

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Last Dickens

Matthew Pearl

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About the Book

Boston, 1870. News of the untimely death of Charles Dickens reaches James R. Osgood at his American publisher. Expecting the arrival of the latest instalment of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and suspicious of unscrupulous New York publishers keen to get their hands on the novel, Osgood sends his clerk, Daniel Sands, to await its arrival.

When Daniel's body is found by the docks, the manuscript is nowhere to be found, Osgood must embark on a transatlantic quest that leads him to the dangerous streets of London in order to unearth the rest of Dickens' final mystery and solve another of his own.

About the Author

Matthew Pearl is the internationally bestselling author of *The Dante Club* and *The Poe Shadow*, which have been published in more than thirty languages and forty countries. Pearl is a graduate of Harvard University and Yale Law School and has taught literature at Harvard and at Emerson College. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

ALSO BY MATTHEW PEARL

The Dante Club
The Poe Shadow

MATTHEW PEARL

The Last Dickens

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

FIRST INSTALMENT

I

BENGAL, INDIA, JUNE 1870

NEITHER OF THE young mounted policemen fancied these subdivisions of the Bagirhaut province. Neither of them fancied jungles where all manner of things could happen unprovoked, unseen, as they had a few years before when a poor lieutenant was stripped, clubbed and drowned in the river for trying to collect licensing taxes.

The officers clamped the heels of their boots tighter into their horses' flanks. Not to say they were scared - only careful.

'You must be careful always,' said Turner to Mason as they ducked the low branches and vines. 'Be assured, the natives in India do not value life. Not even as the poorest Englishman does.'

The younger of the two policemen, Mason, nodded thoughtfully at the words of his impressive partner, who was nearly twenty-five years old, who had two brothers also come from England to be in the Indian Civil Service, and who had fought the Indian rebellion a few years before. He was an expert if ever one was.

'Perhaps we should have come with more men, sir.'

'Well, that's pretty! More men, Mason? We shan't need any more than our two heads between us to take in a few

ragged *dacoits*. Remember, a high-mettled horse stands not for hedge nor ditch.'

When Mason had arrived in Bengal from Liverpool for his new post, he accepted Turner's offer to 'chum', pooling incomes and living expenses and passing their free time in billiards or croquet. Mason, at eighteen, was thankful for counsel from such an experienced man in the ranks of the Bengal police. Turner could list places a policeman ought never to ride alone because of the Coles, the Santhals, the Assamee, the Kookies and the hill tribes in the frontiers. Some of the criminal gangs among the tribes were *dacoits*, thieves; others, warned Turner, carried axes and wanted English heads. 'The natives of India value life only as far as they can kill when doing so', was another Turner proverb.

Fortunately, they were not hunting out that sort of bloodthirsty gang in these wasting temperatures this morning. Instead they were investigating a plain, brazen robbery. The day before, a long train of twenty or thirty bullock carts had been hit with a shower of stones and rocks. In the chaos, *dacoits* holding torches tipped over the carts and fled with valuable chests from the convoy. When intelligence of the theft reached the police station, Turner had gone to their supervisor's desk to volunteer himself and Mason, and their commander had sent them to question a known receiver of stolen goods.

Now, as the terrain thinned, they neared the small thatched house on the creek. A dwindling column of smoke hovered above the mud chimney. Mason gripped the sword at his belt. Every two men in the Bengal police were assigned one sword and one light carbine rifle, and Turner had naturally claimed the rifle.

'Mason,' he said with a slight smile in his voice after noticing the anxious look on his partner's face. 'You are green, aren't you? It is highly likely they have unloaded the goods and fled already. Perhaps for the mountains, where our *elaka* - that is like "jurisdiction", Mason - where our

elaka does not extend. No matter, really, when captured, they lie and say they are innocent peasants until the corrupt darkie magistrates release them. What do you say to going tiger shooting upon some elephants?’

‘Turner!’ Mason whispered, just then, interrupting his partner.

They were coming upon the thatched-roof house where a bright red horse was tied to a post (the natives in these provinces often painted their horses unnatural colours). A slight rustle at the house drew their eyes to a pair of men fitting the description of two of the thieves. One of them held a torch. They were arguing.

Turner signalled Mason to stay quiet. ‘The one on the right, it’s Narain,’ he whispered and pointed. Narain was a known opium thief against whom several attempts at conviction had failed.

The opium poppy was cultivated in Bengal and refined there under English control, after which the colonial government sold the drug at auction to opium traders from England, America and other nations. From there, the traders would transport the opium for sale to China, where it was illegal but still in great demand. The trade was enormously profitable for the British government.

Dismounting, Turner and Mason split up and approached the thieves from two sides. As Mason crept through the bushes from around the back, he could not help but think about their good fortune: not only that two of the thieves were still at the suspected confederate’s house but also that their argument was serving as distraction.

As Mason made his way around the thick shrubbery he jumped out at Turner’s signal and displayed his sword at the surprised Narain, who put up two trembling hands and lay flat on the ground. The other thief had pushed Turner down and dashed into the dense trees. Turner staggered to his feet, aimed his rifle, and shot. He fired a wild second shot into the jungle.

They tied the prisoner and traced the fugitive's path but soon lost the trail. While searching up and down the curve of the rough creek, Turner lunged at something on the ground. Upon reaching the spot, Mason saw with great pride in his chum that Turner had bludgeoned a cobra with his carbine. But the cobra was not dead and it rose up again as Mason approached and tried to strike. Such was the peril of the Bengalee jungle.

Abandoning the hunt for the other thief, they returned to the spot where they'd left Narain tied to a tree and freed him, leading him as they took the horses they'd borrowed back to the police outpost. There, they boarded the train with their prisoner in tow to bring Narain to the district of their station house.

'Get some sleep,' Turner said to Mason with a brotherly care. 'You look worn out. I can guard the *dacoit*.'

'Thank you, Turner,' said Mason gratefully.

The eventful morning had been exhausting. Mason found an empty row of seats and covered his face with his hat. Before long he fell into a deep sleep beneath the rattling window, where a slow breeze made the compartment nearly tolerable. He woke to a horrible echoing scream – the kind that lived sometimes in his nightmares of Bengal's jungles.

When he shook himself into sensibility he saw Turner standing alone staring out the window.

'Where's the prisoner?' Mason cried.

'I don't know!' Turner shouted, a wild glint in his eyes. 'I looked the other way for a moment, and Narain must have thrown himself out the window!'

They pulled the alarm for the train to stop. Mason and Turner, with the help of an Indian railway policeman, searched along the rocks and found Narain's crushed and bloody body. His head had been smashed open at impact. His hands were still tied together with wire.

Solemnly, Mason and Turner abandoned the body and reboarded the train. The young English officers were silent the remaining train ride to the station house, except for some unmusical humming by Turner. They had almost reached the terminal when Turner posed a question.

'Answer me this, Mason. Why did you enrol in the mounted police?'

Mason tried to think of a good answer but was too troubled. 'To raise a little dust, I suppose. We all want to make some noise in the world.'

'Stuff!' said Turner. 'Never lose sight of the true blessings of public service. Each one of us is here to turn out a better civilisation in the end, and for that reason alone.'

'Turner, about what happened today ...' The younger man's face was white.

'What's wrong?' Turner demanded. 'Luck was with us. That cobra might have done us both in.'

'Narain ... the suspected *dacoit*. Well, shouldn't we, I mean, collect up the names and statements of the passengers for our diaries so that if there is any kind of inquiry ...'

'Suspected? Guilty, you meant. Never mind, Mason. We'll send one of the native men.'

'But, won't we, if Dickens, I mean ...'

'What mumbling! You oughtn't chew your words.'

'Sir,' the younger officer enunciated forcefully, 'considering for a moment Dickens—'

'Mason, that's enough! Can't you see I'm tired?' Turner hissed.

'Sir,' Mason said, nodding.

Turner's neck had become stiff and veiny at the sound of that particular name: *Dickens*. As though the word had been rotting deep inside him and now crawled back up his throat.

II

BOSTON, THE SAME DAY, 1870

THE LABOURERS CURSED the mayor of Boston and the summer heat and the governor of Massachusetts and the freed Negroes. And of course they cursed the ships. The freed Negroes cursed the same but substituted the Irish in their epithets.

In other months, some dockworkers sang. But in the summer they'd curse.

'Damn moss to hell!' said one labourer. He did not specify whether it was his own poor wages he was damning or the money lining the pockets of the cushion-faced rich folks whose goods they hauled.

A second labourer added: 'Damn *all* moss! Straight to the devil!' At that, three cheers and another were called out in unison.

They didn't yet notice, walking across the pier, a large stranger dangling an ivory toothpick from his lips. His dark eyes darted ahead into the lanes of stevedores and express wagons. 'Say!' he called out to the clique of Irish labourers, though he failed to attract their attention. Then he raised his gilded walking stick.

That did it.

At the top of the stick was an exotic and ugly golden idol, the head of a beast, a horn rising from the top, terrible

mouth agape, sparks of fire shooting from its outstretched tongue. It was mesmerising to behold. Not just because of its shining ugliness, but also because it was such a contrast to the stranger's own mouth, mostly hidden under an enormous ear-to-ear moustache. The man's lips barely managed to prise open his mouth when he spoke.

'I need,' said the stranger, addressing the dockworkers, 'to find a lad. Have you seen him? He wears a heavy suit and carries a bundle of papers.'

In fact, the dockworkers had seen a passerby fitting the description just a few minutes before. The young man had stopped at an overturned barrel outside the Salt House. Just to look at the fellow's thick suit added to the heat. Steadying himself with a self-conscious air, he had removed a bundle of papers tied up with black string from underneath the barrel and staggered through the pack of labourers. Naturally, they had cursed him.

'Well,' said the stranger when recognition came into their eyes. 'Which way did he walk?'

The four dockworkers exchanged evasive glances. Not so much at his question, but at his decidedly English accent – and at his brown-parchment complexion. Under his hat, a chocolate-coloured cotton turban stuck out. He wore a tunic-style garment that hung over the knees of his silk trousers, and a woollen cord was wrapped around the waist.

'You some kind of Hindoo?' a wiry labourer finally asked.

The swarthy stranger paused and took a momentous breath. He turned with only his eyes to the labourer who had proposed the question. With a sudden ferociousness, he thrust his stick against the labourer's neck and slammed his body down to the ground. His companions rushed in, but a single look from the attacker kept the would-be rescuers at bay.

That grotesque head had crooked, razor-sharp fangs. These were now biting into the soft flesh of the prostrate

worker's jugular. A thin drop of blood trembled down his Adam's apple.

'Look at me. Look at me in the eye now,' the stranger said. 'You'll tell me where you saw that lad go, or right here I rip your Dublin tongue out through your throat, God save us all.'

Fearing the fangs would dig deeper into his neck, the felled stevedore answered with a just perceptible motion. He raised his arm and pointed a shaky finger in the direction the young man had taken, his eyes closing in dread.

'Good boy, my young Paddy,' said the stranger.

No wonder the Irish labourer had closed his eyes. The stranger's teeth and lips, seen from that low vantage point, looked to be stained an unnaturally bright red. As though painted by blood. As if this man had just chewed up a rabid animal for breakfast.

Armed with the new information, the dark-eyed stranger soon regained the trail on the street leading away from Long Wharf and into Boston proper. There, straight ahead, weaving around the market carts of produce by Faneuil Hall, he spotted the one he was after. It was as though a strong wind were pushing the young man. His locomotion was wild, his disoriented eyes urgent; if anyone had paid attention, it would seem that he was possessed of a mission – vital to Boston, vital to the world. He tossed back looks of concern as he hugged the water-stained packet tightly with both arms.

The pursuer pushed aside fish dealers and beggars through the aisles of Quincy Market.

'Beer by the glass!' cried a hawker before being jostled to the ground.

At the end of the market, as predator and prey crossed through the exit, the large hand had latched on to the other's sleeve.

‘You’ll be sorry you ran from me!’ he growled, pulling him by the arm.

‘No!’ The earnest eyes of the young man lit up with defiance. ‘Osgood needs it!’

The lad’s free arm rose as if to strike his assailant – at which gesture the enormous man did not even flinch. But instead of striking, the lad used the free hand to take hold of his own captured sleeve and pull down on the fabric, ripping his suit open at the shoulder. Freed from the stranger’s clutches, he was sent pirouetting from the force across the street and almost to the safety of the other side.

An inhuman shriek combined with an awful cracking sound.

The stranger with the golden idol, panting at the bottom of his throat, pulled his rounded hat to shield his eyes from the clouds of dust as he stepped to the kerb. For a moment he could not find the young man, but then he saw what had happened. When a large assortment of people had gathered, *too many people*, the watcher shuffled away as though he’d never had any interest.

The swarthy stranger hadn’t been the only one out hunting in the lusty traffic of the docks that morning. There were, at the moment, two or three others among the hives of workmen, wharf rats and holiday revellers. These were familiar faces on the docks, many mornings out before the stevedores. They were familiar most of all to each other, though odd as it sounded they didn’t know one another’s names.

Not their christened names, that is. There was Molasses, so titled humorously for his always harried pace. Esquire was a coloured gentleman, a former cabman, who taught fencing and dancing in the Negro neighbourhoods. Kitten was one of the females of this elite and grimy clique and

could have charmed the drink right out of the hands of Whiskey Bill, another of their rivals.

It was Molasses, today, in a black neckcloth and moleskin jacket, who was a hair's breadth from sweet victory. Victory! During the War of the Rebellion, Molasses had been a professional bounty man, paid to take the place of rich lads in the draft who did not want to serve. Using various aliases to get his money and then vanishing as eagerly from each regiment, the powdery days of war helped Molasses pocket five thousand dollars in two and a half years. Since then he had taken to dyeing his hair and beard colours never known to grow on any man naturally. The beard was also overlong. He had sworn that he would not shave until a Democrat was president and those cheating Republicans out of business.

There. Right in front of Molasses's eyes was hidden what he wanted. He had been ordered by wire from Philadelphia to retrieve the treasure for a hefty reward. Stationing himself in one of the fish houses on the waterfront with his long spyglass, he had seen the young man in the suit hide it earlier that morning. Now it would be his.

A wharfinger was taking up an abandoned barrel.

'Beg pardon,' Molasses said, approaching and picking his tweed cap off his head as if in polite greeting. 'I'll take that, sir.'

'Who are you?' asked the wharfinger in a firm German accent. 'Go away from my barrels, wharf rat.'

Molasses kicked over the barrel with his unlaced boot. To his dismay, nothing but stray fish bones poured out. He couldn't believe it. He crouched down, rummaging through the mess. When he looked up, there was Esquire standing over him, gallantly chuckling.

'Squire, you copper bottom rascal! Where are they?'

'They're not here! Calm down, 'lasses, I didn't procure the papers neither. You didn't get them, I didn't get them,

and I saw Kitten – I think she’s working for C. today – at an old tug with a face like she’d been slapped on the back while eating a stick of butter. Why, they’ve likely vanished safely altogether by now to their rightful owner, I s’pose. Rotten luck.’

The German wharfinger became red in the face. ‘If you do not leave my wharf, I shall send for the police.’

Molasses kicked violently at the barrel until it was in pieces. Then he cried out a warning to the wharfinger in German. This time, the wharfinger backed away.

‘Whiskey Bill? Was it him?’ asked Molasses, turning back to Esquire.

‘Nay, ‘lasses,’ Esquire answered grandly, raising himself on to the top of a bench, his feet dangling as he looked out at the water. ‘Bill didn’t get sent on this mission.’ A light breeze now played against the bay and the heavy sun illuminated the sailboats. In the distance, they could hear a bad snarl of traffic, the shouts of drivers and whipping of horses, by Quincy Market.

Molasses, cleaning his reeking hands on his coat and trousers, suddenly paused. ‘There was a whaler of a fellow following the young man – browned skin, lantern jaw, with a turbanned head. You think one of the bigwigs put him on the bounty, too, ‘squire?’

‘Oh, I seen him earlier,’ replied Esquire eerily. ‘His eyes big and black, like they were all hollow, and his mouth just like a skeleton’s? No, he wasn’t one of our kind, Molasses, that’s sure. Not a man bent on dollars and dimes.’

Just about that time in the middle of Dock Square, the omnibus called the ‘Alice Gray’ rolled to a lumbering stop. Its driver and passengers dismounted to learn the source of the noise – that long blood-chilling crack they had all heard from below the vehicle a moment before.

‘Good God!’ ‘Why, he must’ve just been dragged!’ ‘Crushed flat!’ ‘Git the ladies away from here, will you?’

Below the back wheel, a pale young man in a torn wool suit. The first wheel had passed over his neck and the next over his leg, nearly severing it below the knee.

One of the gentlemen coming out of the bus was the first at the body. The young man’s head jerked slightly. His pupils contracted and his mouth opened. ‘He’s alive!’ someone shouted. ‘Is there a doctor?’

‘I am a lawyer,’ said the gentleman as if to improve on the question by answering a different one. ‘Sylvanus Bendall, attorney-at-law!’ The dying man reached to grab this lawyer’s collar with surprising insistence, as his mouth formed a word, then another. Bendall listened carefully, and then the lad’s strength seemed to fail and he stopped.

After a few moments of sober examination befitting an actual doctor, the kneeling man who called himself Bendall removed his hat to signal the young man’s death. A tall gentleman pointed to the bundle of papers in the dead man’s hand. ‘What’s he got? His will?’ He chuckled at his own morbid joke.

‘Pooh!’ Bendall the lawyer said very seriously. Untying the string, he removed one sheet and put his eyeglass up to his face to examine it. ‘I have seen many wills before, and this is no will, sir! Wills do not tend to have engravings ... See here,’ he muttered, his lips opening silently as he read for a few moments. His expression slowly shifted. ‘I believe – yes! I believe this is ... *By heavens!*’

‘Well, man?’ asked the tall bystander.

‘Who could have told,’ said Bendall, ‘whether he had ever known ambition or disappointment?’

The lawyer wasn’t soliloquising over the dead: he was reading the pages taken out of the man’s hand. Sylvanus Bendall looked up from the page, his face flushed bright.

III

JAMES R. OSGOOD HAD GREETED his visitor with, 'Mr. Leypoldt, a great pleasure,' which was the truth. Leypoldt was the editor of one of the principal journals for the book trade. The short-statured German immigrant was supremely well liked by those in publishing for his cordial manner and the fact that he reported with a fair, even hand.

'I hope to share with our readers the latest intelligence of your and Mr. Fields's firm, Mr. Osgood,' said Leypoldt.

'The firm is receiving A-1 notices lately on all sides,' Osgood remarked with an air of humble gratitude rather than pride.

The visitor cross-examined him. 'Your publications upcoming? Very well, very good. Number of books published this year so far? I see, very good. Number of employees currently? Very well. I see you have many bookkeepers of the female sex.'

'Things have changed so quickly,' Osgood said.

'Indeed you're right, so many things in our field are changing, Mr. Osgood! I have even been weighing a change of title for our journal. So that it will reflect more a concentration on the trade.'

The visitor's journal was presently titled *Trade Circular and Publishers' Bulletin: A Special Medium of Inter-*

Communication for Publishers, Manufacturers, Importers, and Dealers in Books, Stationery, Music, Prints and Miscellaneous Goods Sold at the Book, Stationery, Music and Print Stores.

‘We wish something, in a word, that will stand out as memorable for a national readership. Here is what I am considering.’ Leypoldt wrote: *The Publishers’ Weekly Trade Circular*.

Osgood said diplomatically, ‘Our firm should continue our subscription whatever the title you decide on.’

‘Many thanks, Mr. Osgood.’ A pause signified that Leypoldt turned now to the true subject of his interrogation. ‘Many in the trade who read our columns do wonder, Mr. Osgood, how you shall vie with so many of the larger publishers in New York. And with so many cheap republications of English editions threatening the ones published by your firm.’

‘We shall choose the best-quality authors, print the best-quality books, and not yield to standards less than those that have brought us here, Mr. Leypoldt,’ Osgood said earnestly. ‘I am confident we’ll succeed if we uphold those principles.’

The visiting reporter hesitated. ‘Mr. Osgood, I would like our journal not only to report on publications of books but, in a word, the very story of publishing – its bloodstream, its soul, if you will. To encourage cooperation in the trade and to illustrate why those in our fraternity choose to elevate this calling. Why are we not blacksmiths, or politicians, for instance? If you should have such a story, I should like very much to tell it in this column.’

‘It was when I read *Walden* that I knew I wanted to be a publisher,’ said Osgood, not a philosophical man but one who always wanted to be helpful. ‘Not that I wished to experiment as a hermit in the woods, mind! But I realised that behind the unusual insights of this strange spirit, Thoreau, there was yet another person, far from Thoreau’s

woods, who was going to great lengths to ensure that every person in America had a chance to read his writing if they so desired. Someone who did so not because it would instantly prove popular, but because it could be important. I wrote a letter to Mr. Fields, asking for the chance to learn from him as his shop boy.'

'And now, as a man, what is it that you hope to find?'

Osgood was considering this question quite seriously when he was interrupted with the entrance of his bookkeeper. The young woman, whose pretty face was tightly framed with raven hair, bowed her head to both men as if to acknowledge her interruption was bold. She walked over to the desk with a light but confident stride and whispered a few words.

Osgood listened attentively before turning apologetically to his guest. 'Mr. Leyboldt, would you be kind enough to excuse me? I'm afraid something has arisen and I will need to continue this interview another time.' After the reporter had departed from the room, Osgood, twirling his pen between his forefinger and thumb, said to himself, 'A policeman is here?'

His bookkeeper Rebecca Sand spoke quietly as if they might be overheard. 'Yes, Mr. Osgood. The officer wishes a private word with a partner, and Mr. Fields is still out. He wouldn't say what it is about.'

Osgood nodded. 'Show him in, then, Miss Sand.'

'Mr. Osgood, I wasn't clear,' Rebecca said. 'The officer said that he'd wait outside.'

Osgood, gripping the back of his neck with one hand, thought that strange. He also saw a doubt in Rebecca's usually stoic face, but he could not stop to think about it now. James Osgood always was ready to move ahead to the next problem.

The policeman was standing outside the street entrance by the peanut vendor, who took the opportunity to complain about a band of street musicians who had been driving

away his customers with solicitations for money. Osgood presented himself.

‘Are you that one?’ said the policeman.

‘Pardon, Officer?’ replied Osgood.

‘That Osgood up there?’ the officer asked, squinting at the shingle rising over the entrance to the three-storey building at 124 Tremont Street: FIELDS, OSGOOD & Co.

‘Yes, sir,’ Osgood said. ‘James Ripley Osgood.’

‘Never mind all that,’ the policeman shook his head sternly. ‘Ripley and what-you-will. I suppose I expected a partner of your firm to be a somewhat, now then ... a gentleman somewhat ...’ He was trying to find the most sensitive and yet deliberate word. ‘Somewhat older, perhaps!’

James Osgood, a trimly fitted man not yet thirty-five and not yet looking thirty, even with a well-shaped shadow moustache, was accustomed to this. He smiled generously and handed the officer a book. ‘Please accept this token, Officer Carlton. One of the finest from our presses last year.’

The firm’s senior partner, J. T. Fields, had taught Osgood that no matter what the circumstances, presenting a book as a gift – a rather inexpensive gesture for a publisher – improved the mood of the gloomiest recipient. Regardless of the volume, the book was weighed, its title leaf examined with pleasant surprise, and the object finally fancied as precisely right for the recipient’s interests. Accordingly, Carlton weighed the book that Osgood handed him and studied the title. *A Journey in Brazil*, by Professor and Mrs. Agassiz.

‘I have spoken to my wife more than once on how I would enjoy Brazil!’ the officer exclaimed. Then, with an astonished gaze, looked up and said, ‘Sir, how is it you know my name?’

‘You called upon our firm some years ago for a minor problem.’

‘Yes, yes. But do you say we met?’

‘We did, Officer Carlton.’

‘Well,’ the policeman said definitively, ‘you must have changed how you wear your moustache.’

In fact, Osgood had not changed a hair since he was twenty, but he agreed wholeheartedly with the speculation before asking what had brought the officer to their firm.

‘It is not my desire to startle anyone, Mr. Osgood,’ the policeman said, reclaiming a grim demeanour. ‘I asked you to come down because I did not wish to frighten that girl – I mean the very young lady only steps from your office door.’

‘I think you will find that Miss Rebecca Sand does not frighten easily,’ Osgood said.

‘That so? Bless her! I esteem that sort of fortitude of character, even in a woman. I only hope you prove just as strong hearted.’

The young publisher climbed into the back of a carriage while the policeman ordered his driver to the dead house.

It was impossible not to feel possessed of heightened caution when entering the halls of the city coroner’s chambers of Boston. Upon their arrival, the officer led Osgood through an anteroom with little air and a dusty half window. Ascending a narrow staircase to a dark room on the floor above, the police officer turned up a lamp and looked down impatiently at his shoes, as though it were Osgood’s turn now to guide them.

‘We don’t have the entire day, I’m afraid, Mr. Osgood.’

Then he noticed. Officer Carlton was not looking at his shoes, but at the floor.

Osgood stumbled backwards as though about to fall, for the floor below them was made entirely of glass. Below it was a tiny room, twenty feet square, containing four stone slabs. On one, a woman whose skin was shrivelled and blackened by cholera. Another displayed an old man whose

face was burned on one side, and a third, a bloated victim of drowning. Beside each stone was a hook with the clothing the dead had been in when found. On to each body, a gentle stream of water flowed from a series of pipes.

'It's new. This is where dead bodies not yet identified are kept for viewing, at least for forty-eight hours before being placed in a pauper's grave if no one claims them,' Carlton explained. 'The water keeps the bodies fresh.'

The fourth slab. The body was covered below the neck by a white sheet. A familiar heavy suit on the hook at its side was ripped at the left sleeve. Osgood took off his hat and clutched it against his heart when he saw the dulled eyes staring back up at him.

'You know the young man then?' Officer Carlton asked at the publisher's reaction.

He was so distorted by death Osgood had to force himself to recognise him. Checking the catch in his throat and looking up at the policeman with misty eyes, Osgood lowered himself on one knee and touched the cold glass below. 'He is one of my employees. His name is Daniel; he's a junior clerk at our publishing firm. Seventeen years old.'

Osgood did not know how to maintain his usual poise. It was Osgood who had hired Daniel as a shop boy three years earlier. He had been determined to give him a chance in spite of his unpropitious circumstances. Daniel quickly proved himself honest and dedicated – and for longer than two weeks, the usual expiration. He had risen to the post of clerk, and even Mr. Fields had soon called him Daniel (instead of *that one*, short for 'that poor country boy you wanted to hire').

'What happened?' Osgood asked the police officer when he was able to speak again.

'Run down by an omnibus in Dock Square.'

'Did he have anything with him?' Osgood asked, trying to piece it together, make sense of anything that he could. As he kneeled, Osgood was so close to the glass that the

reflection of his own face was imposed over his clerk's lifeless form.

'No, he had nothing on his person. We connected him to you because one of our patrolmen had remembered seeing him coming and going from your building. Do you know where he was today?'

'Yes, of course. He was to be receiving important papers at the harbour and delivering them to our vaults.' Osgood hesitated but remembered he was speaking to a police officer, not a rival publisher. 'They were the advance sheets of the next instalments of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* sent from London.'

The Dickens novel had been published in serialised instalments at the beginning of each month. As with his other novels, the serial publication would gradually add readers who would then praise the story to friends and relatives who had not read it. The serial format made readers feel present at the very moments the story unfolded, as if they were among its characters. After the publication of the final monthly instalment, the novel would be published in its entirety in book form.

'Hold!' said the officer. 'I have been reading about young Mr. Drood's fortunes - misfortunes, I should say - with great interest in the magazines! I suppose this isn't the best time to ask. But pray tell me, Mr. Osgood, do you know how it will all end for Eddie Drood, now that Mr. Dickens has died?'

This very question had in fact been consuming Osgood's mind more than the officer could know - *how it will all end, with Dickens dead* - yet suddenly he had no response. Not now, not at the sight of good Daniel, motionless and broken on a cold board. The figure undulated strangely from the stream of water, as if he might still awaken.

'Daniel never failed his duties to me,' Osgood said. 'To be lost to such a senseless accident!'

‘Mr. Osgood, this was not merely an accident,’ Carlton said as he delivered a long sigh.

‘What do you mean?’

Carlton led Osgood down the stairs and into the room of the unknown dead. There was an entirely different feeling inside the little room with the glass ceiling than there had been in the viewing space above; it was like the difference between watching an exotic and dangerous animal through bars and entering the cage. The floor was white and black marble and cooled by the running water. Close up, the young clerk’s stomach was grossly distended under its sheet.

Carlton explained. ‘Your clerk appears to have forfeited the responsibilities you assigned him and indulged in some variety of intoxicants. Before his death, he was deep out of his senses and wandering blindly through the streets, according to witnesses we interviewed. I’m afraid the young man’s last act *has* been to fail you.’

Osgood knew he should restrain his anger, but he couldn’t. ‘Officer, I’d suggest you mind your words. You are slandering the dead!’

‘Ha!’ clacked the old coroner, Mr. Charles Barnicoat, coming from around the corner and hunching his sweaty face and whiskers over the body. ‘Officer Carlton speaks only the truth, wouldn’t know how to speak anything else.’

‘I *know* Daniel,’ Osgood insisted.

‘Spine bent like a question mark, see?’ said the coroner with confirming nod. ‘Common sign of the habitual opium eater.’

‘He was run down by an omnibus!’ cried Osgood.

Barnicoat yanked hard at the dead clerk’s arm. The skin there had turned a horrible blue tint. ‘You need more?’ he asked.

The sight revealed around Barnicoat’s fingers instantly silenced Osgood. There were several small holes pierced into the arm.

‘What is it?’ the publisher asked.

Barnicoat licked his lips. ‘These are marks from a new sort of needle called a hypodermic treatment – it was used by our doctors in the war. It serves like a lancet but the dose can be precisely controlled. It is now employed by doctors to inject certain potent medicines through the skin and into the cellular tissue. But the kits are used without a doctor’s consent by the opium eaters who are habituated to it, as your young clerk must have been by the looks of it. Some even inject these needles directly into their veins, a thing that would never be permitted by doctors! “Portable ecstasies”, these young men call the drug.’

‘God save the commonwealth,’ Officer Carlton intoned morosely.

‘They wish to be the heroes of their dreams, you see, rather than live their real lives,’ Barnicoat lectured with his chin stuck out pompously. ‘They prefer to feel in their brains they are floating through fire in China or India instead of trudging Boston in the monotonous treadmill of life. It *is* a shame but somewhat less of a shame to remember a young tramp with these habits rarely will attain the age of forty, something you or I can do quite without fail.’

Osgood interrupted. ‘Daniel Sand was no tramp. And no opium fiend!’

‘Then explain the marks on his arm,’ Barnicoat said. ‘No, the omnibus and its passengers, waylaid from their pressing travel, were more the victims than this lad. Now, you needn’t feel any personal responsibility fall on yourself, Osgood,’ Barnicoat said with a rude informality.

‘What happened to his chest?’ Osgood asked, forcing himself to look more closely at the mangled remains of his clerk. There were two parallel cuts in Daniel’s skin. ‘It is almost like a bite mark. And his suit. Over here, it looks as though someone tore it at the seam.’

The coroner shrugged. 'From the mechanisms beneath the bus, perhaps. Or perhaps the boy had injured himself while in the spell of his narcotic. Sad to reflect on, the shadows of this danger fall not uncommonly on young men of low station and more and more even women – if you can call them that still, for they are much degraded. I'm afraid this boy was one of the *fallen*.'

'I cannot say it is a surprise,' Carlton said to Barnicoat, 'after seeing the office today.'

Osgood had begun to feel the heat of anger rising to his ears and lips against Daniel for what seemed an undeniable secret life. Now he could direct his emotion elsewhere. 'Since I have entered, you have insulted the decent name of my clerk, and now my business. Exactly what do you mean to say about our office?'

Carlton raised an eyebrow, as though it were too plain. 'Why, an office in which the men are mixed together with unmarried women – it is bound to corrupt young boys! Could awaken certain un controlled physical urges in the females, too, I dare fancy, that should make any gentleman colour.' Though he himself did not.

Osgood steadied himself to rebuke the policeman, when he realised something ... In his astonishment at seeing Daniel lifeless on the slab, it had unaccountably fled his mind.

'My God. Rebecca!' Osgood said softly.

'Yes, Rebecca! That was the name of the little miss, Mr. Barnicoat, and a pretty one with blooming cheeks, sitting by Mr. Osgood's office door,' Carlton said with a lugubrious frown. 'The place almost seemed all women, in truth. Before long the dear strong-willed creatures will have the ballot – mark my having said that, Mr. Barnicoat! – and there will be no one left in all Boston for housekeeping.'

'Rebecca,' Osgood whispered, gently clutching the stiffening hand of his clerk. 'Rebecca is Daniel's sister.'