange thing is that I dream for just a few minutes - (for I always check with my watch or a distant clock) - into which an entire narrative is compressed which, at the time of dreaming makes obvious sense but at the time of waking leaves me in a state of incredulity; incredulity that my weary brain was capable of conceiving such a detailed, extravagant nonsense.

In the half-hour I have been standing here, my thoughts wandering, the trickle of clerks across the bridge to their desks has become a steady stream to rival almost the one below. The seats of their trousers, having been steadily buffed into a shine by the stools which, in their fidgets, they have steadily buffed, reflect something of the sun. But their faces are gloomy and grey. I try to imagine the thoughts they conceal. Does this face denote an awareness of the futility of his workaday existence - or is it my prejudice against his trade to which he is an innocent recruit? Perhaps there has been a domestic dispute; or an illness in himself or in someone close depresses him; or - and of this there is ample evidence in a system which rewards him and his fellows less

generously than the benefit it derives from them - he has financial worries to the extent that few coppers jingle in his pocket this morning, six days after it was filled; if that is the correct word. Cabs are now threading their way through this poor throng of slaves conveying their masters to their offices, men intent on leaving the nation's affairs that evening in more or less the same state as they had been the night before and the one before that...

As I turn to look back east into Lambeth to see if there was any sign of an end to this dismal procession, a youngish fellow, not twenty yards away, leaning on the rail, smiles. He is tall and dressed as a workman in a navy blue jacket of serge, brown corduroy trousers and black cap, from underneath which fair hair is spilling out. His appearance arrests my gaze; in contrast to the light colour of his hair, his beard, rather similar to mine in length and shape is quite dark; his skin, inconsistent with his station in life, is pink and his eyes are bright. His face is not flattened like the round pie of the London working man but sharp; his nose is prominent, even distinguished and his forehead is high and broad. In taking all this in, I must have looked longer at him than propriety allows, for he smiles again and raises his hand from the rail. Have I mistaken this as a salutation to someone standing to my left? I turn and find no-one there. Embarrassed, and of no mind to make his acquaintance, I break off abruptly for Westminster, turn right along the Embankment and head for The Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street, about a mile away.

I push open the door of the inn to be greeted by the wonderful aroma of smoked gammon and coffee, interlaced with swirls of cigar and pipe smoke. The serving girl looks even more delightful than I have anticipated, standing hands on hips and smiling at my entrance.

"You are a little late this morning", Mr Dickens," she says sweetly. "Shall I put an extra log on the fire?"

She leads me to my table in the left hand corner and asks me if it is to be my usual.

"Er, no, Dorothy. I am more hungry than usual. Two grilled kidneys in addition would be most welcome."

"So, coffee, scrambled eggs. a gammon steak, kidneys, two rounds of toast and marmelade?"

"Indeed. And could you bring me the morning paper?"

I watch her glide away between the tables, as most customers do openly or clandestinely, for she is a beautiful, unspoilt girl of sixteen or seventeen, blessed with astonishing blue eyes and glossy dark brown hair which she ties back in a pony tail; she puts me in mind of my dear Maria (*my* Maria? If only it had been so; if only Providence, having caused our paths to cross and our eyes to meet, had arranged for us to share thereafter a common path, hand-in-hand! Would it not have been better if such a cruel Providence had overlooked us altogether?) Maria had inspired my portrait of Madeline Bray in *Nicholas Nickleby*, daughter of a selfish father. I know from a waiter here who pities and admires Dorothy that she is similarly encumbered, by a widowed mother who is an invalid but far less incapable than she professes herself to be. By dint of my wanderings and acute ears, I know of many a girl who is slave to such parental selfishness. The staff call Dorothy Dorrit. I have it in mind to bring that side-show featuring the travails of Miss Bray into centre-stage in a novel still in embryonic form; Little Dorrit shall sacrifice herself for a father foolish, self-pitying and impractical with money like my own parent. She lives, I know, a short walk away where this grandeur gives way by degrees to squalor; she is a pearl amongst the rough, encrusted shells of the Poor, destined to remain undiscovered unless prepared to sacrifice, not her freedom and independence, as I intend her literary counterpart to do, but her honour and virtue as a hostess in the dubious world of the salons, dining clubs and gaming houses, populated - or better, infested - by rich dissolute men with greedy eyes and niggardly hearts. Her shapely

form and easy elegance would inspire envy in the hearts of her so-called Betterers who have been to Finishing Schools to acquire what she has inherited from Nature. She is both a delight to watch and to engage in conversation. Her eyes shine with a natural intelligence. Her education has been, no doubt, rudimentary. Her example bears sorry witness to a pool of native wit which goes for ever untapped in this century of supposed Progress, a resource which could be of immense value to the nation and would, if acknowledged and properly refined, enhance beyond measure the happiness of its possessors.

My reverie is interrupted by the change of air introduced by the opening of the street door. A dark figure appears in the breakfast room and hesitates. I am astonished to realize that it is the very fellow from Westminster Bridge. I leave my breakfast, just arrived, and the crisp folded newspaper untouched. The room is now in an abrupt state of paralysis. Any elephant, huge or small, ambling in could have scarce induced more astonishment than this humble apparition. This is a coffee house and inn frequented by the worthies of Chancery and of The Temple, by chief clerks, businessmen and retired officers; one gentleman, whom I have inwardly christened The Colonel, grey-whiskered, with belly straining the endurance of his mustard-yellow waistcoat buttons, seems to be on the verge of protest when Dorothy makes straight for the newcomer and ushers him to a table two away from mine. She has her back to me when addresses him with a "Good morning, Mr D ~ " (I do not catch the name but it sounded like Drew) - "I hope you slept well."

"Thank you. I awoke early and the porter let me out. I have been walking and exploring!" His voice is melodious and pleasant. Is he American or Canadian? A convict returned from Australia? The Colonel is staring at me, forehead wrinkled and great red nose out of joint, as if to enlist my support in having the fellow instantly thrown into the street, but I make believe that I have just noticed something astonishing on the ceiling beams while I listen intently to the low conversation taking place within a few feet of me.

"I could bring you a pair o' kippers, Sir, if you are not fond of meat - (the Colonel's eyebrows disappear into his hairline) - or a bowl of porridge sweetened with honey and toast to follow?"

"Two kippers with bread and butter would be just fine, Dorothy."

He knows her name! A pang of jealousy pierces my heart but I am more intrigued than jealous. I eat my breakfast with little relish being less taken up with the savouring of it than with the effort in affecting to be oblivious of the glances with which the stranger is favouring me. I turn a page or two of the newspaper and then leave it be. He gets up at last and comes close.

"Would you mind, Sir, if I take a squint at The Times - if you have finished with it?"

"No, not at all."

I am relieved. While he envelops his face in the paper I can at least enjoy two halves of a pig's kidney and look forward to my toast. When my neighbour rises, having swiftly seen off his kippers, and brings the newspaper back, I expect him to make some opening remark in an effort to acquaint himself with me, but he merely thanks me and makes to go.

"Did you not read the report on the terrible Pittsburgh fire, Sir?" I say in spite of a resolution to keep silent.

"Yes, I did. Though I already knew of it. Thank you."

He stretches and approaches the counter which Dorothy, in a momentary absence of service, is polishing. He takes from his trousers a leather purse and loosens the thong. A great many shiny coins spill out in front of Dorothy's astonished eyes.

"Shall I pay for the breakfast now?" he enquires. "Is a sovereign enough?"

The room draws a deep breath.

“Oh. Laws!” says sweet Dororthy. “Far too much, Sir! The breakfast will be added to your final bill.”

“I see.”

So saying, he quits the dining room and climbs the staircase.

“An Innocent abroad,” mutters the Colonel. “Prey to every villain in London. What does he mean by coming in here dressed like a wharfinger?”

Having no inclination to engage myself in conversation with such an unimaginative and prejudiced fellow, I take immediate refuge in the newspaper and am amazed to read in the margin of page five, written in pencil, the following:

Mr Dickens - allow me first to express my admiration of your work. I have come from afar in the hope that you might do me the honor of granting me a short interview. Having been out most of the night. I need now to keep to my room but shall be at your disposal at any time after three, should you condescend to ask for me at the reception desk,

E.D.

My first and most natural reaction is to suspect that his is a novel and extravagant attempt to persuade me to undertake a second speaking tour of America. My second thought is that my impression of being followed was correct after all. My third is to resent it. I beckon Dorothy to come over. She smiles so beguilingly that I almost stammer.

“What can you tell me, child, about - this gentleman - him just departed?”

I say this when she is close enough for me to whisper, having not the least desire to allow my crusty neighbour an opportunity to interfere.

“Is he.....what is he?”

“He arrived last night about eight, Sir. The Governor was all of a mind not to admit him - then he produces his purse o’ gold which makes his eyes as big as saucers. And the genn’leman spoke so nice and friendly that he was won over quick - but the gold done the trick, I reckon.”

“How long does he stay, child?”

“Oh, you must ask the Governor, Sir. He stays in the best room and he told Bessie upstairs that he’s on a special mission.”

“You are a good girl, Dorothy. How much do I owe?”

“Three and six, Sir.”

“Well here is a crown - take eighteen pence for yourself.”

“Oh, you are wery kind.”

“One more thing. Did I hear you call him Drew?”

“No, Sir. An uncommon name. Drood. Mr Edwin Drood.”

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Having been unable to resist sleep, I awoke before noon and gave my wife instructions that I was not to be disturbed in my writing room where I put down this account as far the Reader, on the assumption of his curiosity being engaged, has so far perused. But I can go no further, speculation being pointless when *my* curiosity can be assuaged by accepting the invitation so strangely issued that morning. I collect my hat and cane and have a cab summoned.

There are only a few guests in the coffee room and some are having a late luncheon. Dorothy is at leisure to clear and polish a table or two.

“Ah, Mr Dickens!” she exclaims. “Uncommon of you to honour us with your presence at this ‘our of the day.’”

She inclines her pretty head to a fresh and neat table near the fireplace where I order coffee and crumpets.

“I have a mystery for you,” says she upon her return. “You being such a clever genn’leman, p’raps you can fathom what this is.”

She takes from her pinafore something grey with slightly rounded corners, about the size of a playing card, shiny and inscribed with a great many numerals and letters in rows interspersed with symbols such as \* > and + . Strange as these are, it is not they which poses the greatest puzzle but the material of which the thing is composed, being not of metal, though shiny and not of card, and oddly flexible. Had my life depended upon it, I would have to say it was a novel kind of glass. I ask Dorothy where it has been found and she tells me that Bessie had picked it up while sweeping the landing carpet.

“We think it might belong to the foreign genn’leman - an Hungarian - what left after midday. Mysterious he was. Kept to his room and had his supper and breakfast took up.....Sourpuss.”

But the name Drood immediately darts into my head. A special mission? I have read that spies are coming from overseas to copy our inventions - as thieves at home and abroad steal the inventions of my brain.

“May I keep this, child? A scientific friend of mine would know what this is.”

“Well that genn’leman being gone, it ain’t the least bit o’ good to us. Bess nearly threw it in the fire.”

“Could you let Mr Drood know that I am here and would like to speak to him - if it is not inconvenient. And Dorothy - if he or anyone else should ask after this card, kindly say you know nothing of it; if Mr Drood mentions its loss, I shall of course take great pleasure in surprising him with its return.”

“Oh. I never thought it might be ‘is. He is such a nice, friendly man, I would never think him mysterious or suspicious.”

I immediately see confirmed what I have already deduced - from the more extraordinary brightness of her eyes and extra perkiness of her manner - what kind of regard is kindling in the lovely bosom of Dorothy for handsome Mr Drood.

Presently, he appears, smiles winningly at Dorothy and sits in the chair next to mine. I offer him coffee and he accepts.

“Permit me to say, Sir, that I was not best pleased to be approached in such unconventional fashion, nor was I pleased to be followed. However, I am thoroughly aware, having been over to America, of differences in manners between your countrymen and ours. Autre pays, autres moeurs as the French have it. But equally valid is the nostrum of doing as the Romans do in Rome.”

“I am sorry, Mr Dickens,” says he with a smile, not apologetic at all. “I took a risk that might seem melodramatic But knowing your love of the Theatrical so much in evidence in your novels, I hoped thereby to tempt you to the extent that your reticence would be overcome by your curiosity, fearing that any routine approach for an introduction would be met with a snub - for you must tire greatly of the tedious ways strangers use to engage you in conversation.”

“Indeed I do, Sir. The efficacy of your reasoning is clearly demonstrated by the object of your attentions being now seated next to you. You are Mr Drood?”

“Drood indeed, Drood Edwin.”

I can judge by the slight, unvarying smile around his lips which shows itself as a gleam in his eyes that he thinks he excels me in something; it cannot be in intelligence. In what then? Some knowledge in which I have no share. A secret? About a matter pertinent to me? What abhorrent

presumption and arrogance! My fingers reach out to tweak his eminently tweakable nose to shock him out of it, but grasp the coffee cup instead.

“Drood. An unusual name.”

“A compliment indeed from one so original in nomenclature! Noggs, Wittiterly, Squeers.....”

“You have read Nicholas Nickleby then?”

“Indeed I have. I consider it to be nothing short of a work of comic genius. Of biting satire and an oblique indictment of your cruel society -”

“Mine? Ours? Not yours then, which I take to be America ? - though you have not yet confirmed it.”

This seems to disconcert him for he blushes and fumbles his words, uttered previously with an elegance which I had never encountered in plain-speaking New York. I examine him more closely and he retreats. He takes a deeper breath preparatory to speaking, but only presses his lips tighter together and smiles. He takes a sip of coffee and clears his throat.

“Do you have any further observation to volunteer on the relative rottenness of our values?” I ask, pressing home my advantage.

“Well, Sir, cruelty, ignorance, poverty and injustice are not the exclusive provinces of the English. Neither is hypocrisy. I misspoke.”

“Misspoke? What a strange verb. Our tongues diverge apace. But I am glad to hear you admit that the English have nothing to teach the New World or the rest of the world on those scores, for men, I believe, are not a great deal better or worse in whatever corner of it they despoil. Now, my time is rather short. In what matter may I be of assistance to you?”

Just then, Dorothy offers us more coffee and I observe how much taken Drood is with her and, once more, how much she with him. She is at most seventeen and he about six-or-seven-and twenty. In spite of my natural jealousy, my noble part sees at once a golden opportunity for her to bloom under the purer skies of a New World away from this sour, sooty, smouldering air of London. We watch her skip away to another table.

“She is an extraordinarily pretty girl, is she not, Mr Drood?”

“She is, in truth, extraordinary; a case in point. Were ordinary boys and girls drawn from their state of ignorance up their maximum potential, all would be extraordinary. How much better then might the world you complain of, be? I sense you are not naturally misanthropic - there is a sentimental yearning for goodness in your work which is not simply there to please your public. I know from your writing that you are a champion of reform and amelioration. You ask, in what matter may you be of assistance to me? To discuss these very themes with you - that is my mission!”

“Is that all? Well, you underestimate the resistance in this rusted-up mechanism that is England to moral change! In technology, Britannia is a sprite; in social advance, a chrone. Since the French had the audacity to cut off a great many fat, greedy, jowled heads, change is seen as revolution. Educating boys - and my goodness girls - from the gutter would induce such dissatisfaction with their lot that they would rip off their pinafores and hobnail boots and create such mayhem on those streets that they would soon run with blood. Buckingham Place would be a doss-house for vagabonds! So say those who oppose all improvement in the lot of poor people, slum-dwellers and the rest. They prefer to spend their money on themselves, not their brothers and sisters who they deem to be poor, not by their own niggardliness, but by the Will of God! Are you a Radical, Edwin Drood? How came you here? What is your true purpose? Be careful not to come to the attention of the police!”

“I intend to leave tomorrow. I have accomplished what I meant to do.”

“Which was?”

“To study and speak to you. No more.”

“You have crossed an entire ocean to spy on me and sit with me a while?”

He falls silent. Finally, he thrusts out his hand with some emotion and I take it, urging him to stay a while longer. I see Dorrit glance over red-faced - she heard him declare his intention of leaving! - and now he matches her look with an intense one of his. She drops a plate! She never drops a plate. She puts her hands to her crimson face and he goes straight to her. She holds out her pinafore while he puts the crocks into it. My head fills with a rush of ideas! Here is my new love story and I only need a villain or two to stand cruelly in the way of my Holborn Romeo and Juliet, and a few gargoyles to decorate the facade! And of course, love will triumph in the final chapter!

With my head simmering and over-brimming with plot, subplot and characterisation, I hurry out and hail a cab for home, examining a variety of faces from the windows to audition for the supporting fops, fools and rough diamonds. The arrival of an American in London will need some explaining. To meet an admired novelist? Absurd! And here my train of thought comes off the rails. This cannot be. Drood is lying. I finger the card in my waistcoat pocket. Here is a mystery far more intriguing than an American Romeo - and a Juliet from Bleeding Heart Yard.

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The next morning I enter the inn at eight o’ clock and find pretty little Dorrit much out of countenance. I assume he has left. The fool!

“Would you like your usual, Mr Dickens?” she asks miserably. “Or kidneys again?”

“Just the usual, Dorothy. Are you out of sorts?”

At this, a tear rolls down her downy cheek.

“No, Sir. It is Mr Drood. He was took ill and I am the cause.”

Love-sick? Has she refused his advances? I ask her to explain.

“Come and sit a little while, child. You are not very busy yet.”

“But the Governor...”

“Leave him to me. Here, take a little sip from my brandy flask.”

She does so, coughs and shines her wet, grateful eyes on mine. She tells me of how Drood had come to the counter the evening before in a terrible state, demanding to know if a card had been found. The Governor had, of course, shaken his head.

“I overheard this and I thought of what you told me and was tempted to say something but I stayed mum - even though the poor man was in tears, saying he couldn’t go home without it - and how dangerous it was to stay longer.”

“And of course, Dorrit, you hold him in high esteem you like him a lot.”

She looks into her lap in shame. I ask her gently to tell me what happened next.

“He was like a Bedlamite,” she sobbed.

He had run out into the street and looked up and down, frantically interrogating passers and entering shops.

“And when he came back he fainted. Joseph and the potboy carried him upstairs. Doctor Broadfoot was sent for. He fears some kind of mental breakdown and has ordered him to stay abed. What shall I do? Shall I go up and tell him?”

“No, Dorrit. Leave it to me. When I have breakfasted I shall go up and see him. I have his property. All will be will.”

Oh, glory! To see the gloomy clouds lift from those vernal eyes! She takes my hand and thanks me, almost kisses me, alights from the chair like a butterfly stirred into flight by sunshine and is on her mazy way. How lucky that man whose sweetheart she will be! If it were only possible to cast a spell on Time and be not a youth of those bygone years but of these now - where I count already three-and-thirty.

But let us not delay over such vain, selfish thoughts - or over breakfast. I eat it the more quickly, anxious to relieve the poor young fellow of his symptoms, though more excited by the prospect of discovering the truth about his mission.

When I reach the landing a further surprise awaits me. While breakfasting I have heard loud voices on the other side of the door and a tramp of feet on the stairs but paid no heed to the circumstances. Outside room nine there stands a portly bobby, looking very severe. I tell him I would like a word with Mr Drood.

"Can't be 'ad, Sir," he tells me, rocking in his boots. "Sergeant Bucket 'as just gorn in to hin'erview 'im. And 'as left hexpress horders that nobdy should be hadmitted...Sir."

"Will you please tell your sergeant that Mr Charles Dickens the author wishes to speak with both parties, being, he thinks, in possession of a fact material to the matter in hand which could alleviate the suffering of the one and shed light on whatever perplexes the other...."

"Hauthor?" says he, rocking with hands behind back. "Mr Dickens, if my sergeant 'as given horders that no-one comes in, Prince Halbert 'imself would not cross the threshold. You do not know Segeant Bucket. 'E is a force of natur like a nailstorm and is not be crossed. And I, PC James O'Bundance, is not the fella to cross'im."

Suddenly, the door opens a few inches and a saggy face like a rubber mask, ill-fitting, bewhiskered, with a prominent wart on the forehead thrusts itself into the dark gap.

"Will you desist out 'ere!" it growls. "A man inside is took quite poorly and Bucket here can scarce 'ear what 'e says. O'Bundance? Send this gentleman down."

The door goes to close and I swiftly interpose the point of my right boot between it and the jamb. The eyes of that astonishing face stare at it in disbelief and then at me in disgust.

"Are you the landlord?"

"No, Sergeant. I am Charles Dickens, novelist, and am given to understand that the gentleman within caused a little disorder in the street last night and - if your reason for being here is indeed, as I am presuming, to seek an explanation of his conduct - I would like to speak on his behalf."

"Would you indeed? Novelist, you say? Might you be the wery person what wrote of that rogue Fagin and Bill Sykes?"

"The very same."

He opens the door a fraction wider looking decidedly evil.

"Bucket here only wishes it was as easy to catch 'em as what it is in your books!"

Then he smiles, causing his cheeks to rise like two ruched drapes, thereby revealing what a pleasant man he is at heart, forever troubled and mystified, I sense, and angered by the unpleasantness of his fellows, to which he had no choice - however much he hoped to procure an improvement in them by his efforts - but to resign himself. He shakes me by the hand and orders O'Bundance to send anybody else straight downstairs

"Without exception."

The room is gloomy, the curtains drawn to and the air stale. A candle flame wobbles on a sideboard. A face is propped up against a pillow; it is like a pale moon framed by a cloud in an inky sky; the eyes are dark craters.

"My dear fellow," I begin. "What ails you so much?"

He can barely move his head and he cannot speak.

“Do you know this person well, Mr Dickens? An American? ‘E has no passport. Says it is lost with a card ‘e must ‘ave. He scarce makes sense.”

“But, Sergeant, why are you here? As far as I am given to understand, his only misdemeanour was to ask certain people in the street and shopkeepers nearby a little too - strenuously - if his property had been found! Is he suspected of some crime?”

Bucket takes me by the arm to the window and pulls the curtain back a fraction. He points in the direction of Greyfriars. He explains that a jeweller not five streets away had suffered a snatch robbery three days previous when a number of rings were taken and around thirty sovereigns scooped from a till.

“The jeweller,” he whispers “was understandably quite shocked and could give no good description of his assailant it ‘appened so quick - except that he wore the clothes of a working man. Well, last night, an elderly gentleman what breakfasts ‘ere came into our police-office, ‘aving got wind of this robbery, and reports a suspicious person in this establishment who looks like a wherryman flashing sovs like a duke. So, Mr Dickens, Sergeant William Bucket of ‘olborn police-office is bound to investigate. Or ain’t he?”

“Of course you must. But that old gentleman - for whom I have the greatest respect - could not be wider of the mark. Mr Drood is no more criminal than you or I!”

I glance at the pale face and observe what I take to be a flicker of a smile in gratitude. I cannot, I tell Bucket, account for Drood’s eccentric dress and can only speculate that it accords with some style currently in fashion in New York.

“But I shall swear that he is honest and that he has his money honestly, for he has brought it here - (I take a deep breath) - as down payment for a drama which his employer, a man of the theatre, hopes to commission from me for the New York stage.”

The dismal eyes on the pillow widen and the head raises itself a little and smiles before falling back with a sigh as if in sudden recollection of the misery which has consigned it here. The sergeant goes very close and asks him slowly to confirm that this is true, whereupon my patience is suddenly exhausted.

“Why, Sir! Do me the courtesy of believing what I say!”

“And,” retorts he, no less furious “do Bucket the courtesy of allowing him to do ‘is job, which is to get at the truth and ‘ave it corroborated, for he ‘ears more lies in his trade than a Cockney ‘ears bells! Mr Drood, is it true what this gentleman says?”

“It is,” he whispers.

“So, you got these sovs at a bank?”

“In exchange for dollars.”

“You have the docket?”

“Lost.”

“Which bank?”

He shakes his head and rests his cheek on the pillow. Bucket picks up a coin from the pile which has already been poured out of the purse.

“Now, Sir,” says he to Drood “here is a mystery which we ‘ope you can explain. I lost this, that and the other - won’t do anymore. Here is one of ‘Er Majesty’s sovereigns. You are possibly not aware of what our statutes demand for counterfeitin’ ‘em - until quite recent, it was an ‘angin’ matter - and in Bucket’s ‘umble opinion - though it ain’t worth a spit - it still should be.

Anyways, for makin’ ‘em, for possessin’ ‘em and spendin’ ‘em brings a long time in stir or a trip to a far away colony. Mr Dickens, what year of our Lord is it please?”

“You know as well as I - it is the year 1845!”

“Do you agree, Mr Drood?”

“I do.”

“Then kindly explain this sov, because William Bucket has not the intellect to come closer than freezin’ cold.”

He passes me the coin. I weigh it in my hand and examine it. Then, amazed, I see what he means. The date.

“1846!” I exclaim.

As if an experimental body in the hands of Signor Galvani, Drood shoots forward from the pillow, eyes ablaze, appeals loudly to God and falls back groaning. For an instant, I think he has given up the ghost but the vein in his neck is pulsing rapidly. I examine the shiny coin in the palm of my hand. It bears the true likeness of our gracious Majesty and the inscription matches that of the coin I have just drawn from my own pocket.

“It is either a very clever counterfeit or an amazing mistake!” I declare.

“A mistake - a crass blunder!” groans the patient.

Bucket takes it from my hand and flips it into the air, before putting it to his teeth.

“Well,” he says with a frown, “see here, look.....dented. Brass. A wrong ’un.”

The patient blows out the breath he has been holding and, this time, in a whisper, thanks God.

Bucket turns on him savagely.

“You thank God for the debasing of the Queen’s currency, do you, Sir?”

But as Drood can make no reply, I come to his aid.

“Sergeant, do not be too hasty in jumping to judgement. This gentleman in a foreign guest uninitiated in the villainous ways of our capital. That it is in his purse is a self-evident proof that he has made no attempt to pass it off -”

“Oh, please Mr Dickens, credit Bucket with the wit to work that one out for ’isself! Its presence could be took ’owever, as a sign of a future intention to spend it -”

“But if Mr Drood was indeed a counterfeiter or the agent of one, would he not have many more about his person?”

Ignoring me, Bucket wrenches open the door and tells O’Bundance to fetch the jeweller.

“And brook no refusal.”

While we wait Bucket takes me out of earshot of Drood. He tells me of another complaint made against the man. A tobacconist had called into the police-office to report the suspicious conduct of an American gentleman who had made a scene in his shop while a thief had helped himself to some very expensive cigars.

“Som’ing about a lost card. His accomplice in a distraction theft? You yourself ‘ave wrote of such tricks in the roguery of the Artful Dodger. Many a man can fake an American accent - not that Bucket can - but he ain’t a crook. Who’s to say he’s an American? Where’s ‘is passport? Lost like the card. Did ’e mention a lost card to you?”

I reply truthfully in the negative. The jeweller arrives, a fat gentleman with a bruised cheek, of a miserable aspect perversely shared by many a rich man I have had the misfortune to encounter. He ventures close to the bed and stares at its occupant before shaking his globe of a head and whinnying that his assailant had had the face of a pugilist. He is curtly dismissed. Bucket finds his hat and tells Drood that he should try to get some sleep.

“This matter ain’t cleared up to Bucket’s satisfaction yet,” he tells him “his nose itches - though he is inclined to come down on your side. He shall be back in due course.”

With a nod of the head he takes his leave - and within a minute, when I see Drood’s eyes have

closed, I follow the policeman out of the room.

\*

A few hours later I return.

“My dear Dorothy, pray run up and announce to Mr Drood that I wish to invite him to dinner - and that I have some good news.”

Her face is at once alight with joy and in a trice she is scampering upstairs. I walk past the staircase and push open the door of a small private dining room I have reserved. A small fire meanders from coal to coal in the grate and emits just enough warmth for comfort. The set table is placed opposite to it. I draw back the chair facing the door and sit down.

After some twenty minutes, by which time I am giving up hope of entertaining my guest, a faint tap at the door announces his arrival. His face shows itself - pale and anxious and robbed of its assurance. I enquire solicitously about his health but he can only manage a wan smile.

“Pray sit down, Sir. You are in clear need of sustenance. Let me recommend the codfish poached with carrots and potatoes if you dislike meat. I shall have the beef ragout. Wine?”

“Thank you, yes.”

Dorothy comes in for our order and I request a good claret and a dry hock immediately, with port and Stilton cheese to complete our repast.

“Dorothy said you had some good news for me, Mr Dickens,” he says leaning eagerly forward.

“I might. Do you like Dorothy?”

“I do.”

“For she likes you.”

“She does?”

“Oh come man! I am not especially sentimental nowadays - but any man with two glass eyes can see she shares with you a mutual attraction and regard.”

“And this is your good news?” he replies half-crestfallen. “You tell me what I already suspected. I am sorry .....

His voice fails and he looks at the table; he breaks down into tears and sobs that it had been a great mistake to come. Embarrassed, I tell him that this is not manly behaviour.

“By heaven, compose yourself! A score of customers here would give their eye-teeth to win the heart of such a lovely girl.” Not excluding myself.

“Y-you misconstrue me, Sir. I am delighted. Yet heart-broken. What a terrible misfortune.”

I am relieved when wine and soup is brought in. He eyes the soup with suspicion.

“Is this...?”

“Oxtail, Sir.”

“Then please take it away, Dorothy. For I cannot eat it.”

When she has shut the door I tell him that he is fastidious and peculiar.

“I am a pescatarian.”

“I have never heard of it! Our countries diverge indeed.”

“I am not an American,” he suddenly blurts out in a very flat English accent I cannot place. My spoon drops in my soup.

“In which case, I can only respond that you are a complete mystery to me, Mr Drood.”

To my alarm and consternation, he throws back his head and guffaws until it seems to hurt his ribs and steal his breath. When he stops he is exhausted and I notice tears in his eyes again. He takes a mighty swig of his wine. A strong feeling of revulsion wells up in me which cannot be



nationality to be a fraud, I would - having convinced myself of that argument - I would have returned it to you without a quibble, thinking your distress at its loss explained by the degree of its importance, even uniqueness -"

"I *am* American!" he retorts.

"Do not interrupt me with such a contemptible infantile ploy! You are the author of your own downfall in more than one respect, for, unless you tell me the whole unabridged truth about yourself, you shall never see that card more, and indeed, it will end up on the fire into which it was almost thrown by the hand of the one who found it on the stairs!"

"Dorrit? Oh no."

"Not Dorrit. Bessie. Dorrit did apply to me for advice because - modesty makes me hesitate - because of my eminence and repute. Your property is in a safe place."

He placed his tousled head into his hands, murmuring his gratitude to the Almighty.

"A safe place?"

"The safest. And there it shall remain unless and until you resolve to my entire satisfaction the mystery you have concocted about yourself."

He threw his shaking head back as if in the throes of a violent internal debate.

"I need to be sober," he said at last. "If I speak now, whatever I say may give me cause for regret later. Is this ultimatum your final word on the matter?"

"It is. I am tired and weary of you. You are drunk. Take the night to reflect. I bid you farewell. I shall be here, as usual, for breakfast at half-past-eight."

\*

The next morning, Dorrit is in a terrible way. Her reddened eyes cause Drood's mention of self-destruction to leap immediately into my mind. Had my ultimatum been too much for him to bear in the wake of other pressing matters?

"Your u-usual, Sir?" she calls from the far side of the room.

My feet, as if frozen to the floor, will not obey me. What have I done? She comes closer, her lips pressed firmly together, in an ugly and vain attempt to suppress a sob which now escapes them. I take her under my arm and escort her into the passageway from the view of the shocked onlookers.

"Whatever is wrong, child? Is Mr Drood.....?"

"He 'as been - "

Found dead?

"- Arrested. That 'orrible Sergeant what came yesterday, took him to 'Olborn police-office a couple of 'ours arter you left last night. Suspicion o' coun'erteitin'. Come with that big fat bobby an' another and took 'im from 'is room. I'll niver see 'im again."

"I promise you that you will, Dorothy. I shall go straight thither and bail him out."

Her delight and relief cheers me then depresses me - for she has no idea, poor child, that she has indeed fallen in love with a counterfeiter, though not of coin.

I leave without thinking of breakfast and am soon outside that tall building in Bow Street which contains so much suspicion, grief and frailty, at strange discord with its stately façade. Above the chaos of the street, the April sky is a rich blue, the sun has regained his old brilliant composure, and the infrequent trees are doused with that first green mistiness of spring. But none of this is of any comfort to me. I had argued the previous evening with my wife who complains that she rarely sees me and I was tempted to give her the real reason. I picture again the despair of

Dorothy for the sake of a man who is not worthy of her and am tempted to abandon my mission on the spot.

Why is the world so perverse? Why are the Undeserving favoured and the Deserving deprived? God 'as got it up wrong, says a voice in my head which I had captured once when passing a low tavern; a ragged philosopher of the Bleeding Heart.

Wearily I ascend the steps to the main door and apply at the desk to speak to a Sergeant Bucket on an urgent matter. After a short wait I am escorted to a door on the first floor and admitted to a room scarce twice bigger than a broom cupboard, and probably smaller than the cell in which the prisoner is sitting. A yellow fire flickers weakly in the grate, the walls are white-washed, and apart from a small dark brown table and two chairs, an empty bleakness dominates. Or is it a bleak emptiness?

Footsteps in the corridor announce the arrival of Bucket who indeed now hangs his red ugly head around the door, grins or grimaces - it is hard to tell which - and eases himself behind the table onto a deal chair. I am invited to sit on its twin which would no doubt have been quite comfortable had it been truly identical to his; for mine has three legs even and one odd, leading me to infer that this was no accident caused by the incompetent or drunken hand of its maker, but rather the result of a saw cynically used to set suspects at a state of discomfort and unease, and hence disadvantage; the twinkle in Bucket's baggy eyes instantly lends weight to this ungenerous theory.

"Bucket here knows what you're abahnt to say, Mr Dickens. But t'ain't his decision. The Inspector 'ad got it on 'im wery bad yesterday. This ain't the first brass sovereign to turn up round 'ere recently. He suspects there's a gang o' foreigners at the back on it. On top of which he 'ad a wery bad toothache all day - *and* 'e broke 'is pocket watch."

"When is the hearing?"

"Later this morning, next door. Just committal and formalities."

"I shall stand bail."

"Might be tasty. Forgery is frowned on. Last year it cost som'ing like three hundred thousand pound in London alone! One poor devil landed with a false sov arter working his fingers to the bone for a week and who needed it to pay for his wife's funeral, done 'isself in a cause on it".

"A wicked trick. I shall make a note of it."

"Bail depends on the magistrate. Bumstead has a personal irritation problem som'ing wicked and don't like to sit long. Pray it's Smallpiece."

And Smallpiece it turns out to be; an individual whose narrow eyes, suggestive of a narrow mind, cause me more consternation than the prior thought of his colleague's fundamental affliction. Aged about sixty, he is blessed with a countenance in keeping with his metier, for it is set in a grey scowl of determined misanthropy betraying no reservations whatsoever that any man, woman or child he has sent to the gallows, to prison or Australia were any less than guilty as charged and therefore deserving of his judgement; that not a single one of those who had protested, screamed and lamented from the dock was innocent as they had had the temerity to plead. My foreboding in that stuffy wood-panelled room next to the police post, of a want of mercy and sympathy for my new acquaintance increases when he is brought up from the cells looking the very epitome of degeneracy; and I have to surmise that he had continued to wash away his distress with wine after I had taken my leave of him in the inn. His handsome face is fallen, his eyes like two embers in white ash, his mouth floppy like a discarded shoe and his hair and beard all straggles. Ungenerously perhaps, I wish Dorrit here to witness the state of him.

“Armhole,” sneers the magistrate “do the necessary.”

A tiny bewigged head, bent backwards like a nestling expecting a worm, shoots up from the wooden box below and squeakily enquires of the prisoner if he is Edwin Drood.

“I am.”

“Of no fixed abode?”

“None.”

“SPEAK UP!” shrieks the judge. “Armhole, see that he speaks up! Or we shall have him for contempt.”

Armhole clears his throat and continues. “You are charged that on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1845 you were found in possession of a counterfeit sovereign in contravention of the 1837 Forgery Act. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty.”

“Very well,” says the judge wearily. “Proceedings set for?”

“April 20<sup>th</sup>, Your Honour,” squeaks Armhole.

“Does anyone stand bail for Drood?” drones the judge.

I stand.

“And your are, Sir?”

“Mr Charles John Huffam Dickens, novelist.”

He frowns. He sneers. He raises his eyebrows.

“Indeed? The very man. Make a note, Armhole. Huffam? Huff ‘em as in the game of draughts?”

The court titters. I ignore the jibe and spell the name out very slowly for the clerk - and to imply a want of intelligence in His Honour. He narrows even more those slits on either side of his long nose to show he has caught my meaning.

“Let me tell you, Mr Charles John HUFFAM Dickens, that I hated Nicholas Nicholsby and threw it down after only ten pages!”

Tittering turns to giggling and I smile.

“Had you persevered, Your Honour, you would have found great injustices undone in it - which is of course your stock-in-trade. The doing of justice, I mean.”

“Do I detect a vein of facetiousness in your tone SIR?”

“Not at all, not at all. Kindly allow me to speak for this gentleman. He is an American. And so would not know a false sovereign from a true one. Furthermore, having had the opportunity to see the very coin in question, I hazard to say that it would confound even the most perceptive numismatist. Only the date - 1846 - gave it away. Furthermore, could you, Your Honour, or I, or any man present or absent from these venerable proceedings - swear upon his honour, his life or the Holy Bible - that he has never - unbeknownst of course - passed a fake coin in a shop or carried one in his purse or kept one in his exchequer? Furthermore -”

“Furthermore, nothing Sir!” he shouted. “You are not the defence attorney. Hold your tongue! Does the Crown object to bail being given?”

Up shoots Sergeant Bucket from a bench behind me.

“We does, Your ‘Onour.”

“On what grounds? Be brief, Bucket.”

“On several grounds and compelling ones to boot.”

“Several? Do you not know it is nearly lunchtime. Oh.....proceed.”

“First, he says he’s American but ‘as no papers - and only the clothes wot he stands ’ere in - no proof of ‘is name - no docket for the sovereigns he says he got in exchange - and no recollection of the bank. In short, ‘e is a wery suspicious an’ mystifying cove. An’ Bucket don’t trust him,

Your 'Onour. His nose is twitchin' worse this morning and when it twitches bad, it knows, his nose, that it's onto a wrong 'un."

"The Sergeant's nose can hardly be given in evidence!" I cry.

"For public safety" rejoins Bucket "The fellow should remain incarcerated until further enquiries can be made. We mean to get a warrant to search his room."

"Your Honour," I counter "I guarantee that I shall take this gentleman into my own home for safeguarding there. Furthermore, I tell you he is in England to persuade me to write a drama for the American stage. Furthermore, I can produce correspondence to prove same" - (Indeed I could, but not pertinent to Mr Drood's visit) - "Here is no mystery or grounds for suspicion at all! Furthermore, it would be intolerable and a waste of public money to keep an innocent man in prison because an inspector of police broke his pocket watch. Furthermore -"

"Enough! One more furthermore and I shall hold you in contempt," cried the judge. "It was due to your d-n tedious longwinded pomposity that Nickersby went onto the fire! ARMHOLE! A word..."

The clerk stretches to his full length and the judge leans down as if to put a worm in his beak.

They consult with a confluence of unintelligible squeaks and growls, like a chick and a crow.

"Bail is allowed," says the judge sullenly "in the sum of two hundred and fifty pounds."

The court echoes my inward gasp of horror.

We need not dally further in that stifling room, and to describe my journey home with that grateful though rather malodorous gentleman via The Cheshire Cheese to collect his few effects and a joyful if brief reunion with Dorothy would be tedious. The judge's comments had cut me to the quick. Henceforth I shall study brevity.

Within an hour, I have him installed in our guest room after the maid has filled a bath for him and taken away his clothes to be thoroughly washed. He sleeps until the early evening and descends to us refreshed and looking smart in his neatly ironed clothes.

My wife Catherine is rather nervous in strange company and, with my encouragement, elects to join our little ones in another room - and so leaves us to dine together. On the table there soon stands a bottle of good port, a mutton chop, a lobster salad and an apple pie and cream. Drood looks around the room and yet again says he cannot thank me enough.

"I am quite overwhelmed, Mr Dickens. I am having to pinch myself to be sure that I am sitting here in Doughty Street, in your home."

"You are here for two reasons, Mr Drood. The first pertains to my favourite Dorothy Wickfield who has - quite foolishly - fallen in love with you. The second pertains to my burning curiosity about you, which I hope you will presently quench - if you wish to be reunited with a certain item of your property....."

"I have been thinking things over and am not sure that I want it now, though I must have it. Part of me desires to remain here. In London."

"Sir, I have staked two hundred and fifty pounds for you - and I tell you that I shall lose it - for you must flee! To Liverpool. For a ship to the New World. Take Dorothy for a new life. For this I shall gladly forfeit the money. If you are worthy of her. Of this you must convince me. Or I swear I shall denounce you. Who are your parents? Where are you from? What is your history? In short, Sir - who are you?"

"Bring me the card and I will tell you."

"Very well. Pour yourself another glass of port."

"Indeed I shall. And you had better have one yourself."

Our glasses filled, we eye each other. He takes a deep breath and puts a hand into his beard. Then, with a smile, with a wink, and to my utter astonishment, he rips the beard off before beginning the account which I have recorded, as fully as I remember it, below.

“I am, Sir                    a traveller            from                    an Age                    not yet come to be. The card operates in a part of my portmanteau which is thereby expanded into a device to carry its passenger from one Time to another in the past. My name is            Dickens. I am your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson, born in the year 2130. My true year now - then - is 2158. I had the great fortune to win a competition to be the first traveller in time after writing an essay explaining why I would like to meet my famous forebear - for you are still esteemed in my time as a great novelist. My prize was a stay of two days duration. I am now overdue. I fear the card may not work. I was warned of this but incline now to the view that this was an empty threat by my sponsors - for why would they want to keep me here blundering around in the seedbeds of our future, causing anomalies, perhaps a terrible harvest of catastrophes? As a mathematician and a philosopher, I wrote quite convincingly in my essay that the chances of interfering with the course of events-to-be were small, provided that I - one - moved around at night - and two - kept to my room in the day. I agreed to the administration of a potion which would temporarily suppress my - please excuse me - sexual proclivities and capacities - so that, even were I tempted, I would be incapable of fathering a child who might go on to wreak havoc in the world. This did not however prevent me from falling in love and I must confess that the effects of the potion are growing ever weaker. My attraction to this person is due to an amazing coincidence which I am sure that you, grandfather, will easily believe and appreciate, you being the master of coincidences. For Dorothy resembles in many ways - in charm, in countenance and figure - a dear girl lost to me in an accident when I was but sixteen. So alike is she, that I was immediately smitten. I cannot leave her here but cannot take her back - for, apart from a lack of room in my capsule, how can I be sure that the huge amount of energy used in the process would not engender an unfortunate admixture of our atoms and deliver of two beautiful beings a frightful monster to the year 2158? Besides, I have not the means to conduct research into the history of Dorrit in order to ascertain that she will not produce a child or spark an event - here - which are essential to the coming-about of some situation crucial to the future? Were that not to be the case, her displacement from your age to mine would, of course, have no evil consequences - for it would be as if she were born afresh on the brink of a time yet to be made. To me, she is now indispensable, but how can I stay? For as the days increase, so do the chances that my presence shall set in motion a train of chaotic, destabilizing causes and effects. Must I destroy myself? No. Your suggestion of our emigration to America is an excellent one, because there are wide open spaces there where we could settle - and even take the chance of having a child or two! Think of it this way, grandfather - and here I quote from my essay: if we consider human history as a tapestry which grows ever longer and wider, would the absence or the addition of a few strands make any material - literal and metaphorical - difference to the main picture? Let me help you to another glass of port while you ponder these matters, dear grandfather - for I see by your open mouth and staring eyes this perplexes you a good deal - where was I? Yes. The tapestry. Or - better - human history could be deemed a river! Imagine just a few pebbles - or even boulders - more or less being strewn on the river bed - so that it varied somewhat in depths and shallows from its original. That being the case, would the flow or amount of water or the place of its egress into the sea be any more than trivially changed? This Triviality Theory, as much as my kinship with you, helped me to win the prize - but to be quite candid I am not - privately - convinced that it matters a jot whether Henry Tudor or Richard

Plantagenet won that famous battle! Our wicked rulers would have had different persona and names but would, in essentials, have been the same, acting no less selfishly, although, of course the population, due to their affairs, their bestowing of favour and cruelties, would bear different countenances; Charles Dickens might not now exist but some other genius, born rather than unborn, would have opened his - or her eyes on the lamentable state of London and made literary capital of it; and had Mr James Watt not been present to witness the vibration of that kettle lid, sooner or later some innovator would have done. Or perhaps not. But would it matter? Consider also - some great genius - the like of Archimedes - might have already died this year or last in childbirth - as millions have - thus depriving us of great insights and material benefit; but do we lament these improvements ? No. Because we cannot - for we, being less than that genius, cannot imagine what they are! If the music of Wolfgang Mozart were to be of a sudden expunged from the record so that we never heard it more, we would be rightly distressed. But what of the even greater genius which the loins of Leopold Mozard failed to produce, and whose melodies would have been even sweeter than his living brother? Do we miss them? Of course not. This is, as Voltaire had it, the best of all possible worlds, because no other world than this actual one is possible. (I did not introduce these heretical observations into my essay, fearing that some hysterical person on the board of judges, terrified perhaps that they, their spouse or pet dog might suddenly vanish due to my return to this far-off year, would disqualify me. I cannot doubt of the logic and validity of these thoughts. Can you think of an objection? Have I gone too quickly for you? Here let me help you to another glass of port.....There. So, whether the world would be better or worse in consequence of another set of events is a value-judgment and misses the point. It would only be otherwise. The wind would still blow, the rain would still fall etc, etc, etc, The same, similar or entirely different race of men would still get wet and have experiences which they would judge inevitable because experience is as they find. They would not run around crying - if only Richard had killed Henry! If only I could go by train and not by barge! If only I could listen to Robert Mozart? Is there any more port? Brandy perhaps?"

I reach for the bell and ring it until the maid comes in.

"Jennifer, kindly go upstairs and collect together this gentleman's belongings and bring them down. Have Alfred summon a cab."

I take his card from my waistcoat pocket and pass it to him.

"Take it, Mr Drood. You do not belong here and are not welcome to stay. You may wait in the hall."

"No, I do not want it! I prefer to stay here grandfather."

"Say that word once more, Sir, and I shall forget that you were a guest and that I am a gentleman. Be gone from my sight. And take your beard with you."

\*

I walk around London in the dark thinking about what this lunatic has said. I think about poor Dorothy, about Sergeant Bucket - and in my mind count out those two hundred and fifty pounds onto the counter of the police-office. I construct a dozen scenes where I play the part of Dorothy's undeceiver, each one more heart-rending than the last. Is there a kind way to tell a girl that her darling is a fraud or a madman? In addition to these disturbing images, that blessed card keeps popping into my internal eye. As the only anachronistic anomaly in his absurd account, it unsettles me. So I remind myself that we do live in a time of rapid scientific advance; different alloys and glasses are in manufacture. I decide that he has broken into a workshop and stolen it.

This makes me feel better.

There are eccentrics today who speculate on the likelihood of time-travel, just as there are men, less ambitious and more grounded, who foresee a time when we might hurtle along at fifty miles an hour. Fifty miles an hour! To the ears of a bargee or a coachman of forty years ago such talk would have sounded as absurd as Drood's ravings had to mine! And there are doubtless some inmates of Bedlam who have convinced themselves they had flown to Australia and even to the moon and back. As a man of some fame, I am bound to attract the attention of eccentrics. As the first glimmers of dawn appear above the poor roofs of Lambeth, I find a small park and take a seat on the bench. I close my eyes. Had he gone too fast for me? Logical and valid? Could I see an objection? Impudent booby! I almost exclaim an expletive but am checked by the appearance of a charlady passing on her way to her toil. An objection! I shall not move from this spot until I find one. I close my eyes again to meditate.

Soft footsteps interrupt my reverie. The charlady has seated herself next to me.

"You are Mr Dickens, I believe," she says. She is wrapped in a shawl of coarse cloth but has neither the voice nor the rough complexion of one so ill-favoured in life.

"I beg your pardon," she continues "but I have seen you hereabouts many times and you are famed for your nocturnal walks. May I be frank?"

I watch her as she opens her reticule and extracts a small though an amazingly accurate likeness of Mr Edwin Drood *sans barbe*.

"This man is an escaped lunatic from Leicester. I am from an agency sent to find him. He confided in a friend of a friend of a friend that he was coming to London to seek you out as he is obsessed with you, even to the extent that he believes himself a distant relative of yours. He must be found and put under restraint before he does some damage to himself or to people around him. Have you seen anything of him?"

"Are you from the year 2158?"

She looks at me strangely and places her tiny hand on my brow. A warmth creeps over me and I feel tranquil at last. When I open my eyes again she is gone. But in that split second, as is so often the case with my flashes of insight, I see the great flaw in the argument of Edwin Drood Esquire. Ah, ideas! There may be a long drought of them and then they tumble down as generously as the showers of April.

It is now fully light and the streets are awake. I am soon in my way to cross the Thames and heading for a great repast at my favourite inn in Holborn. And a confrontation with my grandson.

Clouds are rolling in, and soon, as I leave the Embankment, it is pattering with rain. Those blessed with umbrellas put them up; those without put up their collars and quicken their pace. But the cool rain refreshes me and I lick it as it trickles down my moustaches and into my beard. I push open the door of the inn to be greeted by the wonderful aroma of smoked gammon and coffee, interlaced with swirls of cigar and pipe smoke. Instead of looking disconsolate as I have anticipated, Dorothy, standing hands on hips and smiling at my entrance, looks prettier than ever. "You are a little late again this morning", Mr Dickens," she says sweetly. "Shall I put an extra log on the fire?"

She leads me to my table in the left hand corner and asks me if it is to be my usual.

"Er, no, Dorothy. I am more hungry than usual. Two grilled kidneys in addition would be most welcome."

"So, coffee, scrambled eggs, a gammon steak, kidneys, two rounds of toast and marmelade?"

"Yes. Dorothy, please excuse my impertinence, but should I conclude from your joyous and -

pardon me - beautiful expression, that a certain person is once more in residence?"

In response, she darts a smiling glance at the window table where two pink hands are holding up a copy of The Times. The paper descending reveals the very cheerful - even smug - face of my lunatic relative. I dread again the disillusioning of his sweetheart. He ambles across and greets me as if last night's intercourse had never taken place.

"It took a couple of sovereigns to overcome the reluctance of the owner to readmit me. But here I am!"

Cordially I invite him to join me. I tell him I have something to say to him pertinent to what I call too politely our discussion of the previous evening.

"Have you ordered breakfast?" I ask.

"Yes. I am ravenously hungry. Logic gives me a great appetite. I am so pleased that you bear me no ill feelings, dear grand -"

"Say that word and I shall not invite you! I should like you now to listen without interruption, for I have been meditating a great deal on your extraordinary assertions and am convinced that I can refute them with the same tool of which you are so proud. Namely logic. But first, a word of warning. You are sought after - but not by the police."

"By whom then?" he asks, instantly pale.

I tell him of my encounter and he trembles.

"A young woman of medium height with brown hair, you say? It must be McGiven. They have sent McGiven to locate me. Did you tell -"

"Not a word. I asked her if she was from the year 2158. She stared at me as if I were insane, and was gone in a trice."

"She is a woman without conscience who means to kill me. If I stay here, I endanger their world, for which I could not give tuppence. Would you believe that most of England's green and pleasant land now lies almost entirely under concrete? Their only option is to put an end to me."

"Calm yourself. I was not followed here. I told her I had not met you. You are safe."

I reason that it will not be long before enquiries by this lady and her accomplices at various police-offices will lead to his detention and delivery - or return? - to Bedlam. If he is detained here, in a terrible scene, it will at least absolve me of the task of breaking the news to Dorrit, even though I entertain the pleasant notion of becoming her comforter in some respect later.

"Now, Mr Drood or Dickens - may I expound my counter-theory to you?"

"Please continue."

"Please do me the courtesy of not interrupting me as I did for you - unless I invite you."

"Very well."

"This pleasant earth is, I contend, a finite place - unless one includes the matter which meteorites scatter on its surface from time to time. Her account of matter does not significantly increase and even the contents of volcanoes tend to remain in situ although some dust may find its way to other continents or fall as rain over the oceans. At any given second, all that matter is employed in some way, be it in a stone or a tree or a finger - or a fraud."

He laughs. I hold up my hand. He stops.

"At this second, my finger cannot become part of this table, nor the old Colonel's bacon which he is so greedily devouring, nor your newspaper nor your cap which I so admire. Nor that false beard which you ripped off and have since reattached. Nor this card the loss of which you once so lamented and which has caused me - indirectly - to lose a lot of hard-earned money. Take it!" I shove it towards him but he is loathe to touch it. So I continue.

"All that matter is, I contend, captive in form. And yet, and yet. That man's bacon comes from a

pig which was killed the day after it grew somewhat, and months after it grew a great deal. Your cap was once on the back of a sheep. The newspaper was in a tree. Animate things grow slowly, inanimate things erode slowly. This fork, when it comes into contact with greedy teeth and scrapes on plates, loses a few atoms. Whither do such atoms go, and whence come the atoms which fatten the pig? It is a slow, slow, unobservable process on which only the Almighty can keep a watchful Eye, were He of a Mind, for He probably has better things to attend to, such as whispering remonstrations into the ears of the evil and deceitful - do not snigger, Sir! Where was I? Ah yes. Every day, there takes place an invisible increase, decrease and alteration of things so that the sun always sets on a slightly different world from the one over which it rose. To adapt an analogy of yours to my purpose, this fluid Wholeness can be seen as a bounded lake in which currents flow hither and thither, fishes thrive, fishes die, weed advances and retreats with the seasons - ignore evaporation and precipitation - or accept that the one generally equals the other in the long term. Accept that it is a bounded lake from which nothing escapes. After a thousand years, the amount of matter of the lake will be the same - even though its arrangement would be wholly unrecognizable to any observer fortunate enough to own a capsule to travel back to swim in it as it used to be. The arrangement and apportionment of said matter into form at every interval of a thousand years will never be the same as chance always plays the key role in its distribution. Yet the matter is all there! In 1000 AD this atom was in a fish. In 2000 AD it might be in a weed. Now, after this preamble, I come to the point. I hope I have not spoken too quickly for you, Sir. If you have an objection, have the goodness to wait until I have finished. You maintain that you have travelled by some wonder of science beyond my powers of conception - and beyond the ingenuity of any Victorian man - from the year 2156 to this year 1845. I maintain that you are a material body of blood, bones organs and whatnot - excuse the liberty I take of prodding your hand with my finger - there - but I need to ascertain that you are indeed a physical not a spiritual being. See - my pressing of your skin whitens it, for the flow of blood is fleetingly interrupted. Ah, breakfast arrives! Tuck in, Sir, in order to procure the aforementioned changes and alterations in yourself so necessary to survival."

I fall upon my food like a grown Oliver Twist for the intellectual exertions of philosophy do indeed induce a leonine hunger. My counterpart emulates me and even ordered more bread to mop up his egg yolk and juice from a grilled tomato.

"So," say I, as soon as he puts down his knife and fork, "you are now replete of your bacon, egg, tomato and bread which I hope you enjoyed as thoroughly as you appeared to do, for I am sure its impact on your stomach was increased by the thought that it had no impact on your purse."

"Indeed, so it was -"

"Indeed. So if you now climbed into your portmanteau and flashed, fizzed or flew home, you would carry, would you not, your breakfast with you, thus depriving various simple plants and their microscopic dependants which congregate around the outflows of unmentionable conduits - to put it as delicately as I can. - of your bodily emissions While I refresh myself - for my mouth is dry - you may answer."

"Very true! How could I put it better? But this is compatible with my Triviality Theory. The stuntedness or absence of a few blades of grass or a thousand less shrimpy things -"

"Fewer, Sir, fewer!"

"Fewer shrimps here and a few more in my time would produce no evil consequences - at least not until a time when all around us has turned to dust - and even if this so-called evil were produced sooner, could it be deemed more or less evil than normal by a populace used to good and evil and not inclined to go about counting grasses for an explanation of why Thursday has

turned out worse than expected? Would they really see such tiny alterations as contributive to delight or despair, even if a scientist claimed they were? Would you suffer more or less from a corn if some idiot whispered into your ear that it would never have appeared on your toe, had King Alfred burnt one less cake than he did - a fellow-traveller of mine, perhaps, having been present in the kitchen to shout a reminder in his ear that they should come out of the oven?"

"You are an ingenious lunatic, Drood, but you shall not outwit Charles John Huffam Dickens! Dorothy! More coffee please - and some brandy."

By this time the whole room is listening. The Colonel looks furious. The brandy arrives and is partaken of by both parties. I resume my counter-attack.

"Now for the concluding and conclusive argument. At this very instant - as already established - all the matter in this world is engaged and locked away. I hereby seize the corner of this table.

Can I bend it? No. Dissolve it? No. Can I say abracadabra and cause it to disappear and reappear on this gentleman's head? No. It must remain as it is until the table is burnt, chopped up or disposed of in some other way. Then its matter will be available for use in some other object - perhaps a door or a window frame. Or its ashes may be buried around the roots of a bush and magically subsumed into its branches, leaves and flowers. The matter in your body is yours on lease from - as you claim - resources gleaned from the year 2156. But how can that be? How can that matter be present both in you *and* in other things of *this* time - perhaps in this gentleman's nose, in this table, in that passing lady's hat feather, in a Hottentot's toe nail, in my beard - or in a billion things which, as I speak, exist here perfectly well? It is impossible for those atoms which you *shall* inherit to be contained in you as you sit here - for they are currently trapped

elsewhere! Even if you are partly composed of new matter from meteorites and volcanic dust, there should be enough old matter in you, which, by travelling back in time you will have lost on the way. You are either a lunatic, a fraud or in danger of implosion, for your atomic fabric is very weak!"

Had these final words been blades, they could not produce a more intense expression of pain on that rosy face. His eyes, which have narrowed into sardonic slits, are instantly large and round as saucers; the puckering grin around his mouth unpuckers; his mouth falls open as if his jaw has unhinged itself.

"No wonder I am feeling dizzy and weak," he whispers. "Time travel is too dangerous - and the further back into the past, the more dangerous it becomes."

"Nonsense, Drood! I only jest! It is the brandy which makes you faint. You are as mad as a March hare!"

Dorothy, like everyone else, has stopped to listen. She is regarding her sweetheart with ever increasing alarm. The Colonel calls him a d-n fool and asks for his bill. A movement outside the window catches my eye. McGiven, Bucket and O'Bundance are peering in. Drood senses my alarm and follows my gaze. Instantly, he jumps up, knocking over his chair, and takes Dorrit by the hand.

"Dorrit!" he cries. "Will you come with me. I cannot stay here! Not one second longer."

"Of course I will, Edwin. Anywhere!"

"Then let us fly this instant!"

So saying, he grabs the card, drags her from the room and they run upstairs. I sit back, content to have so comprehensively routed my "grandson." I down a bumper of brandy and laugh heartily, watching for the pair to come hurtling down towards the back door before those adversaries have gained the front. When the miserable Governor, a man whom I have seen once vaguely at a distance, and who has an uncanny resemblance to the magistrate, looks in sternly and asks for

Dorothy, I tell him they have gone upstairs.

“Oh they have, have they? The little baggage. She shall be dismissed without notice and without wages.”

I stagger to my feet and call him a heartless scoundrel.

“Very generous, I’m sure! You are the very soul of compassion.”

“And you, Mr Dickens, are drunk.”

“How dare you? Henceforth I shall break my fast elsewhere.”

“Good,” sneers the Colonel. “Pompous ass.”

In run Bucket and the two others, and directed by the Governor they race upstairs. I close my eyes and wait for the inevitable screams. But they do not come.

“Gorn,” declares Bucket returning to the breakfast room. “Wanished into thin air.”

THE STRANGER