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MR DICKENS  
AND HIS CAROL

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## CHAPTER ONE

On that unseasonably warm November day at One Devonshire Terrace, Christmas was not in his head at all.

His cravat was loose, top button of his waistcoat undone, study windows flung open as far as they'd go. Chestnut curls bobbed over his dark slate eyes that brightened to each word he wrote: this one, no, that one, scribble and scratch, a raised brow, a tucked chin, a guffaw. Every expression was at the ready, every limb engaged in the urgent deed. Nothing else existed. Not hunger nor thirst, not the thrumming of the household above and below – a wife about to give birth, five children already, four servants, two Newfoundlands, a Pomeranian, and the Master's Cat, now pawing at his quill. Not time, neither past nor future, just the clear-eyed now, and words spilling out of him faster than he could think them.

The exhilaration of his night walk had led him straight to

his writing chair by first morning without even his haddock and toast. He'd traversed the city twice in half his usual time, from Clerkenwell down Cheapside, across the Thames by way of Blackfriar's Bridge, and back by Waterloo, propelled by a singular vision – the throng of devoted readers that very afternoon pressing their noses against the window of Mudie's Booksellers, no doubt awaiting the new *Chuzzlewit* instalment, with its flimsy green cover, thirty-three pages of letterpress, two illustrations, various advertisements, and the latest chapter of pure delight by the 'Inimitable Boz' himself! Why, it was plain to him that humanity's chief concern, now that Martin Chuzzlewit had sailed for America, was the fate of Tom Pinch and the Pecksniffs, and he considered it his sacred duty to tell them.

And so Charles Dickens didn't hear the slap-bang of the door knocker downstairs that would alter the course of all his Christmases to come.

Like any man, he'd known a good share of knocks in his thirty-some years. Hard knocks at lesser doors, insistent *rap-rap-raps* on wind-bitten, rain-battered doors whose nails had lost all hope of holding. And with fame came gentler taps at better doors, pompous, pillared, and crowned thresholds in glazed indigo paint, like his own door two floors below, where the now-polite pounding was having no effect at all.

Because there are times in a man's life when no knock on any door will divert him from the thing at hand, in particular when that thing is a goose-feather pen flying across the page, spitting ink.

## CHAPTER TWO

When the fusee table clock on his desk struck three o'clock, a smallish groom (as was the fashion) with fiery red hair (as wasn't the fashion at all) appeared at the study door with a tray of hot rolls, fancy bread, butter, and tea. Dickens dotted his final *i*, brandished his pages, and stood.

'Topping! I've just this moment finished the new number.'

'Wot good news, sir.'

Dickens took a roll and tore a bite out of it, his hunger returning. Everything – the whole house – seeped back into his awareness. Oh, glorious Devonshire Terrace, a house of great promise (at a great premium), undeniable situation, and excessive splendour. He was glad for the great garden outside, the clatter of crockery and clanging of tins in the kitchen downstairs, the chatter and play of his children somewhere above. And here was

Topping right in front of him, vivid as ever, in his usual tie and clean shirtsleeves instead of a livery, with no sense of impropriety, and a kindly expression that asked what more he might do, because doing was what he liked best. He was the longest-lived of the household servants, and Dickens regarded him most like family of them all, something between the father he'd always wanted and the brother he wished his were.

'Oh, Topping.' He leant in, clutching his pages. 'I believe I have once again . . . stumbled upon perfection.'

Topping squinched his eyes as a way of smiling without showing his teeth, which went in every direction except straight up and down. Dickens felt a great affection for him, for everyone, even the handsome house itself, which had subdued itself all day in the service of his art. He was sure he had Topping to thank for it.

A sustained holler from the bedroom upstairs announced Catherine Dickens in the full tilt of a labour of her own. The two men looked up and held their breath until it stopped. Dickens smiled with one corner of his mouth, wistful. Another child was nearly born, he knew, if stubbornly resisting its arrival into the world.

'I suppose it altogether too much to think Catherine would hear it now,' he said with a playful frown.

Topping's caterpillar brows arched and fell in ironic agreement. 'Well, sir. Masters Chapman and Hall are downstairs.'

'Chapman and Hall, here?' Dickens returned the half-eaten roll to the tray and trusted his pages to Topping. He sprang for the mirror to quick-comb his hair, fasten his green velvet

waistcoat, and fluff his blue satin cravat. 'Apparently even my publishers cannot wait to know what happens next!'

'They do sit a bit on the edge of their seats, sir.'

'Splendid. I shall read it to them!'

Topping looked at the pages, curious. 'May I ask, does Chuzzlewit's man Tapley have, this month, a line or two?'

'Or three, or four.' Dickens turned with a wink, retrieved the pages, and tapped them three times for luck. 'I think it far and away my finest book.'

Topping blinked in solidarity and stood aside. Dickens rounded the brass ball at the banister and skittered down the stairs by twos. He had that feeling of finishing that had always been for him like floating, air under his feet and lungs like full sails. It seemed wrong to be going down when he should be soaring instead, but down he went, pages tight under his arm, edges ruffling as if with their own excitement. He thought it only his due, Chapman and Hall at his door instead of him at theirs. And so, like an actor expecting an audience squeezed into the pit and overflowing the gallery, he bounded into the drawing room to greet them, only to find the publishing partners sitting stiffly in a pair of pink parlour chairs, looking like cold fried soles.

'Chapman! Hall!' Dickens offered his hand as the partners stood. 'What a surprise.'

'I hope not an unpleasant one,' said Hall, with his fingertips-only handshake, limp as old lettuce.

'Certainly not.' Dickens gave Chapman a warm double-hander. 'Of course, normally you wouldn't be the first to hear it, but never mind that.'

He stepped onto his favourite footstool and bowed theatrically, stirring the air with his pages. ‘Gentlemen, I give you the next instalment of everything that matters.’

‘Charles,’ interrupted Hall. ‘We’ve come on a matter of grave importance.’

Dickens peeked over his pages. Hall gripped his top hat with sharp white knuckles. Chapman mopped his beading brow.

‘In fact, we drew straws,’ said Chapman, pulling a broom bristle from his pocket.

‘His was the shorter one!’ said Hall.

Dickens looked from one to the other, confused. ‘Yet here you both are.’

A long loud shriek from above caused Hall to grimace and Chapman to sink. ‘But we’ve come at a bad time,’ said Hall.

‘Nonsense. I think you’ll find this new number strong to the very last word.’

A string of sharp yelps from upstairs punctuated their discomfort. The visitors gazed at the ceiling in horror.

‘Oh, that,’ said Dickens. ‘You mustn’t worry. The louder it is, the nearer the end.’

‘The end?’ Chapman pressed his kerchief to his lips.

‘A child!’ Dickens beamed.

Chapman and Hall looked at each other, grim. Dickens was used to the way they were – the obverse of each other in temperament and gesture, but ringers when they shared the same end. It had been Edward Chapman, short and excitable, who years before had stumbled on the notion that certain comic etchings about the exploits of Cockney sportsmen might be in want of a hack writer. But it was William Hall, tall and



stern, who'd found the young Charles Dickens – court reporter, freelancer, would-be actor, and playwright – then hungry for recognition and income; in fact, any at all would do. Hall had a knack for computation.

‘Charles. I’m afraid it’s a matter of money.’

Dickens lowered his pages and stepped off the stool. If it was a matter of money, it could be one thing only. ‘My father’s been to you for a loan again, hasn’t he?’ Dickens started for the slant front desk by the window with a frustrated sigh. ‘I shall pay it at once, as always.’

‘It’s not your father this time, Charles. It’s *Chuzzlewit*.’

Dickens turned, his face pinched with worry. Martin Chuzzlewit had become, like so many of his characters, as good as an old family friend. He watched the partners trade glances, grave indeed.

‘It’s not selling one-fifth of *Nickleby*,’ said Chapman.

‘Not one-fifteenth of *Twist*,’ added Hall.

‘There must be some mistake.’

‘A few of the booksellers have been forced to sell at . . . a discount,’ said Chapman in a whisper, knowing the word would pierce the author’s heart.

‘A discount?’ Dickens flopped onto the giltwood settee, dangling an arm over the edge. He could swing like a pendulum, from hot to cold, light to dark. ‘It’s the name. When the name isn’t right . . . I had so many others: Sweezleback, Chuzzletoe, Chubblewig—’

‘The Americans do not like it,’ blurted Hall.

‘The name?’

‘The story.’

‘America, the republic of my imagination?’

The partners nodded as if their jaws were wired together, like puppets.

‘Where I have never shaken so many hands, been so feted and accosted for autographs, had orange peels and eggshells filched from my plate, locks of hair snipped from my head and fur from my coat?’

‘They now take you as a . . . misanthrope,’ said Hall.

Dickens pulled himself to full height. ‘I? A misanthrope?’

‘You’ve portrayed them as hypocrites, braggarts, bullies, and humbugs,’ said Chapman.

‘Humbugs?’ Dickens puffed his chest, indignant. ‘Bah!’

He drew back to wait for a retraction, or a reaction, at least. As his renown had grown, he’d learnt that a small, tactical tantrum could work wonders. Not this time. The partners were unmoved, faces expressionless. Dickens put a palm to his forehead, feeling warm and dizzy. ‘Sales are definitely down, then?’

Hall nodded to Chapman, who patted his pockets and pulled out a thin velvet box. ‘But we’ve brought you a pen.’

Dickens stared at the offering in Chapman’s hand. He could not think of a quill in the world that would ease this terrible sting. ‘At least my own countrymen do not abandon me. Why, only yesterday I saw a crush of people at Mudie’s—’

‘Waiting for the new Thackeray, no doubt,’ said Hall, doubling the blow. He took a copy of *The Times* from the breast of his coat and read from above the fold. “‘Charles Dickens has risen like a rocket, but will sink . . . like . . . a . . . rock.’”

Dickens snatched the paper and read it himself, twice to be

sure. ‘Well! From now on I should simply ask my public what it is *they’d* like to read.’

The partners seemed to admire the novelty of his thinking, but before they could say so—

‘Should Little Nell live? Sikes not kill Nancy? Should Oliver want some *less*?’

‘Charles,’ said Hall, retrieving the paper from Dickens’ grasp, ‘we are simply suggesting perhaps the public needs a bit of a—’

‘Christmas book!’ said Chapman, unable to contain his zeal.

‘A Christmas book? But I’m in the middle of *Chuzzlewit*. And Christmas is but weeks away!’

‘Not a long book,’ said Hall. ‘A short book. Why, hardly a book at all.’

‘And we’ve organised a public reading of the book on Christmas Eve!’ said Chapman.

‘A public reading of the book I have not written?’

‘We have every confidence you will,’ said Hall.

‘And have brought you a pen,’ Chapman tried again, with a toady grin.

‘We were thinking something festive,’ said Hall. ‘A bit Pickwickian, perhaps.’

‘And why not throw in a ghost for good measure?’ Chapman knocked his chubby knuckles together. ‘The public adore spirits and goblins in a good winter’s tale.’

‘A ghost?’ Dickens spluttered. ‘I am not haunted by ghosts, but by the monsters of ignorance, poverty, want! Not useless phantoms that frighten people into . . . inactivity. I do not abide such nonsense.’

‘Perhaps the ghost is wrong.’ Chapman tried the gift one last time. ‘Anyway, it is a pen.’

Dickens took the velvet box and turned it in his hand. He shook his head and thrust it back, calm in his new resolve.

‘Gentlemen. I will not write your Christmas book.’

Hall cleared his throat and withdrew a contract from a second pocket. ‘I’m afraid there’s the matter of a certain . . . clause,’ he said, opening it with a flick of his wrist. ‘To the effect that in the unlikely event of the profits of *Chuzzlewit* being insufficient to repay the advances already made, your publishers might, after the tenth number, deduct from your pay—’

‘Deduct from my pay?’

‘Forty pounds sterling per month.’

‘But I alone have made you wealthy men! Such a loss will ruin me.’

Hall handed him the contract, as another ear-puncturing bawl echoed through the house, shaking its walls.

‘*Chuzzlewit*, Charles, will ruin us all.’