Caddy Jellyby copies letters at the dictation of her mother

Mr Dick's Kite

FOR ALL DICKENS FELLOWSHIP MEMBERS

No 88 **January, 2012**

"*It's disgraceful,"* she said. "*You know it is. The whole house is disgraceful. The children are disgraceful*. Pa's miserable, and no wonder!"

Bleak House, Chapter IV

Dickens's Machiavellian Plots?

A book editor recently wrote a piece identifying Dickens's plots as "Machiavellian". Now, the name and work of Niccoló Machiavelli (1469-1527) quickly became associated with dishonesty, disloyalty, craftiness and service to tyrants, and it still largely is. Yet he was actually loyal, honest, in favour of a democratic unified Italy, a diplomat *par excellence*, a poet and novelist and the doyen of political philosophers*. Because of that ambiguity, it was not immediately clear what connection was being made between his theories and Dickens's plots. Reading further, it seemed the writer thought "Machiavellian" implied convoluted and lengthy, which did not fit either its proper or its distorted sense. And yet, in a way, the term is just right for some of Dickens's writing.

One of Machiavelli's main political theories, the one which led to his defamation as early as Marlowe and Shakespeare, was that we live in a world where few people, including rulers and politicians, go for straight-forward arguments or are willing to accept that pursuit of the general good might need compromises and even sacrifices. He therefore advised that the pursuit of a set of aims or policies, however good, might require subterfuge: that one might have to appeal to people's self-interest, their fears and even their greed, rather than to their better natures. Put like that, one can see Dickens's "back-door" attacks on the dead hand of some Government departments in *Little Dorrit,* on the evils of the Yorkshire Schools in *Nicholas Nickleby* and on utilitarianism in *Hard Times,* as well as his humorous attack in *Martin Chuzzlewit* on the abysmal state of nursing, as being truly Machiavellian: there he used methods designed to subvert the entrenched resistance he knew he was almost bound to face. He designed his plots in such cases, not to be intricate or convoluted, but to achieve political or social ends. In the true Machiavellian sense, his intention was to be effective in achieving a beneficial end. His really convoluted plots, as found in, say, *Bleak House* or *Great Expectations*, or *Our Mutual Friend* were quite different.

AJP

*It is clear why Machiavelli's character was reviled. He worked out a method to achieve one's ends, and, as so often happens, this was used by doubtful elements for doubtful purposes; but trained negotiators today will all try to use his techniques, just as Dickens did.

Wordsmiths

Children are inveterate wordsmiths and my two were no exceptions. They did however differ in the type of words they produced; my daughter who was the older of the two produced words such as a commercial product might have been proud of. Her *chef d'oeuvre* was "pominaree". This concoction had some magical properties. If we took her to some

remote place far from any shops and human habitation, she would inevitably demand some pominaree, and nothing would console her until we had gone back to the realms of civilisation and she had been given "something to eat". It took us a little while to realise that this new word which she had coined meant something to eat and that it possessed these magical qualities of appearing and disappearing depending upon our location.

Her brother's examples of wordsmithing had no magical qualities apart from a quiet way of imparting that they referred to a secret name of an individual who had already visited that spot. This secret name was "Mr Bunjum" . My son would whisper in his mother's ear that "Mr Bunjum has been here" when the family found some new place to explore. This reminds me that Mr Bunjum had always to be addressed correctly. Once or twice I forgot to do to this and said casually "I believe Bunjum's here?" only to be corrected imperiously "You mean Mr Bunjum!"

My daughter also had a secret friend who was known by the prosaic name "Gam" and whether by Miss, Mr or Mrs we never knew.
These characters came on the scene and disappeared into the realms of childhood unheralded and unsung.

However, this is not quite true. Many years later when I was looking for a name to bestow upon a friendly character in a short story I recalled the name of Mr Bunjum and sent him on his way rejoicing.

ASW

Remembering Helen?

Dickens used only three of the many variants of the name Helen in his novels, though there is only one other female name that has as many – Elizabeth. These were Nell, Nelly(ie) and Helena. The original Helen (of Troy), whose face "launched a thousand ships", had her attributes echoed early in Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and late in Helena Landless in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; both were petite, beautiful, loved and dark-haired (though Nell, because younger, was fairer).

Little Nell, one of Dickens's most emotional inventions, created in 1840, was clearly an object of lust as well as love, and might have been abducted, as Helen was by Paris, if she had not persuaded her Grandfather to flee from London and the threats lurking there. Helena Landless, created in 1869, was clearly named after, if not based on, Ellen (often referred to as Nellie) Lawless Ternan, who was also petite, beautiful and loved; she was not dark-haired but she was kept hidden. It seems pertinent to ask if this trio might have formed some blended character in the artistic world of Dickens.

These thoughts were triggered by the idea that Dickens may have had some special adventure awaiting Helena in this, his last novel, if it had not been so suddenly terminated. Little Nell and Ellen, both had their

Helen-related adventures. Half the book was still to be written, and the mysteries that surrounded Helena and her brother Neville had not yet been explored, let alone exploited. Supposing, on that basis, that episode seven had seen her disappear as mysteriously as Edwin had – and she cannot have been introduced for nothing – we would have had a second half to the *Drood* story worthy of Dickens.

AJP

Among the Mortals

But some are more immortal than others.

Thackeray seemed indifferent to the immortality of his characters. At the end of 'Vanity Fair' he would cheerfully "sweep his puppets into a box and close the lid".

Dickens, on the contrary, had more respect for his creations. Perhaps it took a little while before Mr Pickwick and Sam Weller were recognised as "immortal", but Dickens never swept them into a box and closed the lid. He treated even his minor characters with due respect. This is not to say Dickens treated them all equally. He knew that some would die on the battlefield while others would survive to enjoy happy longevity in a prosperous tavern where many of his other characters would later foregather to enjoy the hospitality and good fellowship of their host.

ASW

A Leap without Looking

In Dickens's *Sketches of Young Gentlemen* written 1830 to 1846 (when they seem to have been put in some later volumes of *Sketches*) one particularly facetious Sketch was his "Remonstrance". This is not in all collections of Dickens's works, so the relevant part is quoted here:

THE REMONSTRANCE OF THEIR FAITHFUL, FELLOW-SUBJECT, sheweth -

That Her Most Gracious Majesty, Victoria, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen, Defender of the Faith, did, on the 23rd day of November last past, declare and pronounce to Her Most Honourable Privy Council, Her Majesty's Most Gracious intention of entering into the bonds of wedlock.

That Her Most Gracious Majesty, in so making known Her Most Gracious intention to Her Most Honourable Privy Council as aforesaid, did use and employ the words – "It is my intention to ally myself in marriage with Prince Albert of Saxe Coburg and Gotha."

That the present Bissextile, or Leap Year, in which it is held and considered lawful for any lady to offer and submit proposals of marriage to any gentleman, and to enforce and insist upon acceptance of the same, under pain of a certain fine or penalty: to wit, one silk scarf or satin dress of the first quality, to be chosen by the lady and paid (or owed) for, by the gentleman.

That these and other the horrors and dangers with which the said Bissextile, or Leap Year, threatens the gentlemen of England on every occasion of its periodical return, have been greatly aggravated and augmented by the terms of Her Majesty's said Most Gracious communication, which have filled the heads of divers young

ladies in the Realm with certain new ideas destructive to the peace of mankind, that never entered their imagination before.

This was written after Victoria and Albert wed in February 1840 (which **was** a Leap Year), and possibly much later, as Dickens had forgotten, or expected his reader's to have forgotten, that her "proposal" was actually made on 15th October 1839 (which was **not**)**.** Dickens's readers may have missed the sleight of hand he used to get humour from the theme of the misuse of, and great damage done by, the leap-year proposal.

(The term "bissextile" Dickens used for a leap year actually comes from the Romans: to keep their calendar correct, they would, every fourth year, repeat one day ("sextus") in March; hence "bi" and "sextile", which may have given some the idea that it benefited both sexes. In any case, the customary right - a legal one in some countries - for the female to propose, and claim a forfeit if rejected, goes back a long time.)

GC

Food

A recent copy of the Spectator contained an article bearing the title 'FOOD', which was chiefly about the Savoy Grill in London, which offers an "Olde British" menu of fare. This did not have any reference to Dickens, although a year or two ago Mr Cedric Dickens published a book entitled *Dining with Dickens!* the readers of which must have looked in vain for any reference to today's most popular dinner food, which I beg pardon for introducing with the riddle *"Why did the French lose the Battle of Trafalgar?"* Answer – *"Because they did not have sufficient ships [fish and chips]."*

ASW

Dickens's Uncashed Cheque

Dickens's geography generally seems pretty sound, though he did make some slips. For example, in *A Child's History of England*, he wrote of Cromwell's stunning action in 1649 in putting down a mutiny in the Parliamentary Army on the orders of General Sir Thomas Fairfax: "*Oliver was the only man to deal with such difficulties as these, and he soon cut them short by bursting at midnight into the town of Burford, near Salisbury, where the mutineers were sheltered.*"

Burford was actually in Oxfordshire, over 50 miles or a good two-days' ride from Salisbury; but Dickens can be excused for thinking it nearer when historians put great emphasis on the fact that Cromwell's trained troop got there in only a 12-hour ride, taking the mutineers by surprise.

It does not look so easy to explain another error that Dickens seems to have made. This came to light when Dan Calinescu of the Toronto Branch was offered (and bought) a cheque Dickens had sent to his sons, Alfred and Edward, in Australia. It was for £100 (worth around

£10,000 or $25,000 Australian today), and it was never cashed. It seems Dickens, not realising the distance that might separate them, and that meetings between them might not be easy, made it payable to Alfred and Edward jointly, which meant it could only be cashed if endorsed with the signatures of both within a limited period of time. And it was not.

AJP

Parenting

I was listening to an interesting radio programme the other afternoon which discussed the need for 'parenting skills' to be taught to new parents. The programme drew attention to the way in which many children are brought up in circumstances which do not allow them to understand what constitutes a 'normal' family life. I was immediately reminded of the dysfunctional Jellyby family.

We usually think of Dickens as a social reformer in the 19th century and we may overlook the fact that there are still many social reforms required today. I learned for instance, that there are many new mothers who are quite ignorant in the art of changing nappies and preparing feeding bottles. At one time such skills were handed down from mothers to daughters, but now, with changing times, parents are often forced to go out to work for economic reasons, and have less and less time to spend with their offspring, and as a result young children are often neglected. Against this background the Government is putting forward tentative proposals for parenting classes to be offered at ante-natal clinics for new parents.

Caddy Jellyby's words (in the quotation on our front page, as written by Dickens) have a sharp relevance in today's world.

ASW

Hitting the Nail on the Head

From time to time, stemming from Dickens's statement in *Christmas Carol* that "*Old Marley was as dead as a door nail*", one sees debates as to whether he was the creator of that metaphor. The fact that he goes on, "*I don't mean to say that I know from my own knowledge what there is particularly dead about a door nail,*" suggests he had taken the idea from somewhere else. Indeed, he may have adapted it from Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 2* where Falstaff asks, "*Is the old King dead?*" and Pistol replies, "*As a nail in a door*."

The basis of the metaphor seems to be that early doors had nails with large heads in them so that, when hit by the knocker, the noise would echo round the house. The death of the nail, if it were animate, would have been certain. Yet 200 years before Shakespeare, the deadness of a doornail had been referred to in Chaucerian English by Langland in his *Piers Plowman*, and that was more nearly in the form that Dickens used.

AJP

Dickens Limericks

A member writes of visiting a town in the west of Ireland with the sign at its portals which was a double invitation. It read "*Welcome to Limerick City*", and seemed to challenge him to complete the five-line rhyme of which that was clearly the first; his second was obvious, namely, "*Where all of the girls are so pretty*". That reminded him of going to talk to a very active Women's Institute, where he found himself "elected" to judge their monthly competition. Normally that would have been a Christmas card design, or a cake, or a flower arrangement, but, in honour of his talk, it was to be a Dickens Limerick. The members had been given the first line – "*There once was a writer Charles Dickens*" – and invited to finish it. The entry chosen as best read:

There once was a writer Charles Dickens,
Who my interest invariably quickens,
While his Sikes and Hortense
Keep me well in suspense
His plot implacably thickens.

It turned out that all the entries had used the same two rhymes for the second and fifth lines ("quickens" and "thickens"), though not necessarily in that order, with none of the variations that might have been turned up in a rhyming dictionary – "chickens", "sickens", or even "pickin's", "weakens", or "Billikins". The Limerick form is so ubiquitous that it would seem strange if there were no collection of such verses for Dickens, though, of course, some might "cheat" and stretch the meter or use varied first lines to free up the "poet's" fancy. For instance, one might try, "*When Dickens created Ma Todgers, Who only took gentlemen lodgers,"* or, *"When Dickens wrote his Edwin Drood,/ He hoped it would be misconstrued"*. All right; you have a go.

AJP

Matters Arising

In the "*The Kite*", issue 87, in the article on the flight of Little Nell from Quilp, the reference to her Grandfather as "Grandfather Trent" was an error. Dickens's text makes it clear Nell was his **daughter's** child, not his son's. That was pointed out by Joanne Eysell and Malcolm Andrews who also reminded us that, recognising the concupiscence – lust – in the story, James Joyce, in his *Finnegan's Wake*, referred to it as *The Old Cupiosity Shop*.(The reader will note the use here of the modern political method of apologising in the abstract – there has been an error - but AJP wrote it, and will probably point out it is not an uncommon one.

GC

Dostoevsky

A report of a Dickens-Dostoevsky meeting used by Tomalin to berate him in her *Charles Dickens* has been found to be a fake. Oh Dear! **AJP**

Central Fellowship Meetings.
Thursday 19 January 2012 at the Artworkers Guild Hall. DF President Mark Dickens will welcome members to the lecture:
Introduction to *David Copperfield* by Dr Tony Williams, @ 6.30pm.
Tuesday 21 February 2012 at London House, Goodenough College. Dickens and Magic: performance by Magic Circle member, Ian Keable. 6.30pm.
Other events:
Thursday 26 January 2012: The Thackeray Society invites members of the Dickens Fellowship to join them at a meeting at the Reform Club, to celebrate the Dickens bicentenary. The event will include dinner and drinks, and an after-dinner talk on 'Dickens and Thackeray' by Peter Clark, author of a new book on *Dickens's London.* Cost around £65. Please contact Joan Dicks for further information: joan@dickshg.freeserve.co.uk. 020 7242 8575
Tuesday 7 February 2012:
Dickens Fellowship buffet lunch at the National Liberal Club. 1pm. Cost around £25. Speakers: Robert Patten, Michael Slater, Tony Williams. Advance notice.
Special Bicentenary Edition of *The Dickensian*: The spring edition of *The Dickensian* will contain contributions from well-known figures who will reflect on what they owe to Dickens. Remember to order your copy!

JD

Front Page Picture
As well-meaning as Mrs Jellyby might have been as regards her charitable project in Africa, she was so obsessed with carrying it out that, in the process of promoting her idea of sending British Colonials to Borrioboola-Gha to teach the Natives how to grow coffee, and to educate them, she neglected her family and housekeeping responsibilities. She used her eldest daughter, Caddy, as her amanuensis, to write letters etc. (the subject of the front page picture). Caddy showed her discontent of the situation, and the destruction of their family life, in her verbal protest to Esther Summerson, which is the quotation at the bottom of the front page.

GC

Contributions
Comments and short items for the Kite are always welcome. Please send them either through alanwatts1@supanet.com or (for Geoffrey Christopher, (39 Northern Parade, Hilsea, Portsmouth, Hants., PO2 9PB) geoffreychristopher132@btinternet.com

In fellowship,
Compiled by Alan S. Watts and friends, for The Dickens Fellowship.