

Miscellaneous Papers

Miscellaneous Papers

by

Charles Dickens

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JOSEPH GRIMALDI

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER TO 'MEMOIRS OF JOSEPH GRIMALDI'

(1838)

It is some years now since we first conceived a strong veneration for Clowns, and an intense anxiety to know what they did with themselves out of pantomime time and off the stage. As a child, we were accustomed to pester our relations and friends with questions out of number concerning these gentry;—whether their appetite for sausages and such like wares was always the same, and if so, at whose expense they were maintained; whether they were ever taken up for pilfering other people's goods, or were forgiven by everybody because it was only done in fun; how it was they got such beautiful complexions, and where they lived; and whether they were born Clowns, or gradually turned into Clowns as they grew up. On these and a thousand other points our curiosity was insatiable. Nor were our speculations confined to Clowns alone; they extended to Harlequins, Pantaloons, and Columbines, all of whom we believed to be real and veritable personages, existing in the same forms and characters all the year round. How often have we wished that the Pantaloon were our godfather! and how often thought that to marry a Columbine would be to attain the highest pitch of all human felicity!

The delights—the ten thousand million delights—of a pantomime come streaming upon us now, even of the pantomime which came lumbering down in Richardson's waggons at fair time to the dull little town in which we had the honour to be brought up, and which a long row of small boys, with frills as white as they could be washed, and hands as clean as they would come were taken to behold the glories of in fair daylight.

We feel again all the pride of standing in a body on the platform, the observed of all observers in the crowd below, while the junior usher pays away twenty-four ninepences to a stout gentleman under a Gothic arch, with a hoop of variegated lamps swinging over his head. Again we catch a glimpse (too brief, alas!) of the lady with a green parasol in her hand, on the outside stage of the next show but one, who supports herself on one foot on the back of a majestic horse, blotting-paper coloured and white; and once again our eyes open wide with wonder and our hearts throb with emotion as we deliver our cardboard check into the very hands of the Harlequin himself, who, all glittering with spangles and dazzling with many colours, deigns to give us a word of encouragement and commendation as we pass into the booth!

But what was this—even this—to the glories of the inside, where, amid the smell of sawdust and orange-peel, sweeter far than violets to youthful noses, the first play being over, the lovers united, the Ghost appeased, the Baron killed, and

everything made comfortable and pleasant, the pantomime itself began! What words can describe the deep gloom of the opening scene where a crafty Magician holding a young lady in bondage was discovered studying an enchanted book to the soft music of a gong! or in what terms can we express the thrill of ecstasy with which, his magic power opposed by superior art, we beheld the monster himself converted into Clown! What mattered it that the stage was three yards wide and four deep? *we* never saw it. We had no eyes, ears, or corporeal senses but for the pantomime. And when its short career was run, and the Baron previously slaughtered, coming forward with his hand upon his heart, announced that for that favour Mr. Richardson returned his most sincere thanks, and the performances would commence again in a quarter of an hour, what jest could equal the effects of the Baron's indignation and surprise when the Clown, unexpectedly peeping from behind the curtain, requested the audience 'not to believe it, for it was all gammon!' Who but a Clown could have called forth the roar of laughter that succeeded! and what witchery but a Clown's could have caused the junior usher himself to declare aloud, as he shook his sides and smote his knee in a moment of irrepressible joy, that that was the very best thing he had ever heard said!

We have lost that Clown now;—he is still alive though, for we saw him only the day before last Bartholomew Fair eating a real saveloy, and we are sorry to say he had deserted to the illegitimate drama, for he was seated on one of 'Clark's Circus' waggons;—we have lost that Clown and that pantomime, but our relish for the entertainment still remains unimpaired. Each successive Boxing Day finds us in the same state of high excitement and expectation. On that eventful day, when new pantomimes are played for the first time at the two great theatres, and at twenty or thirty of the little ones, *we* still gloat as formerly upon the bills which set forth tempting descriptions of the scenery in staring red and black letters, and still fall down upon our knees, with other men and boys, upon the pavement by shop-doors, to read them down to the very last line. Nay, we still peruse with all eagerness and avidity the exclusive accounts of the coming wonders in the theatrical newspapers of the Sunday before, and still believe them as devoutly as we did before twenty years' experience had shown us that they are always wrong.

With these feelings upon the subject of pantomimes, it is no matter of surprise that when we first heard that Grimaldi had left some memoirs of his life behind him, we were in a perfect fever until we had perused the manuscript. It was no sooner placed in our hands by 'the adventurous and spirited Publisher'—(if our recollection serve us, this is the customary style of the complimentary little paragraphs regarding new books which usually precede advertisements about Savory's clocks in the newspapers)—than we sat down at once and read it every word.

See how pleasantly things come about, if you let them take their own course! This mention of the manuscript brings us at once to the very point we are anxious to

reach, and which we should have gained long ago, if we had not travelled into those irrelevant remarks concerning pantomimic representations.

For about a year before his death Grimaldi was employed in writing a full account of his life and adventures. It was his chief occupation and amusement; and as people who write their own lives, even in the midst of very many occupations, often find time to extend them to a most inordinate length, it is no wonder that his account of himself was exceedingly voluminous.

This manuscript was confided to Mr. Thomas Egerton Wilks, to alter and revise, with a view to its publication. Mr. Wilks, who was well acquainted with Grimaldi and his connections, applied himself to the task of condensing it throughout, and wholly expunging considerable portions, which, so far as the public were concerned, possessed neither interest nor amusement: he likewise interspersed here and there the substance of such personal anecdotes as he had gleaned from the writer in desultory conversation. While he was thus engaged, Grimaldi died.

Mr. Wilks having by the commencement of September concluded his labours, offered the manuscript to the present publisher, by whom it was shortly afterwards purchased unconditionally, with the full consent and concurrence of Mr. Richard Hughes, Grimaldi's executor.

The present Editor of these volumes has felt it necessary to say thus much in explanation of their origin, in order to establish beyond doubt the unquestionable authenticity of the memoirs they contain.

His own share in them is stated in a few words. Being much struck by several incidents in the manuscript—such as the description of Grimaldi's infancy, the burglary, the brother's return from sea under the extraordinary circumstances detailed, the adventure of the man with the two fingers on his left hand, the account of Mackintosh and his friends, and many other passages—and thinking that they might be related in a more attractive manner (they were at that time told in the first person, as if by Grimaldi himself, although they had necessarily lost any original manner which his recital might have imparted to them); he accepted a proposal from the publisher to edit the book, and *has* edited it to the best of his ability, altering its form throughout, and making such other alterations as he conceived would improve the narration of the facts, without any departure from the facts themselves.

He has merely to add that there has been no *book-making* in this ease. He has not swelled the quantity of matter, but materially abridged it. The account of Grimaldi's first courtship may appear lengthy in its present form; but it has undergone a double and most comprehensive process of abridgment. The old man was garrulous upon a subject on which the youth had felt so keenly; and as the feeling did him honour in both stages of life, the Editor has not had the heart to reduce it further.

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Here is the book, then, at last. After so much pains from so many hands—including the good right hand of George Cruik-shank, which has seldom been better exercised—he humbly hopes it may find favour with the public.

Doughty Street,
February, 1838.

THE AGRICULTURAL INTEREST

(Leader in *The Morning Chronicle*, March 9, 1844)

The present Government, having shown itself to be particularly clever in its management of Indictments for Conspiracy, cannot do better, we think (keeping in its administrative eye the pacification of some of its most influential and most unruly supporters), than indict the whole manufacturing interest of the country for a conspiracy against the agricultural interest. As the jury ought to be beyond impeachment, the panel might be chosen from among the Duke of Buckingham's tenants, with the Duke of Buckingham himself as foreman; and, to the end that the country might be quite satisfied with the judge, and have ample security beforehand for his moderation and impartiality, it would be desirable, perhaps, to make such a slight change in the working of the law (a mere nothing to a Conservative Government, bent upon its end), as would enable the question to be tried before an Ecclesiastical Court, with the Bishop of Exeter presiding. The Attorney-General for Ireland, turning his sword into a ploughshare, might conduct the prosecution; and Mr. Cobden and the other traversers might adopt any ground of defence they chose, or prove or disprove anything they pleased, without being embarrassed by the least anxiety or doubt in reference to the verdict.

That the country in general is in a conspiracy against this sacred but unhappy agricultural interest, there can be no doubt. It is not alone within the walls of Covent Garden Theatre, or the Free Trade Hall at Manchester, or the Town Hall at Birmingham, that the cry 'Repeal the Corn-laws!' is raised. It may be heard, moaning at night, through the straw-littered wards of Refuges for the Destitute; it may be read in the gaunt and famished faces which make our streets terrible; it is muttered in the thankful grace pronounced by haggard wretches over their felon fare in gaols; it is inscribed in dreadful characters upon the walls of Fever Hospitals; and may be plainly traced in every record of mortality. All of which proves, that there is a vast conspiracy afoot, against the unfortunate agricultural interest.

They who run, even upon railroads, may read of this conspiracy. The old stage-coachman was a farmer's friend. He wore top-boots, understood cattle, fed his horses upon corn, and had a lively personal interest in malt. The engine-driver's garb, and sympathies, and tastes belong to the factory. His fustian dress, besmeared with coal-dust and begrimed with soot; his oily hands, his dirty face, his knowledge of machinery; all point him out as one devoted to the manufacturing interest. Fire and smoke, and red-hot cinders follow in his wake. He has no attachment to the soil, but travels on a road of iron, furnace wrought. His warning is not conveyed in the fine old Saxon dialect of our glorious forefathers, but in a

fiendish yell. He never cries 'ya-hip,' with agricultural lungs; but jerks forth a manufactured shriek from a brazen throat.

Where *is* the agricultural interest represented? From what phase of our social life has it not been driven, to the undue setting up of its false rival?

Are the police agricultural? The watchmen were. They wore woollen nightcaps to a man; they encouraged the growth of timber, by patriotically adhering to staves and rattles of immense size; they slept every night in boxes, which were but another form of the celebrated wooden walls of Old England; they never woke up till it was too late—in which respect you might have thought them very farmers. How is it with the police? Their buttons are made at Birmingham; a dozen of their truncheons would poorly furnish forth a watchman's staff; they have no wooden walls to repose between; and the crowns of their hats are plated with cast-iron.

Are the doctors agricultural? Let Messrs. Morisori and Moat, of the Hygeian establishment at King's Cross, London, reply. Is it not, upon the constant showing of those gentlemen, an ascertained fact that the whole medical profession have united to depreciate the worth of the Universal Vegetable Medicines? And is this opposition to vegetables, and exaltation of steel and iron instead, on the part of the regular practitioners, capable of any interpretation but one? Is it not a distinct renouncement of the agricultural interest, and a setting up of the manufacturing interest instead?

Do the professors of the law at all fail in their truth to the beautiful maid whom they ought to adore? Inquire of the Attorney-General for Ireland. Inquire of that honourable and learned gentleman, whose last public act was to cast aside the grey goose-quill, an article of agricultural produce, and take up the pistol, which, under the system of percussion locks, has not even a flint to connect it with farming. Or put the question to a still higher legal functionary, who, on the same occasion, when he should have been a reed, inclining here and there, as adverse gales of evidence disposed him, was seen to be a manufactured image on the seat of Justice, cast by Power, in most impenetrable brass.

The world is too much with us in this manufacturing interest, early and late; that is the great complaint and the great truth. It is not so with the agricultural interest, or what passes by that name. It never thinks of the suffering world, or sees it, or cares to extend its knowledge of it; or, so long as it remains a world, cares anything about it. All those whom Dante placed in the first pit or circle of the doleful regions, might have represented the agricultural interest in the present Parliament, or at quarter sessions, or at meetings of the farmers' friends, or anywhere else.

But that is not the question now. It is conspired against; and we have given a few proofs of the conspiracy, as they shine out of various classes engaged in it. An indictment against the whole manufacturing interest need not be longer, surely, than the indictment in the case of the Crown against O'Connell and others. Mr. Cobden may be taken as its representative—as indeed he is, by one consent

already. There may be no evidence; but that is not required. A judge and jury are all that is needed. And the Government know where to find *them*, or they gain experience to little purpose.

THREATENING LETTER TO THOMAS HOOD, FROM AN ANCIENT GENTLEMAN

(*Hood's Magazine and Comic Miscellany*, May 1844)

MR. HOOD.

SIR,—The Constitution is going at last! You needn't laugh, Mr. Hood. I am aware that it has been going, two or three times before; perhaps four times; but it is on the move now, sir, and no mistake.

I beg to say, that I use those last expressions advisedly, sir, and not in the sense in which they are now used by Jackanapeses. There were no Jackanapeses when I was a boy, Mr. Hood. England was Old England when I was young. I little thought it would ever come to be Young England when I was old. But everything is going backward.

Ah! governments were governments, and judges were judges, in *my* day, Mr. Hood. There was no nonsense then. Any of seditious complainings, and we were ready with the military on the shortest notice. We should have charged Covent Garden Theatre, sir, on a Wednesday night: at the point of the bayonet. Then, the judges were full of dignity and firmness, and knew how to administer the law. There is only one judge who knows how to do his duty, now. He tried that revolutionary female the other day, who, though she was in full work (making shirts at three-halfpence a piece), had no pride in her country, but treasonably took it in her head, in the distraction of having been robbed of her easy earnings, to attempt to drown herself and her young child; and the glorious man went out of his way, sir—out of his way—to call her up for instant sentence of Death; and to tell her she had no hope of mercy in this world—as you may see yourself if you look in the papers of Wednesday the 17th of April. He won't be supported, sir, I know he won't; but it is worth remembering that his words were carried into every manufacturing town of this kingdom, and read aloud to crowds in every political parlour, beer-shop, news-room, and secret or open place of assembly, frequented by the discontented working-men; and that no milk-and-water weakness on the part of the executive can ever blot them out. Great things like that, are caught up, and stored up, in these times, and are not forgotten, Mr. Hood. The public at large (especially those who wish for peace and conciliation) are universally obliged to him. If it is reserved for any man to set the Thames on fire, it is reserved for him; and indeed I am told he very nearly did it, once.

But even he won't save the constitution, sir: it is mauled beyond the power of preservation. Do you know in what foul weather it will be sacrificed and

shipwrecked, Mr. Hood? Do you know on what rock it will strike, sir? You don't, I am certain; for nobody does know as yet but myself. I will tell you.

The constitution will go down, sir (nautically speaking), in the degeneration of the human species in England, and its reduction into a mingled race of savages and pigmies.

That is my proposition. That is my prediction. That is the event of which I give you warning. I am now going to prove it, sir.

You are a literary mau, Mr. Hood, and have written, I am told, some things worth reading. I say I am told, because I never read what is written in these days. You'll excuse me; but my principle is, that no man ought to know anything about his own time, except that it is the worst time that ever was, or is ever likely to be. That is the only way, sir, to be truly wise and happy.

In your station, as a literary man, Mr. Hood, you are frequently at the Court of Her Gracious Majesty the Queen. God bless her! You have reason to know that the three great keys to the royal palace (after rank and politics) are Science, Literature, Art. I don't approve of this myself. I think it ungenteel and barbarous, and quite un-English; the custom having been a foreign one, ever since the reigns of the uncivilised sultans in the Arabian Nights, who always called the wise men of their time about them. But so it is. And when you don't dine at the royal table, there is always a knife and fork for you at the equerries' table: where, I understand, all gifted men are made particularly welcome.

But all men can't be gifted, Mr. Hood. Neither scientific, literary, nor artistical powers are any more to be inherited than the property arising from scientific, literary, or artistic productions, which the law, with a beautiful imitation of nature, declines to protect in the second generation. Very good, sir. Then, people are naturally very prone to cast about in their minds for other means of getting at Court Favour; and, watching the signs of the times, to hew out for themselves, or their descendants, the likeliest roads to that distinguished goal.

Mr. Hood, it is pretty clear, from recent records in the Court Circular, that if a father wish to train up his son in the way he should go, to go to Court: and cannot indenture him to be a scientific man, an author, or an artist, three courses are open to him. He must endeavour by artificial means to make him a dwarf, a wild man, or a Boy Jones.

Now, sir, this is the shoal and quicksand on which the constitution will go to pieces.

I have made inquiry, Mr. Hood, and find that in my neighbourhood two families and a fraction out of every four, in the lower and middle classes of society, are studying and practising all conceivable arts to keep their infant children down. Understand me. I do not mean down in their numbers, or down in their precocity, but down in their growth, sir. A destructive and subduing drink, compounded of

gin and milk in equal quantities, such as is given to puppies to retard their growth: not something short, but something shortening: is administered to these young creatures many times a day. An unnatural and artificial thirst is first awakened in these infants by meals of salt beef, bacon, anchovies, sardines, red herrings, shrimps, olives, pea-soup, and that description of diet; and when they screech for drink, in accents that might melt a heart of stone, which they do constantly (I allude to screeching, not to melting), this liquid is introduced into their too confiding stomachs. At such an early age, and to so great an extent, is this custom of provoking thirst, then quenching it with a stunting drink, observed, that brine pap has already superseded the use of tops-and-bottoms; and wet-nurses, previously free from any kind of reproach, have been seen to stagger in the streets: owing, sir, to the quantity of gin introduced into their systems, with a view to its gradual and natural conversion into the fluid I have already mentioned.

Upon the best calculation I can make, this is going on, as I have said, in the proportion of about two families and a fraction in four. In one more family and a fraction out of the same number, efforts are being made to reduce the children to a state of nature; and to inculcate, at a tender age, the love of raw flesh, train oil, new rum, and the acquisition of scalps. Wild and outlandish dances are also in vogue (you will have observed the prevailing rage for the Polka); and savage cries and whoops are much indulged in (as you may discover, if you doubt it, in the House of Commons any night). Nay, some persons, Mr. Hood; and persons of some figure and distinction too; have already succeeded in breeding wild sons; who have been publicly shown in the Courts of Bankruptcy, and in police-offices, and in other commodious exhibition-rooms, with great effect, but who have not yet found favour at court; in consequence, as I infer, of the impression made by Mr. Rankin's wild men being too fresh and recent, to say nothing of Mr. Rankin's wild men being foreigners.

I need not refer you, sir, to the late instance of the Ojibbeway Bride. But I am credibly informed, that she is on the eve of retiring into a savage fastness, where she may bring forth and educate a wild family, who shall in course of time, by the dexterous use of the popularity they are certain to acquire at Windsor and St. James's, divide with dwarfs the principal offices of. state, of patronage, and power, in the United Kingdom.

Consider the deplorable consequences, Mr. Hood, which must result from these proceedings, and the encouragement they receive in the highest quarters.

The dwarf being the favourite, sir, it is certain that the public mind will run in a great and eminent degree upon the production of dwarfs. Perhaps the failures only will be brought up, wild. The imagination goes a long way in these cases; and all that the imagination *can* do, will be done, and is doing. You may convince yourself of this, by observing the condition of those ladies who take particular notice of General Tom Thumb at the Egyptian Hall, during his hours of performance.

The rapid increase of dwarfs, will be first felt in her Majesty's recruiting department. The standard will, of necessity, be lowered; the dwarfs will grow smaller and -smaller; the vulgar expression 'a man of his inches' will become a figure of fact, instead of a figure of speech; crack regiments, household-troops especially, will pick the smallest men from all parts of the country; and in the two little porticoes at the Horse Guards, two Tom Thumbs will be daily seen, doing duty, mounted on a pair of Shetland ponies. Each of them will be relieved (as Tom Thumb is, at this moment, in the intervals of his performance) by a wild man; and a British Grenadier will either go into a quart pot, or be an Old Boy, or Blue Gull, or Flying Bull, or some other savage chief of that nature.

I will not expatiate upon the number of dwarfs who will be found representing Grecian statues in all parts of the metropolis; because I am inclined to think that this will be a change for the better; and that the engagement of two or three in Trafalgar Square will tend to the improvement of the public taste.

The various genteel employments at Court being held by dwarfs, sir, it will be necessary to alter, in some respects, the present regulations. It is quite clear that not even General Tom Thumb himself could preserve a becoming dignity on state occasions, if required to walk about with a scaffolding-pole under his arm; therefore the gold and silver sticks at present used, must be cut down into skewers of those precious metals; a twig of the black rod will be quite as much as can be conveniently preserved; the coral and bells of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, will be used in lieu of the mace at present in existence; and that bauble (as Oliver Cromwell called it, Mr. Hood), its value being first calculated by Mr. Finlayson, the government actuary, will be placed to the credit of the National Debt.

All this, sir, will be the death of the constitution. But this is not all. The constitution dies hard, perhaps; but there is enough disease impending, Mr. Hood, to kill it three times over.

Wild men will get into the House of Commons. Imagine that, sir! Imagine Strong Wind in the House of Commons! It is not an easy matter to get through a debate now; but I say, imagine Strong Wind, speaking for the benefit of his constituents, upon the floor of the House of Commons! or imagine (which is pregnant with more awful consequences still) the ministry having an interpreter in the House of Commons, to tell the country, in English, what it really means!

Why, sir, that in itself would be blowing the constitution out of the mortar in St. James's Park, and leaving nothing of it to be seen but smoke.

But this, I repeat it, is the state of things to which we are fast tending, Mr. Hood; and I enclose my card for your private eye, that you may be quite certain of it. What the condition of this country will be, when its standing army is composed of dwarfs, with here and there a wild man to throw its ranks into confusion, like the elephants employed in war in former times, I leave you to imagine, sir. It may be

objected by some hopeful jackanapeses, that the number of impressments in the navy, consequent upon the seizure of the Boy-Joneses, or remaining portion of the population ambitious of Court Favour, will be in itself sufficient to defend our Island from foreign invasion. But I tell those jackanapeses, sir, that while I admit the wisdom of the Boy Jones precedent, of kidnapping such youths after the expiration of their several terms of imprisonment as vagabonds; hurrying them on board ship; and packing them off to sea again whenever they venture to take the air on shore: I deny the justice of the inference: inasmuch as it appears to me, that the inquiring minds of those young outlaws must naturally lead to their being hanged by the enemy as spies, early in their career; and before they shall have been rated on the books of our fleet as able seamen.

Such, Mr. Hood, sir, is the prospect before us! And unless you, and some of your friends who have influence at Court, can get up a giant as a forlorn hope, it is all over with this ill-fated land.

In reference to your own affairs, sir, you will take whatever course may seem to you most prudent and advisable after this warning. It is not a warning to be slighted: that I happen to know. I am informed by the gentleman who favours this, that you have recently been making some changes and improvements in your Magazine, and are, in point of fact, starting afresh. If I be well informed, and this be really so, rely upon it that you cannot start too small, sir. Come down to the duodecimo size instantly, Mr. Hood. Take time by the forelock; and, reducing the stature of your Magazine every month, bring it at last to the dimensions of the little almanack no longer issued, I regret-to say, by the ingenious Mr. Schloss: which was invisible to the naked eye until examined through a little eye-glass.

You project, I am told, the publication of a new novel, by yourself, in the pages of your Magazine. A word in your ear. I am not a young man, sir, and have had some experience. Don't put your own name on the title-page: it would be suicide and madness. Treat with General Tom Thumb. Mr. Hood, for the use of his name on any terms. If the gallant general should decline to treat with you, get Mr. Barnum's name, which is the next best in the market. And when, through this politic course, you shall have received, in presents, a richly jewelled set of tablets from Buckingham Palace, and a gold watch and appendages from Marlborough House; and when those valuable trinkets shall be left under a glass case at your publishers for inspection by your friends and the public in general;—then, sir, you will do me the justice of remembering this communication.

It is unnecessary for me to add, after what I have observed in the course of this letter, that I am not,—sir, ever your
CONSTANT
 READER.

Tuesday, 23rd April 1844.

P.S.—Impress it upon your contributors that they cannot be too short: and that if not dwarfish, they must be wild—or at all events not tame.

JOHN OVERS

PREFACE TO 'EVENINGS OF A WORKING MAN'

(1844)

The indulgent reader of this little book—not called indulgent, I may hope, by courtesy alone, but with some reference also to its title and pretensions—may very naturally inquire how it comes to have a preface to which my name is attached, nor is the readers right or inclination to be satisfied on this head, likely to be much diminished, when I state in the outset, that I do not recommend it as a book of surpassing originality or transcendent merit. That I do not claim to have discovered, in humble life, on extraordinary and brilliant genius. That I cannot charge mankind in general, with having entered into a conspiracy to neglect the author of this volume, or to leave him pining in obscurity. That I have not the smallest intention of comparing him with Burns, the exciseman; or with Bloomfield, the shoemaker; or with Ebenezer Elliott, the worker in iron; or with James Hogg, the shepherd. That I see no reason to be hot, or bitter, or lowering, or sarcastic, or indignant, or fierce, or sour, or sharp, in his behalf. That I have nothing to rail at; nothing to exalt; nothing to flourish in the face of a stonyhearted world; and have but a very short and simple tale to tell.

But, such as it is, it has interested me: and I hope it may interest the reader too, if I state it, unaffectedly and plainly.

John Overs, the writer of the following pages, is, as is set forth in the title-page, a working man. A man who earns his weekly wages (or who did when he was strong enough) by plying of the hammer, plane, and chisel. He became known to me, to the best of my recollection, nearly six years ago, when he sent me some songs, appropriate to the different months of the year, with a letter, stating under what circumstances they had been composed, and in what manner he was occupied from morning until night. I was, just then, relinquishing the conduct of a monthly periodical: or I would gladly have published them. As it was, I returned them to him, with a private expression of the interest I felt in such productions. They were afterwards accepted, with much readiness and consideration, by Mr. Tait, of Edinburgh; and were printed in his Magazine.

Finding, after some further correspondence with my new friend, that his authorship had not ceased with these verses, but that he still occupied his leisure moments in writing, I took occasion to remonstrate with him seriously against his pursuing that course. I pointed out to him a few of the uncertainties, anxieties, and difficulties of such a life, at the best. I entreated him to remember the position of heavy disadvantage in which he stood, by reason of his self education, and imperfect attainments; and I besought him to consider whether, having one or two of his

pieces accepted occasionally, here and there, after long suspense and many refusals, it was probable that he would find himself, in the end, a happier or a more contented man. On all these grounds, I told him, his persistence in his new calling made me uneasy; and I advised him to abandon it, as strongly as I could.

In answer to this dissuasion of mine, he wrote me as manly and straightforward, but withal, as modest a letter, as ever I read in my life. He explained to me how limited his ambition was: soaring no higher than the establishment of his wife in some light business, and the better education of his children. He set before me, the difference between his evening and holiday-studies, such as they were; and the having no better resource than an alehouse or a skittle-ground. He told me, how every small addition to his stock of knowledge, made his Sunday walks the pleasanter; the hedge-flowers sweeter; everything more full of interest and meaning to him. He assured me, that his daily work was not neglected for his self-imposed pursuits; but was faithfully and honestly performed; and so, indeed, it was. He hinted to me, that his greater self-respect was some inducement and reward; supposing every other to elude his grasp; and showed me, how the fancy that he would turn this or that acquisition from his books to account, by and by, in writing, made him more fresh and eager to peruse and profit by them, when his long day's work was done.

I would not, if I could, have offered one solitary objection more, to arguments so unpretending and so true.

From that time to the present, I have seen him frequently. It has been a pleasure to me to put a few books in his way; to give him a word or two of counsel in his little projects and difficulties; and to read his compositions with him, when he has had an hour, or so, to spare. I have never altered them, otherwise than by recommending condensation now and then; nor have I, in looking over these sheets, made any emendation in them, beyond the ordinary corrections of the press; desiring them to be his genuine work, as they have been his sober and rational amusement.

The latter observation brings me to the origin of the present volume, and of this my slight share in it. The reader will soon comprehend why I touch the subject lightly, and with a sorrowful and faltering hand.

In all the knowledge I have had of John Overs, and in all the many conversations I have held with him, I have invariably found him, in every essential particular, but one, the same. I have found him from first to last a simple, frugal, steady, upright, honourable man; especially to be noted for the unobtrusive independence of his character, the instinctive propriety of his manner, and the perfect neatness of his appearance. The extent of his information: regard being had to his opportunities of acquiring it: is very remarkable; and the discrimination with which he has risen superior to the mere prejudices of the class with which he is associated, without

losing his sympathy for all their real wrongs and grievances—they have a few—impressed me, in the beginning of our acquaintance, strongly in his favour.

The one respect in which he is not what he was, is in his hold on life.

He is very ill; the faintest shadow of the man who came into my little study for the first time half a dozen years ago, after the correspondence I have mentioned. He has been very ill for a long, long period; his disease is a severe and wasting affection of the lungs, which has incapacitated him, these many months, for every kind of occupation. 'If I could only do a hard day's work,' he said to me the other day, 'how happy I should be!'

Having these papers by him, amongst others, he bethought himself that if he could get a bookseller to purchase them for publication in a volume, they would enable him to make some temporary provision for his sick wife and very young family. We talked the matter over together, and that it might be easier of accomplishment, I promised him that I would write an introduction to his book.

I would to Heaven that I could do him better service! I would to Heaven it were an introduction to a long, and vigorous, and useful life! But Hope will not trim her lamp the less brightly for him and his, because of this impulse to their struggling fortunes; and trust me, reader, they deserve her light, and need it sorely.

He has inscribed this book to one whose skill will help him, under Providence, in all that human skill can do. To one who never could have recognised in any potentate on earth, a higher claim to constant kindness and attention, than he has recognised in him.

I have little more to say of it. While I do not commend it, on the one hand, as a prodigy, I do sincerely believe it, on the other, to possess some points of real interest, however considered; but which, if considered with reference to its title and origin, are of great interest.

If any delicate readers should approach the perusal of these 'Evenings of a Working Man,' with a genteel distaste to the principle of a working-man turning author at all, I may perhaps be permitted to suggest that the best protection against such an offence will be found in the Universal Education of the people; for the enlightenment of the many will effectually swamp any interest that may now attach in vulgar minds, to the few among them who are enabled, in any degree, to overcome the great difficulties of their position.

And if such readers should deny the immense importance of communicating to this class, at this time, every possible means of knowledge, refinement and recreation; or the cause we have to hail with delight the least token that may arise among them of a desire to be wiser, better, and more gentle; I earnestly entreat them to educate themselves in this neglected branch of their own learning without delay; promising them that it is the easiest in its acquisition of any: requiring only open eyes and

ears, and six easy lessons of an hour each in a working town. Which will render them perfect for the rest of their lives.

London,
June 1844.

CRIME AND EDUCATION

(Letter to *The Daily News*, February 4, 1846)

I offer no apology for entreating the attention of the readers' of *The Daily News* to an effort which has been making for some three years and a half, and which is making now, to introduce among the most miserable and neglected outcasts in London, some knowledge of the commonest principles of morality and religion; to commence their recognition as immortal human creatures, before the Gaol Chaplain becomes their only schoolmaster; to suggest to Society that its duty to this wretched throng, foredoomed to crime and punishment, rightfully begins at some distance from the police office; and that the careless maintenance from year to year, in this, the capital city of the world, of a vast hopeless nursery of ignorance, misery and vice; a breeding place for the hulks and jails: is horrible to contemplate.

This attempt is being made in certain of the most obscure and squalid parts of the Metropolis, where rooms are opened, at night, for the gratuitous instruction of all comers, children or adults, under the title of Ragged Schools. The name implies the purpose. They who are too ragged, wretched, filthy, and forlorn, to enter any other place: who could gain admission into no charity school, and who would be driven from any church door; are invited to come in here, and find some people not depraved, willing to teach them something, and show them some sympathy, and stretch a hand out, which is not the iron hand of Law, for their correction.

Before I describe a visit of my own to a Ragged School, and urge the readers of this letter for God's sake to visit one themselves, and think of it (which is my main object), let me say, that I know the prisons of London well; that I have visited the largest of them more times than I could count; and that the children in them are enough to break the heart and hope of any man. I have never taken a foreigner or a stranger of any kind to one of these establishments but I have seen him so moved at sight of the child offenders, and so affected by the contemplation of their utter renouncement and desolation outside the prison walls, that he has been as little able to disguise his emotion, as if some great grief had suddenly burst upon him. Mr. Chesterton and Lieutenant Tracey (than whom more intelligent and humane Governors of Prisons it would be hard, if not impossible, to find) know perfectly well that these children pass and repass through the prisons all their lives; that they are never taught; that the first distinctions between right and wrong are, from their cradles, perfectly confounded and perverted in their minds; that they come of untaught parents, and will give birth to another untaught generation; that in exact proportion to their natural abilities, is the extent and scope of their depravity; and that there is no escape or chance for them in any ordinary revolution of human

affairs. Happily, there are schools in these prisons now. If any readers doubt how ignorant the children are, let them visit those schools and see them at their tasks, and hear how much they knew when they were sent there. If they would know the produce of this seed, let them see a class of men and boys together, at their books (as I have seen them in the House of Correction for this county of Middlesex), and mark how painfully the full grown felons toil at the very shape and form of letters; their ignorance being so confirmed and solid. The contrast of this labour in the men, with the less blunted quickness of the boys; the latent shame and sense of degradation struggling through their dull attempts at infant lessons; and the universal eagerness to learn, impress me, in this passing retrospect, more painfully than I can tell.

For the instruction, and as a first step in the reformation, of such unhappy beings, the Ragged Schools were founded. I was first attracted to the subject, and indeed was first made conscious of their existence, about two years ago, or more, by seeing an advertisement in the papers dated from West Street, Saffron Hill, stating 'That a room had been opened and supported in that wretched neighbourhood for upwards of twelve months, where religious instruction had been imparted to the poor,' and explaining in a few words what was meant by Ragged Schools as a generic term, including, then, four or five similar places of instruction. I wrote to the masters of this particular school to make some further inquiries, and went myself soon afterwards.

It was a hot summer night; and the air of Field Lane and Saffron Hill was not improved by such weather, nor were the people in those streets very sober or honest company. Being unacquainted with the exact locality of the school, I was fain to make some inquiries about it. These were very jocosely received in general; but everybody knew where it was, and gave the right direction to it. The prevailing idea among the loungers (the greater part of them the very sweepings of the streets and station houses) seemed to be, that the teachers were quixotic, and the school upon the whole 'a lark.' But there was certainly a kind of rough respect for the intention, and (as I have said) nobody denied the school or its whereabouts, or refused assistance in directing to it.

It consisted at that time of either two or three—I forget which—miserable rooms, upstairs in a miserable house. In the best of these, the pupils in the female school were being taught to read and write; and though there were among the number, many wretched creatures steeped in degradation to the lips, they were tolerably quiet, and listened with apparent earnestness and patience to their instructors. The appearance of this room was sad and melancholy, of course—how could it be otherwise!—but, on the whole, encouraging.

The close, low, chamber at the back, in which the boys were crowded, was so foul and stifling as to be, at first, almost insupportable. But its moral aspect was so far worse than its physical, that this was soon forgotten. Huddled together on a bench about the room, and shown out by some flaring candles stuck against the walls,