

Tangible Typography
(excerpted from *Harriet and Letitia: A Novel*)

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Author's Note

This excerpted chapter falls midway through *Harriet and Letitia*, a historical novel-in-progress that centres on the friendship and adventures of Letitia Austin, the younger sister of Charles Dickens, and her sister-in-law and companion Harriet Dickens (née Lovell), who was deserted by husband Augustus in 1857, several years after losing her eyesight. The two women took up house together in the 1860s, after the death of Letitia's husband Henry, a sanitary engineer. Harriet's desertion by Augustus serves as a prologue to two other marital breakdowns that figure prominently in the plot: those of Charles and Catherine Dickens in 1858 and of Frederick and Anna Dickens in 1859. Harriet's blindness, and her efforts to counter the dependence associated with her disability and her womanhood, are leitmotifs in the novel. Her struggle for autonomy amplifies those of the sighted women born or married into the Dickens family, whose stories sometimes parallel her own.

Set in 1868, shortly after the novelist returned to England from his second American tour with the idea of publishing an embossed edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop* for blind readers, the chapter opens with Letitia and Harriet at their home on Ledbury Road, where they soon receive two unexpected visitors – the first, their niece Katherine, daughter of Alfred Dickens and his widow Helen.

Letitia Austin looked at her companion and cleared her throat. “Remarks on the Peculiar Position of Blind Women,” she began.

“He says ‘peculiar?’” Harriet Dickens, her sister-in-law, turned to face her, following her voice.

“He means ‘particular.’ ‘Specific,’ you know.”

“Par-ti-cu-lar,” Harriet repeated, breaking the word into pieces, as she sometimes did, as if to ingest it, and then clicking her tongue. “Well, we can agree with Mr. Levy there. But ‘peculiar’ is a different word, Tish. Do you know why it sounds so unpleasant in my ears?”

“I’m afraid I do.”

“The pe-cu-li-ar-ity of her character has thrown all the children on someone else.’ I’ll never forget that line. Mother read it to me and to Julia at the breakfast table when it first appeared in print. Ever since hearing it, I’ve shuddered at the word.”

Harriet made her point by shaking in her chair.

Letitia couldn’t deny it. Why did she always want to deny it – to defend the indefensible? A graying woman of fifty-two and seven years a widow, Letitia wore a high-collared, tightly-buttoned dress, her look severe. Yet she often chided herself for her leniency – especially toward her older and famous brother. “He didn’t mean it, I’m sure he didn’t mean it. It was a mistake. He said that much himself.” She could just hear herself. Even now, she had to resist the impulse, and it had been ten years. Yes, it was absolutely dreadful and she needed to say so.

“It was dreadful, Harriet. I know.”

And then the room seemed to open on another and Kate herself appeared to Letitia as she had that late August day, sitting in the quiet back parlour at Gloucester Crescent, a volume in her hand and a newspaper – *the* newspaper – on the table at her left, along with several scattered letters. Eyes wide, expression fixed, Kate reminded Letitia of a wounded deer facing a huntsman. But Letitia was unarmed.

“Mrs. Austin, ma’am,” Emily had announced. “Will you be having some tea, Mrs. Dickens?”

“Yes, Emily. Thank you. Please bring it up as soon as it’s ready.” Kate gave the visitor a mournful smile, as if handing her a piece of funeral cake.

Letitia took the seat to Kate's right as the housemaid left the room. Books nearly covered the walls – Tish could easily imagine the titles – although Kate had only moved into her new home that summer. A cottage piano stood in a far corner, sheet music at the ready. Haydn's canzonet – Fanny's favourite song – would be there in the stack. Patience smiling at grief.

Tish and Kate were old allies in the struggle that was marriage, as women joined by means of Dickens men often were. Yet the visitor appeared self-conscious, as if placed on stage during one of her brother's amateur theatricals. Charles had, in fact, created the scene in which Tish found herself, though she refused to speak the lines he would have handed her if given the chance.

“My dear Catherine,” she began awkwardly, as if writing a letter, “how do you find yourself? Henry and I both have been anxious to see you today – Charles's misstep, you know.”

Harriet, restless in her chair, brought Letitia back to the now and here – their own parlour on Ledbury Road. “Well, Tish, go on. I am waiting to hear what lies beyond Mr. Levy's title.”

Once again, Letitia cleared her throat. “In taking into consideration the position of blind females,” she went on, the lines around her mouth drawing together as she puckered and frowned, “it is necessary to bear in mind that the marriage state is a normal condition of human happiness. In the case of men without sight, this almost indispensable requisite is not exceptionally wanting, for they certainly enter into the bonds of matrimony quite as frequently, in proportion, as their sighted neighbours; but with blind women it is far otherwise.’ Well, Harriet, Mr. Levy is certainly a man who likes his words! He could make his point with far fewer, don't you agree?”

The marriage state. A normal condition of human happiness. Like it or not, Harriet had to agree with Mr. Levy here. Why else would she have been so quick to place her advertisements after Augustus disappeared? She had certainly accomplished results by doing so, though not the results she sought, as her foray into print brought Letitia and then Charles Dickens himself to her door.

The first ad passed unnoticed – by Augustus as well as everyone else she knew. Some readers may remember having seen it on the front page, in the second column:

H. L. D. implores A. N. D. to return home or otherwise communicate with his loving wife. She suspects that her eyesight may be returning. Do not concern yourself with the debts you may have incurred or with the wrongs you may have committed. Remember our happiness. All will be forgiven.

The next, composed and published a week later, was more direct and less conciliatory, and Harriet soon regretted its angry tone. She had abandoned the acronyms and their anonymity, using her husband's full name instead. She was driven to candour by the cutting quip of her sister Julia, who took down both of the ads, in turn, from Harriet's dictation. ("A.N.D!" Julia had said after hearing the first. "Another Ne'er-do-well Dickens, just as bad as Fred!") To Harriet's disappointment, Augustus either ignored or missed the second ad, too – Harriet never *did* learn on what date he and Bertha had sailed – but ignore it her friends and trustees did not:

Augustus Newnham Dickens, who left Lewisham on February 7, is asked to communicate at once with his wife, who has no idea of his whereabouts or his movements, and whom he has left in dire straits. Much will be forgiven upon his return.

Letitia had called at John's Terrace on the very day of its appearance. Henry handed the *Times* to his wife across the breakfast table that morning after nearly choking on his buttered toast. She was in for a shock, he warned her, and had better get her bonnet on and pay a visit to Mrs. Augustus as quickly as the omnibus could carry her. Better yet, she should take a cab. Letitia had ended her visit by offering Harriet a place to live in her own home – at least until Augustus "realised his error" – though Henry, generous man as he was, might well have been surprised by Harriet's appearance at their door.

Two days later, Letitia's older brother came calling on Harriet, his determination to "nip this behaviour in the bud" sharpened by his rights as one of Harriet's trustees and by his fear of bad publicity. She should never again take such a step without consulting him, he warned. What was she thinking? And how *had* she done it? She must have had an accomplice –

“accomplice” was his term – to write the advertisement and bring it to the newspaper office, and he wanted to “get to the bottom of it.” But she shouldn’t worry, he added. He would find Augustus, if anyone could; she should leave it all to him. She could rely on him and Mr. Ouvry.

“My only ‘accomplice’, as you put it, Charles, has been my typograph,” Harriet had protested, anxious to shield Julia from whatever unpleasantness her brother-in-law might cause. “You forget my kind gift from Dr. Armitage. I am perfectly capable of writing my own advertisements, thanks to that ingenious device.”

Harriet could hear him scoff, and could picture his eyes narrowing sceptically. For all his admiration of Laura Bridgman and her accomplishments, impressed upon him during his 1842 American tour and relayed to Harriet after her own eyesight failed her, the novelist would not abandon his conviction that the blind were utterly dependent creatures, beckoning to Good Men for help and indebted to the sighted for whatever they achieved. Dr. Howe had made Laura all she was, he insisted. Harriet hadn’t been privy to the conversation but she could have scripted in burlesque the praise Dickens offered to Wilkie Collins just weeks before she wrote her ads for the *Times*, with the serialisation of *The Dead Secret* underway in *Household Words*. “I’ve had a pull at your novel, and it’s served me like a draught,” Dickens assured his fellow author, patting the back of his chair at the Hawk and Mole. “You’ve captured what I’ve always believed – that a blind man is no better than a helpless woman. Poor Leonard Franklin, led around by the nose by his wife!”

It happened to be Dickens’s forty-fifth birthday when he offered Collins this praise – the very day on which Augustus left Harriet, in fact. As Dickens reprimanded his sister-in-law in the home that she and Augustus had shared, the novelist thought back bitterly on his youngest brother’s timing – one last, unwelcome birthday gift to him, Augustus’s erstwhile benefactor. The offence was only matched by the ingratitude of Fred, whose birthday greetings in 1857 had been a litany of complaints against his elder brother – “the most Intolerant of Men,” Fred alleged, after Dickens refused to give him £30.

“And did your typograph also bring your advertisement to the office of the *Times*?” Dickens asked Harriet, goaded into sarcasm by his sense that, in publicising her situation, she had compounded the injury already

done him by Augustus. His own wounds helped him to forget that she was the victim.

Dickens would later admit, if only to himself, that the typograph possessed uncanny powers – when he started to receive Harriet’s petitions and appeals. The device might not *deliver* the letters it helped to produce but it enabled whoever used it to master, cannibalise or otherwise assault the writings of others, Dickens grumbled; the printed words already on the page were actually impaled as the new text was created! In jest, Harriet called her prick writing her needlepoint but there was nothing domestic or womanly about that work. Dickens was indignant. The proofs of *Household Words* were *not* waste paper, though Harriet had treated them as such – surely this could not be intentional! He had sent advanced proofs of Collins’s novel to Letitia as a favour – it was the first of Wilkie’s that he had published and the young man’s star was on the rise. Eager to share the gift, Tish had read it to Harriet in her lone state at Lewisham. *That* must have been the means by which the pages ended up lining the bottom of Harriet’s apparatus, to be filled with the pinpricks of her tangible typography – the writing *weapons* (there was no better word) for which George Gibson of Birmingham had earned his gold medal. Despite his irritation, Dickens kept Harriet’s first letter to him as a curiosity while burning nearly all the other correspondence that came his way. “My Dear Charles,” Harriet began – but perhaps it will be best to let her speak for herself. [Editor’s Note: we include both recto and verso of Harriet’s first page to show the workings of her device; thereafter solely recto.]

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Leonard, when his wife had read to the end, "Mrs. Trevelyan, Sarah Eason, and the servant who disappeared from Porthgenna Tower, are one and the same person." "Poor creature!" said Rosamond, sighing, "I will put down the letter. We know not why she warned me so anxiously not to go into the little Room. Who saw me what she must have suffered when she came as a stranger to my bed-side? Oh, what would I not give if I had been less hasty with her! It is dreadful to remember, that I wrote to her as a servant whom I expected to obey me. It is worse still to feel that I cannot even now, think of her as a child should think of a mother. How can I ever tell her that I know the secret? How?" She paused, with a heart sick consciousness of the sin that was cast on her behalf; she paused, shrinking as she thought of the name that her husband had given to her, and of her own parentage, which the laws of society disdained to recognize.

"Why do you stop?" asked Leonard. "I was afraid," she began, and paused again. "I read," he said, finishing the sentence for her, "that words of pity for that unhappy woman might wound my sensitive pride, by reminding me of the circumstances of my birth. Rosamond, I should be unworthy of your matchless truthfulness towards me, if I, on my side, did not acknowledge that the discovery had wounded me as deeply as proud man can be wounded. My pride has been born and bred in me. My pride, even while I am now speaking to you, takes advantage of my first moments of companionship, and deludes me into doubting, in the face of all probability, whether the words you have said to me, can after all be words of truth. But strong as that inborn and bred feeling is—strong as it may be to discipline and master me as I ought, and must, and will,—there is another feeling in my heart that is stronger yet." He felt for her hand, and took it in his; then added: "From the hour when you first devoted your life to your blind husband,—from the hour when you took all his gratitude, as you had already done, for his love, you took a pledge in his heart, Rosamond, from which nothing, not even such a shock as has now assailed us, can remove you. Right as I have always been the worth of me in my estimation, in the face of it, even before the event of yesterday, to hold the worth of my wife, let her parentage be what it may, higher still."

"Oh, Leary, Leary, I can't hear you praise me, if you talk in this way, as if I had made a sacrifice in marrying you! But for my blind husband I might never have observed what you have just said of me. When first read that fearful letter, I had one moment of vile ungrateful doubt if your love for me would hold out against the discovery of the secret. I had one moment of

horrible temptation that drew me away from you when I ought to have put the letter into your hand. It was the sight of you, waiting for me to speak again, so innocent of all knowledge of what had happened to me by you, that brought me back to my senses, and told me what I ought to do. It was the sight of my blind husband that made me consider the temptation to betray that letter in the best hope of discovering it. Oh, if I had been the hardest-hearted of women, could I have ever taken your hand again,—could I kiss you, could I lie down by your side, and hear you fall asleep in my arms, after night, feeling that I had abused your blind dependence on me to serve my own selfish interests? Knowing that I had only succeeded in my deceit because your affection made you incapable of suspecting deception? No, no; I can hardly believe that the basest of women could be guilty of such baseness as that, and I can claim nothing more for myself than the credit of having been true to my trust. You said yesterday, love, in the little Room, that the one faithful friend to you in your blindness who never failed, was your wife. It is reward enough and consolation enough for me, now that the worst is over to know that you can say so still."

"Yes, Rosamond, the worst is over, but we must not forget that there may be hard trials still to meet."

"Hard trials, love! For what trials do you refer to?"

"Perhaps, Rosamond, I over-rate the courage that the sacrifice demands; but, to me, at least, it will be a hard sacrifice of my own feelings to make strangers, partners in the knowledge of the secret, and to know possess."

Rosamond looked at her husband in astonishment. "Why need we tell the secret to anyone?" she asked.

"Assuming that we can satisfy ourselves of the genuineness of that letter," he answered, "we shall have no choice but to tell the secret to strangers. You cannot forget the circumstances under which your father—under which Captain Trevelton—"

"Take him my father," said Rosamond sadly. "Remember not the hard line, and how I loved him, and say my father, still."

"I am afraid I must say," Captain Trevelton now, returned Leonard, "but I shall finally be able to explain simply and plainly what it is very necessary that you should know. Captain Trevelton died without leaving a will. His only property was the purchase-money of this house and estate; and you inherited it, as his next of kin—"

Rosamond started back in her chair, and clasped her hands in dismay. "Oh, Leary," she said, "I have thought so much of you, since I found the letter, that I never remembered this!"

"It is time to remember it, my love. If

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you are not Captain Treverton's daughter, you have no right to the fortune that you possess, and it must be restored to the person who is Captain Treverton's next of kin—or, in other words, his brother."

"To that man!" exclaimed Rosamond, "to that man, who is a stranger to us, who holds our very name in contempt! Are we to be made poor that he may be made rich?"

"We are to do what is honourable and just, at any sacrifice of our own interests and ourselves," said Leonard firmly. "I believe, Rosamond, that his obsequy as your husband is necessary, according to the law, to effect this restitution. If Mr. Andrew Treverton was the bitterest enemy I had on earth, and if the restoration of this money unfairly guided us both in our worldly circumstances, I would give it back of my own accord to the last farthing; I would give it back without an instant's hesitation, and so would you."

The blood mantled in his cheeks as he spoke. Rosamond looked at him admiringly in silence. "Who would have had him less proud," she thought, "twice his pride speaks in such words as these?"

"You understand me," continued Leonard, "that we have duties to perform which will oblige us to seek help from others, and which will therefore render it impossible to keep the secret to ourselves. If we search all England for her, Sarah Leeson must be found. Our future actions depend upon her answers to our inquiries, upon her testimony to the genuineness of that letter. Although I am resolved beforehand to shield my best friend from no technical quibbles and delays—although I have nothing but evidence that is morally conclusive, however legally imperfect, it may be—it is still impossible to proceed without seeking advice immediately. The lawyer who always managed Captain Treverton's affairs, and who now manages those of the poor person to direct us in instituting the search, and to assist us, if necessary, in making the restitution."

"How quietly and firmly you speak of it, Lenny! Will not the abandoning of my fortune be a dreadful loss to us?"

"We must think of it as a gain to our contentment, Rosamond, and must alter our plan of life resignedly to suit our altered means. But we need speak no more of that until we are assured of the necessity of restoring the money. My impudently anxious and your immediate anxiety must turn now upon the discovery of Sarah Leeson—no! on the discovery of your mother. I must learn to call her by that name, or I shall not learn to pity and forgive her."

Rosamond nestled closer to her husband's side. "Even were you not my love, does my heart good," she whispered, laying her head on his shoulder. "You will help me and

strengthen me when the time comes to meet my mother, as I ought. How pale and worn and weary she was when she stood by me's bedside, and looked at me as my child! Will it be long before we find her? Is she far from us, I wonder? It sears, much nearer, than we think."

Before Leonard could answer, he was interrupted by a knock at the door, and Rosamond was surprised by the appearance of the main servant. Betsy was flushed, excited, and out of breath; but she contrived to deliver intelligibly a brief message from Mr. Munder, the steward, requesting permission to speak to Mr. Frankland or to Mr. Frankland on business of importance.

"What is it? What does he want?" asked Rosamond.

"I think, madam, he wants to know whether he had better send for the constable for me," answered Betsy.

"Send for the constable!" repeated Rosamond. "Are these thieves in the house in broad daylight?"

"Mr. Munder says he don't know but what it may be worse than thieves," replied Betsy. "It's the foreigner again, if you please, madam. He come up and rung at the door as you is pass, and ask if he could see Mrs. Frankland."

"The foreigner!" exclaimed Rosamond, laying her hand eagerly on her husband's arm.

"Yes, madam," said Betsy. "Him as come here to go over the house along with the lady—"

Rosamond, with characteristic impulsiveness, started to her feet. "Let me go down!" she began.

"Wait," interposed Leonard, catching her by the hand. "That is not the best road for you to go down stairs. Show the foreigner up here," he continued, addressing himself to Betsy, "and tell Mr. Munder that we will take the management of the business into our own hands."

Rosamond sat down again by her husband's side. "This is a very strange accident," she said, in a low, serious tone. "It must be something more than mere chance that puts the thief to our hands at the moment when we least expected to find him."

The door opened for the second time, and there stood a modest man on the threshold, a little old man, with grey cheeks and long white hair; a small leather case was slung by a strap at his side, and the stem of a pipe peeped out of the breast-pocket of his coat. He advanced one step into the room, stopped, raised both his hands with his fingers cramped up in them to his heart, and made five fantastic bows in quick succession—two to Mrs. Frankland, two to her husband, and one to Mrs. Frankland, again, as an act of separate and special homage to the lady. Never had Rosamond seen a more complete embodiment in human form of perfect inno-

AT MY TYPOGRAPH THE
Charles Dickens THE DEAD SECRET (January 31, 1851)

She sat for some time in the undignified position which Miss Howlem had described with such graphic correctness to her mother, then drew back a little, raised her head, and looked earnestly into the quiet, meditative face of the blind man.

"Lenny, you are very silent this morning," she said. "What are you thinking about? If you will tell me all your thoughts, I will tell you all mine."

"Would you really care to hear all my thoughts?" asked Leonard.

"Yes; all. I shall be jealous of any thoughts that you keep to yourself. Tell me what you were thinking of just now! Me?"

"Not exactly of you."

"More shame for you. Are you tired of me in eight days? I have not thought of anybody but you ever since we have been here. Ah! you laugh. O, Lenny, I do love you so; how can I think of anybody but you? No! I shan't kiss you. I want to know what you were thinking about first."

"O, a dream, Rosamond, that I had last night. Ever since the first days of my blindness— Why, I thought you were not going to kiss me again till I had told you what I was thinking about!"

"I can't hear kissing you, Lenny, when you talk of the loss of your sight. Tell me, my poor love, do I help to make up for that loss? Are you happier than you used to be? and have I some share in making that happiness, though it is ever so little?"

She turned her head away as she spoke, but Leonard was too quick for her. His inquiring fingers touched her cheek. "Rosamond, you are crying," he said.

"I crying!" she answered with a sudden assumption of gaiety. "No," she continued, after a moment's pause. "I will never deceive you, love, even in the merest trifle. My eyes serve for both of us now, don't they? you depend on me for all that your touch fails to tell you, and I must never be unworthy of my trust—must I not, Lenny—but only a very little. I don't know how it was, but I never, in all my life, searched to pity you and feel for you less than just at that moment. Never mind, I've done now. Go on—do go on with what you were going to say."

"I was going to say, Rosamond, that I have observed some curious things about myself since I lost my sight. I dream a great deal, but I never dream of myself as a blind man. I often visit in my dreams places that I saw, and people whom I knew when I had my sight, and though I feel as much myself at those visionary times, as I am now when I am wide awake, I never, by any chance, feel blind. I wander about all sorts of old walks in my sleep, and never grope my way. I talk to all sorts of old friends in my sleep, and see the expression in their faces which, waking, I shall never see again.

I have lost my sight more than a year now, and yet it was like the shock of a new discovery to me to wake up last night from my dream, and remember suddenly that I was blind."

"What dream was it, Lenny?"

"Only a dream of the place where I first met you when we were both children. I saw the glen, as it was years ago, with the great twisted roots of the trees and the blackberry bushes twisting about them in a still shadowed light that came through thick leaves from the rainsky. I saw the mead on the walk in the middle of the glen, with the marks of the cows' hoofs in some places, and the sharp circles in others where some country women had been lately strudging on a patten. I saw the muddy water running down either side of the path after the shower; and I saw you, Rosamond, a naughty girl, all covered with clay and wet—just as you were in the reality—kissing your bright blue petticoat and your pretty little chubby hands by making a dam to stop the running water, and laughing at the indignation of your nursemaid, when she tried to pull you away and take you home. I saw all that, exactly as it really was in the bygone time, but strangely enough I did not see myself as the boy I then was. You were a little girl, and the glen was in its old neglected state, and yet, though I was all in the past so far, I was, in the present, as regarded myself. Throughout the whole dream I was scarcely conscious of being a grown man—of being, in short, exactly what I am now, excepting always that I was not blind."

"What memory you must have, love, to be able to recall all those little circumstances after the years that have passed since that wet day in the glen. How well you recollect what I was as a child! Do you remember in the same vivid way what I looked like a year ago, when you saw me—O, Lenny, it almost breaks my heart to think of it!—when you saw me for the last time?"

"Do I remember, Rosamond! My last look at your face has painted your portrait on my memory in colours that can never change. I have many pictures in my mind, but your picture is the clearest and brightest of all."

"And it is the picture of me at my best—painted in my youth's dawn, when my face was always confessing how I loved you, though my lips said nothing. There is some consolation in that thought. What years have passed over us both, Lenny, and when time begins to set his mark on me, you will not say to yourself, 'My Rosamond is beginning to fade; the grows less and less like what she was when I married her.' I shall never grow old, love, for you! The bright young picture in your mind will still be my picture when my cheeks are wrinkled and my hair is grey."

THE LOVELL HOUSEHOLD WOMEN

that his eyes look quieter than other people's, there seems no difference in them now! Who was that famous character you told us about, Miss Sturch, who was blind, and didn't show it any more than Leonard Frankland?"

"Milton," my love, begged you to remember that it was the most famous of British epic poets," answered Miss Sturch with suavity. "He poetically describes his blindness as being caused by a thick drop of serum. You must read about it, Louise. After we have had a little refreshment, we will have a little Milton, this morning. Hush, hush, your love is speaking!"

"Rodrigo Frankland!" said the vicar tenderly. "That good, tender, noble creature I married him to this morning, seems sent as a consolation to him in his affliction. If any human being can make him happy for the rest of his life, Rosamond Trevorton is the girl to do it."

"She has made a sacrifice," said Mr. Phippen; "but I like her for that, having made a sacrifice myself in remaining single. It seems indispensable, indeed, on the score of humanity that I should do so. How could I conscientiously prohibit such a digestion as mine of a member of the fairer portion of creation? No: I am a sacrifice in my own proper person, and I have a fellow-feeling for others who are like me. Did she cry, Mr. Phippen, when you were marrying her?"

"Cry?" exclaimed the vicar, contemptuously. "Rosamond Trevorton is not one of the pining, sentimental sort, I can tell you, a fine, buxum, warm-hearted, quick-tempered girl, who looks what she means when she tells a man she is going to marry him. And thirdly, she has been tried; if she hadn't loved him with all her heart and soul, she might have been free months ago to marry anybody she pleased. They were engaged long before this cruel affliction befell young Frankland; the fathers, on both sides, having lived as near neighbours in these parts for years. Well, when the blindness came, Leonard, like the fine conscientious fellow he is, at once offered to release Rosamond from her engagement. You should have read the letter she wrote to him, Phippen, upon that. I don't mind confessing that I blubbered like a baby over it when they showed it to me. I should have married them at once the instant I read it, but old Frankland was a fidgety, punctilious kind of man; and he insisted on a six months' probation, so that she might be certain of showing her own mind. He died before the term was out, and that caused the marriage to be put off again. But no delay could alter Rosamond—six years, instead of six months, would not have changed her. There she was this morning as, and of that poor patient blind fellow; as she was the first day they were engaged. You shall never know a sad moment, Lenny, if I can help it, as long as you live, those were the first words she said to

him when we all came out of church. I hear you, Rosamond, say I. And you shall judge me, too, doctor, says she, quick as lightning. We will come back to Long Beckley, and you shall ask Lenny if I have not kept my word. With that she gave me a kiss that you might have heard down here at the vicarage, bless her heart! We'll drink her health after dinner, Miss Sturch—we'll drink both their healths, Phippen, in a bottle of the best wine I have in my cellar."

"In a glass of toast-and-water, so far as I am concerned, if you will allow me," said Mr. Phippen, stoutly. "But, my dear Chensery, when you were talking of the fatness of these two interesting young people, you spoke of their living as near neighbours here, at Long Beckley. My memory is impaired, as I am painfully aware, but I thought Captain Trevorton was the eldest of the two brothers, and that he always lived, when he was on shore, at the family place in Cornwall?"

"So he did," returned the vicar, in his wife's lifetime. But since her death, which happened as long ago as, the year twenty-nine—let me see, we are now in the year forty-four—and that makes—"

The vicar stopped for an instant to calculate, and looked at Miss Sturch.

"Fifteen years ago, sir," said Miss Sturch, offering the accommodation of a little simple subtraction to the vicar, with her blindest smile.

"Of course," continued Doctor Chensery. "Well, since Mrs. Trevorton died fifteen years ago, Captain Trevorton has never been near Porthgenna Tower. And what is more, Phippen, at the first opportunity he could get, he sold the place—old it, and four mine, fisheries, and all—for forty thousand pounds."

"You don't say so?" exclaimed Mr. Phippen. "Did he find the air unhealthy? I should think the local produce, in the way of food, must be coarse, now, in those barbarous regions. Who bought the place?"

"Leonard Frankland's father," said the vicar. "It is rather a long story, that sale of Porthgenna Tower, with some curious circumstances, involved in it. Suppose we take a turn in the garden, Phippen! I'll tell you all about it over my morning cigar. Miss Sturch, if you want me, I shall be on the lawn sometime. Girls! mind your own business! Bob! remember that I've got a suit in the hall, and a brocade in my dressing-room. Come, Phippen, rouse up out of that swan-chair. You won't say, no, no, turn in the garden?"

"My dear fellow, I will say yes—I will kindly lend me an umbrella, and allow me to carry my ramp-stool in my hand," said Mr. Phippen. "I am too weak to encounter the sun, and I can't do so without sitting down. The moment I feel fatigued, Miss Sturch, I open my camp-stool, and sit

MY MARRIAGE SETTLEMENT

(January 17, 1884.) HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

—look out of it a great pair of apothecary's scales, with the accompanying weights, a morsel of ginger, and a highly-polished silver nutmeg-grater. "Dear Miss Sturch will pardon an invalid!" said Mr. Phippen, beginning to grate the ginger feebly into the nearest tea-cup.

"Guess what has made me a quarter of an hour late this morning," said the vicar, looking mysteriously all round the table.

"Lying in bed, papa," cried the three children, clapping their hands in triumph.

"What do you say, Miss Sturch?" asked Doctor Chennery.

Miss Sturch smiled as usual, rubbed her hands as usual, cleared her throat softly as usual, looked fixedly at the tea-urn, and begged, with the most graceful politeness, to be excused if she said nothing.

"You're late now, Phippen," said the vicar. "Come, guess what has kept me late this morning."

"My dear friend," said Mr. Phippen, giving the doctor a brotherly squeeze of the hand, "don't ask me to guess—I know! I saw what you eat at dinner yesterday—I saw what you drank after dinner. No digestion could stand it—not even yours. Guess what she made you late this morning? Good! Good! I know. You dear, good soul, you have been taking physics!"

"Have you touched a drop, thank God, for the last ten years?" said Doctor Chennery, with a look of devout gratitude. "No, no; you're all wrong. The fact is, I have been to church; and what do you think I have been doing there? Listen, Miss Sturch, listen, girls, with all your ears. Poor young Frankland is a happy man at last—I have married him to our dear Rosamond Treverton this very morning!"

"Without telling us, papa!" cried the two girls together, in their shrillest tones of vexation and surprise. "Without telling us, when you know how we should have liked to see it?"

"That was the very reason why I did not tell you, my dears," answered the vicar.

"Young Frankland has not got so used to his affliction yet, poor fellow, as to bear being publicly pined and stared at in the character of a blind bridegroom. He had such a nervous horror of being an object of curiosity on his wedding-day, and Rosamond, like a true kind-hearted girl as she is, was so anxious that his slightest caprices should be humoured, that we settled to have the wedding in an hour in the morning when she sisters were likely to be laughing about the neighbourhood of the church. I was bound over to the strictest secrecy about the day, and so was my clerk, Thomas. Excepting us two, and the bride and bridegroom, and the bride's father, Captain Treverton, nobody knew—"

"Treverton!" exclaimed Mr. Phippen, holding his tea-cup, with the grated ginger in the bottom of it, to be filled by Miss Sturch.

"Treverton! (No more tea, dear Miss Sturch.) How very remarkable! I know the name. (Fill up with water, if you please.) Tell me, my dear doctor (many, many thanks; no sugar, it turns acid on the stomach) is this Miss Treverton whom you have been marrying (many thanks again; no milk, either) one of the Cornish Trevertons?"

"To be sure she is!" rejoined the vicar. "Her father, Captain Treverton, is the head of the family. Not that there's much family to speak of now. The Captain, and Rosamond, and that whimsical old brute of an uncle of hers, Andrew Treverton, are the last left, now, of the old stock—a rich family, and a fine family, in former times—good friends to Church and State, you know, and all that."

"Do you approve, sir, of Amelia having a second helping of bread and marmalade?" asked Miss Sturch, appealing to Doctor Chennery with the most perfect unconsciousness of interrupting him. Having no spare room in her mind for putting things away in until the appropriate time came for bringing them out, Miss Sturch always asked questions and made remarks the moment they occurred to her, without waiting for the beginning, middle, or end of any conversation that might be proceeding in her presence. She invariably looked the part of a listener to perfection, but she never acted it except in the case of talk that was aimed point-blank at her own ears.

"O, give her a second helping, by all means!" said the vicar, carelessly. "She must over-eat herself, and she may as well do it on bread and marmalade as on anything else."

"My dear good soul!" exclaimed Mr. Phippen, "look what a wreck I am, and don't talk in that shocking, thoughtless way of letting our sweet little Amelia over-eat herself. Loosely the stomach in youth, and what becomes of the digestion in age? The thing which vulgar people call the huide—I appeal to Miss Sturch's interest in her charming pupil—as an excuse for going into physiological particulars—in point of fact, an apparatus. Digestively considered, Miss Sturch, even the fairest and youngest of us is an Apparatus. Oil our wheels, if you like; but clog them at your peril! Farinaceous puddings and mutton-chops; mutton-chops and farinaceous puddings—those should be the parents' watchwords, if I had my way, from one end of England to the other. Look here, my sweet child, look at me! There is no man, dear, about these little scales, but dreadful earnest. See! I put in the balance, on one side, dry bread (stale, dry bread, Amelia!) and on the other, some ounce weights. 'Mr. Phippen! eat by weight. Mr. Phippen! eat the same quantity, day by day, to a hair's breadth. Mr. Phippen! exceed your allowance (though it is only stale, dry bread) if you dare!' Amelia, love, this

Dickens looked over Harriet's letter and then *felt* her words with his fingertips, each pinhole rising through Collins's story from the backside of the page. He admired Gibson's innovation; no doubt the inventor deserved his prize. New machines and engines made the progress of the nation; they were the ploughs of England's moral growth. Yet from the day he received Harriet's appeal for control of her marriage settlement, Dickens discouraged her use of Gibson's apparatus. The writing it produced was illegible – or rather, intangible – at least to *him*, he told her with mild derision, rejecting the appeal he comprehended all too well. Her settlement would remain in the hands of her trustees, he assured her, as she was still a married woman in the eyes of the law.

Harriet caught an echo of Dickens's derisive tone as Letitia now read from Mr. Levy's manuscript, and was thankful that the criticism was not aimed at her this time.

“– and as single life requires that they provide their own maintenance, it is evident that the position of females suffering from blindness must be bad in the extreme. Want of muscular strength prevents their following many employments open to men.”

Letitia paused and sighed, put down the manuscript and looked over at her friend, who was sitting very still and upright, hands in lap.

“Go on, please. I'm sure he's not finished.”

“I'd rather not continue, Harriet. I don't think that Mr. Levy has anything to tell us that we don't already know.”

“He is a friend of Dr. Armitage and has taken the trouble to send us – to send *me* – his manuscript. I should hear him out. By now, he's waiting for my response.”

“Very well then.” Letitia cleared her throat for a third time, drawing out the sound as if she was choking. “‘Woman without the aid of man is naturally weak, and how incomparably so must they be who are not only debarred from having man's aid, but are also deprived of the inestimable blessing of sight! Weak in body, fearful in mind, utterly without friends and pecuniary resources, and their condition almost rendered hopeless by that greatest of all afflictions, blindness, the position of the greater number of our poor sightless sisters is indeed exceedingly wretched.’ Must I go on?”

“Yes, Tish. Mr. Levy has been blind from birth. There will be a turn in his argument, I'm sure.”

Letitia returned to her task. “What, then, can be done to help these children of misfortune? That which blind women specially need is *a home* – a happy home, where their joys and sorrows will be dear to some one. Let those who imagine it is impossible think well over these words of Christ, viz. “Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you do ye even so to them, for *this is the law and the prophets.*”” Letitia paused between each of her last words to convey the effect of Mr. Levy’s italics. No author could ask more of even the most admiring reader.

“The Golden Rule. He is a religious man. So Dr. Armitage told me.”

“That’s well and good, Harriet. But his gospel seems very ordinary to me. Blind women need a happy home? Very true but we could write that ourselves.”

“Not everyone could – or would. Finish the section, will you please?”

“The training of sightless young girls in domestic pursuits is therefore a matter of the greatest importance. Home is the true sphere of woman, and she who can produce domestic comfort possesses the surest passport to the affections of a household. The eminent Dr. Johnson entrusted the entire management of his domestic affairs to a blind person, namely, Miss Williams, the poetess, who often remarked that “Persons who could not do those common offices without sight, did but little when they enjoyed that blessing.””

“Do you remember those lines of Mrs. Williams’s, Tish? We had them by heart at school – the darkness, the drowning, the body floating down the river – Julia and I used to recite them at night in our bed, to frighten each other –

Behold the floated corpse, the visage pale;
See here what virtue, wealth, and birth avail.

Mother said that Mrs. Williams wrote the poem but Father told us that he could tell Dr. Johnson was the *real* author. The style was manly.”

“I don’t know the poem but I’m more than happy to give Mrs. Williams the credit if you think it’s her due.” Letitia paused, glanced at Harriet, who was nodding in approval, and then scanned a page ahead. “One long paragraph remains before Mr. Levy turns to his next subject, ‘The Legal Position of the –’”

A knock brought Letitia's sentence to an end. The door opened and Katherine Dickens entered, the tea tray balanced precariously on one hand.

"Aunt Letitia, Aunt Harriet! Hello!" Katherine – better known as Kat – gave her last syllable more emphasis than she should have done, to Harriet's delight, though the girl was sometimes corrected for her wayward speaking. "The Right Reverend Septimus Buss has given me a half-holiday and I've come to surprise you and take tea! Mother and I decided yesterday that I would visit you. I got the tray from Jane as she was coming up the stairs."

The daughter of Alfred and Helen Dickens and fatherless since a little girl, Kat appeared in the uniform of North London Collegiate School. She talked quickly, facing Letitia but watching Harriet, as she usually did. She set down the tray on the table, kissed Harriet's cheek, and flounced down by Harriet's side. At fifteen years of age, the girl was short, almost stunted, but made up for her small size with her emphatic tones.

"A half-holiday! And for what?" Harriet asked.

"For reciting Cowper's 'On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture' without a single error, and with the proper elocution and feeling, as the Right Reverend deemed it! Not only to *say* poetry but to recite it in a way that shows we understand it; that's our lesson, along with Euclid, Latin and Harmony –

Oh, that those lips had language! Life has passed
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
Those lips are thine – thy own sweet smiles I see,
The same that oft in childhood solaced me;
Voice only fails, else, how distinct they say,
'Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away!'"

So Kat declaimed, careful to run Cowper's first line into his second even as her voice crowded the room. "Katherine Louisa Dickens was a born thespian," Miss Haydon had remarked to Miss Buss with reason only a few days before, her pride in their pupil tempered by genteel alarm.

"A prize very well deserved, I'm certain!" Harriet responded. "You're as smart as your cousin Harry, and he's Head Censor at Wimbledon School."

“And your voice is in no danger of failing,” Letitia added. “I’m glad the poet loved his mother.”

Their niece smiled and poured the tea, putting Harriet’s cup directly in front of her, and then placing her aunt’s hand at the saucer’s edge. “It’s hot, hot, *hot*,” she warned.

“Your aunt Letitia is just finishing our reading – from a manuscript sent to me by Mr. Levy, the blind author. He hopes to secure a publisher soon. He has just described the person – the *poetess* – who kept house for Dr. Johnson. Shall she finish? Only a bit more to go.”

“Yes, of course, please. Aunt Tish reads better than anyone. As well as uncle Charles, I always say, and he’s electric! All she needs is a stage, like the one we have at school, to prove it –

Where once we dwelt, our name is heard no more –
Children not thine have trod my nursery floor!”

“I’ll leave the stage to you and your sisters, my dear. I’d never be comfortable on it. Let me finish my reading and then you may pour my tea. ‘There have been many blind women remarkable as clever housewives besides Miss Williams, and some have even obtained a reputation as good nurses. One of the most successful was Martha Brass, of Liverpool, who, in addition to her great abilities as a nurse, was remarkable for her success as a shampooer.’”

Kat tittered.

““In this undertaking she had the good fortune to obtain the patronage of Lord Derby (grandfather of the present earl), who having employed her as shampooer for upwards of twelve years, – ””

“Good fortune to shampoo an earl! I hope I can escape *that* stroke of luck.”

““...settled upon her an annuity which she enjoyed until her death,”” Letitia went on, ignoring Kat’s interruption. ““She died in 1868, aged seventy-one, leaving £2000, saved from her earnings and the benefactions of her patrons. She was never married, but had several offers that she pertinaciously refused. She left by will the following legacies: – The Blind Asylum, £250; the Workshops for the Out-door Blind, the Deaf and Dumb Asylum, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, each £10.’ So Mr. Levy’s chapter ends.””

“I’m sure that Martha Brass was as good as gold, and I hope to get many large annuities from all my titled patrons after I’ve coifed them. Then I’ll refuse their marriage proposals and die a rich spinster.” Kat paused. “But her causes were all worthy,” she then offered her aunts, as if sweetening a bitter drink she had served them.

“Well, we can hope that you’ll never need the patronage of strangers,” Letitia said, smiling, “and that you meet a man who will help to change your mind about becoming a wife. Your uncle Henry made me very happy, and his public service is what brought me my pension. But perhaps the less said on this subject the better.”

The two glanced at Harriet, who sensed their look.

“I was luckier than poor Kat,” Harriet replied. “When I lost *my* father, he was a wealthy man; I’ve had no need to struggle. Since the death of Augustus, Father’s legacy has been in my hands.”

Kat thought of her own father, a good man dead from pleurisy before the age of forty – and then of the patronage of her father’s famous brother, who had come to their immediate relief. “I thank God for your Uncle Charles,” Helen Dickens had told the five little witnesses to calamity. “He knows what to do for the best. ‘Life is a fight and must be fought out,’ he says. He’s written to the Earl of Carlisle about Edmund and Alfred, and you girls are all to be pupils at North London Collegiate School!” Charity was a virtue yet Kat deeply regretted their need of it. As if her regrets had the power to conjure up her benefactor, there was a sudden ruckus on the stairs. The door opened quickly after a knock.

“Your brother, ma’am. Mr. Charles Dickens.” Jane tried to mask her surprise as she announced him.

The novelist entered the room as Kat gasped and Harriet, like the others, rose from her chair. Moving more quickly than they could, he embraced his sister and niece; darting to Harriet’s side, he kissed her.

“Charles!” “Charles!” “Uncle Charles!” was the chorus.

Letitia hadn’t seen her older brother since November, on the evening before he left London for Liverpool and, from Liverpool, for America. She and Harriet had heard of his procession and his glory, though at second hand, as no letter had arrived from him during his absence. He was here to make up for that omission, no doubt. Letitia looked more closely at his face. The six months had aged him more than his due, as the strain of the public readings naturally would. Yet his – magnetism, they called it – was as

strong as ever. He was happy, too, Letitia could see as he took them into his sights – his happiness a compound of satisfaction and relief. She thought she knew why.

“Tish, Harriet, so good to see you looking well. And Katherine, I’m glad to find you here with your aunts.”

The three repeated their expressions of surprise and welcome.

“I’ve stopped here on my way to Gad’s Hill – I’ve been at the office for a few days, and haven’t yet been home. I’ve come to invite you for a visit on Saturday. Mamie, Georgina and I will expect you to stay for dinner and spend the night. And Katherine, please come with your aunts if your mother and your schoolwork can spare you. Your cousin Plorn will likely be there to greet you, if we can get him back from Cirencester for a few days. We have some plans for him in the offing.”

“A treat, sir, I’m sure.”

“Georgy and Forster gave you my news from America, I hope,” he said to his sister, who nodded. “The work was very hard and the winter severe, but it was a gratifying trip. Most gratifying. Dolby was tremendous.” He went on to describe to them, in brief, his reception in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, his travels to Washington D.C. and Buffalo, and his Atlantic crossings. “A deputation came to me on the ship after we left New York and asked if I would read to the passengers one evening. I told them that I’d prefer to assault our Captain and be placed in irons for the duration!”

The three laughed.

“Charles, it’s most kind of you to think of us and bring us your invitation in person,” Letitia said when he paused. “Will you have some tea?”

“No tea, thank you. But I *will* take your opinion while I’m here – yours and Harriet’s – on a question that arose during my travels. I see no reason to wait until Saturday.”

He drew a letter out of a pocket inside his jacket and handed it to Letitia.

“This reached me in Boston more than two months ago now, and I’ve been mulling over the matter ever since. Please, Tish, will you read it to Harriet and Kat? I believe that each of you will be interested in what Dr. Howe suggests.”

“Certainly, Charles.” Letitia took the paper from his hand and unfolded it. “My dear Dickens,” she began, “I write in pursuit of an idea raised among some of us at Perkins after your visit last November. You may perhaps have heard already that *Paradise Lost* is really the only book we have of literary character which our blind students call for – ”

“The work of the Great Blind Poet,” Dickens interjected, as if hearing the letter for the first time.

“Yes, and his daughters wrote the poem with their own hands – that is, to his dictation,” Kat quickly added, “if I remember the story properly. Miss Buss read that to us from her own copy of *Paradise Lost*. Milton would ring for his daughters to come to his bedside when the inspiration was on him,” she added, turning to her uncle, whose eyebrows were raised, “or else he would sit in his easy chair with his leg dangling over its elbow and speak eloquently of Adam, Eve and Satan to his family while they wrote down every word. It must have been a strange scene. Miss Buss also said that Milton eventually called his daughters undutiful and tried to cut them from his will – to leave them only what they received from their mother’s father. A judge found Milton’s will invalid.”

“Milton’s mistake was asking his daughters to read Greek and Latin to him when they didn’t understand a word of what they were saying,” Dickens responded. “Ignorance sparked their rebellion against him.”

Letitia rustled the paper in her hand. “Well, I am all obedience, at least. Shall I continue with Dr. Howe?”

“Hail, Holy Light!” her brother exclaimed, smiling. Letitia took his words as acquiescence.

“Now our students want something to gladden their hearts,” she read. “They have had melancholy food enough, as you must know. They want happier views of this life. They want some books which will give pleasure and joy in their dark chambers. *Your* books do this” – Letitia glanced at her brother – “and I want the blind to have one of them at their fingers’ ends.’ Well, that’s a wonderful idea, and I’m sure that Harriet *and* Kat agree; I’m glad that Dr. Howe has thought of it.”

“Yes, Charles, I’m sure you’ll be kind enough to do what Dr. Howe asks. I’ve been lucky myself, to have Tish read me several of your novels, bit by bit – and, of course, to hear you read from them. But an edition for the blind – that will put the book at their disposal. Which one will they have? Have you chosen the – ”

“Title? That’s partly why I’m consulting you. I thought that perhaps we could settle it among ourselves. I’m eager to hear your thoughts. *David Copperfield* has always been my favourite child, but discovering *my* favourite is not our task. What will best amuse and cheer blind readers?”

“And what will best encourage them to make their own way in the world? What will show them whom to trust? It’s a liberty to pose my own questions but surely Dr. Howe meant for us – for you – to consider such matters.”

“The students trust to Dr. Howe, of course. He’s their friend and protector as long as they remain at the Perkins Institute.”

“But some may venture out and live in their own homes, with their own friends – some as lucky as I’ve been. They’ll find other protectors or learn to protect themselves.”

“And how, Harriet, have my books taught you to protect yourself, or to make your own way in the world? I’m not sure I understand how or where I have taught you that lesson.”

Letitia glanced at Harriet, then at Kat; each could hear the irritation sharpening the edge of Dickens’s voice.

“Certainly your books have taught me who I *shouldn’t* trust,” Harriet said quickly. “A false friend like Steerforth – ”

“And a cruel husband like Murdstone,” Kat added.

“Yes,” Harriet continued, “that’s a measure of protection. And then there are those who help themselves in your stories, whatever their struggles may be. They don’t want to be helped by others. Betty Higden is my favourite; the Boffins – or was it John Rokesmith? – they had to force her to carry that paper with her, naming them as her friends if she got into trouble. She fought her way along, though she had little or nothing to her name. And Jenny Wren, her back was bad but she earned her keep; her father stole and drank away her money. If it hadn’t been for Lizzie Hexam, she’d have been a lonely being. Those two women in the rooftop garden – I was sorry that Mr. Wrayburn came between them.”

Dickens smiled. Hearing Harriet recall these details mollified him. The reception of his most recent novel had been mixed – less enthusiastic than the reception of his public readings. Some claimed his powers were diminishing, others found his plot overwrought or called Betty’s portrait bosh. He was glad his sister-in-law took the proper view.

“Well, Harriet, you certainly are an attentive reader, though you have the novel from Tish at second hand. I struggled in writing it but it sold well in the end. Still, I’m not certain that *Our Mutual Friend* is best for Dr. Howe’s pupils. It may not have enough bright spots. *Old Curiosity Shop* seems preferable. Truth outlives Fraud and Gentleness defeats Force, even when it’s backed by gold. So the critics said.”

“That’s such a *sad* story, though – isn’t it?” Kat asked. “We all cried long and hard when Little Nell died. After all her wanderings, there’s no hope for her – on earth, in any case. She deserved a better fate.”

Letitia looked at her niece and hoped that Kat would see her signs of warning.

“A tragic figure, yes,” Dickens replied after an ominous pause, “but crowned with glory. Above all else, innocent and pure – she was an angel on earth. Extremely good girls do usually die young. Dr. Howe spoke to me of Nell, too, singling her out for praise. ‘Laura Bridgman was no Little Nelly’ – that was how he described his star pupil to me when I first met him in 1842. The star shrank by comparison.”

Dickens thought back to Laura, her eyes covered with a green ribbon tied around the back of her head. Would they all be less distracted by Harriet’s blindness if her cloudy eyes were hidden?

“Since Dr. Howe praised the book, I can understand why you would select it for your purpose,” Harriet said. “But perhaps *Hard Times* would be an even better choice.”

Letitia cleared her throat for Harriet’s sake. She was relieved to see that her brother was determined to be tolerant, on this day at least. He held his tongue.

“Louisa’s story is hopeful because she *isn’t* pure but makes the right choice in the end,” Harriet went on. “I remember how she speaks of blindness, too. If she had been blind and made her way about by touch, she could still imagine how the world appeared, she said, since she would know the shapes and surfaces of things. I was struck by that paragraph – Augustus was the one who first read it to me. Louisa would be wiser and happier without her vision than she was with the eyes she had, she told her father, if only she still had the imagination she’d lost. I’m sure that Dr. Howe’s students would like to read *that* passage with their fingers’ ends. It would bring home your point.”

“Well, Harriet, these are good ideas and I’ll take them into consideration. I’d forgotten that passage from the novel, to speak the truth.”

“And have you decided *how* you will put the book you choose at their fingers’ ends? In what system, that is? Perhaps you could discuss the question with Dr. Armitage. The men on his committee – they call themselves the ‘British and Foreign Blind Society’ – have met with dozens of blind readers – they call them ‘witnesses’ – to discover which kind of raised type works best.”

“This subject is Harriet’s hobby-horse now, Charles,” Letitia said, smiling. “You’d best prepare yourself for a lecture.”

“There’s Mr. Moon’s system, which mostly uses Roman letters but reverses them on every other line. You have to read backwards half of the time; Dr. Armitage says that it’s like walking backwards!”

“Poor Fred used to run backwards for fun as a boy – do you remember, Charles?”

“He’s still moving backward, I fear, Tish. He lost his best ally and hope in Alfred.”

The two looked at Kat, and Dickens patted her shoulder.

“There’s also Mr. Fry,” Harriet persisted. “He uses plain Roman capitals. So does Mr. Alston in Glasgow – and Mr. Frere is known for his phonetic shorthand. To be consulted by the committee, you must know at least three systems. Dr. Armitage believes that only one should be used – and that only those who rely on touch to read should make the choice. Tish and I met the committee men by accident, in company with Dr. Armitage – Mr. Conolly, Mr. Gale and Mr. Fenn, who used to be an artist.”

“Yes, it was on the Strand. All of them are blind, Charles.”

“They favour the French system of Louis Braille above Alston, Frere, Moon – and they also considered Dr. Howe’s system. If I remember, Dr. Howe uses small Roman letters but replaces the curves with angles. He took that idea from Mr. Gall.”

“The French system!” Dickens’s tone spoke his disapproval.

“Yes, the French. Dr. Armitage thinks that Braille has some disadvantages – it’s what he called an ‘arbitrary system.’ The letters don’t resemble those we know – an ‘a’ is one dot of six, as he explained it. But it works best for those who use their fingers to read. I tried it myself. He has a copy of Cowper’s ‘John Gilpin’ in Braille’s script and also some Advent hymns – ‘Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding’ was one. Each letter is called a

cell. It was all very interesting. I'm certain that Dr. Armitage would recommend Braille for your edition."

"But I would put my readers at a disadvantage if I pursued that course," Dickens objected. "I'd place them in a world of their own, where they read a language known only to themselves and a few others – a *foreign* language. When I visited Dr. Howe, his pupils put into my hands the books they were studying, embossed in Howe's system, and I could read with ease *every word* that they felt with their fingers, just as I do the books in my own library."

"Exactly. Howe's alphabet is easier for *you* than it is for them. So says Dr. Armitage."

"Harriet, Armitage and his protégés are founding their own Isle of the Blind, I'm sorry to say. If we are going to put a novel into Braille, we should bring out an edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, since that system will make castaways of all of its readers. They'll be cut off from every kind soul who would assist them. I can picture them ignorant of written English, struggling to keep alive the forms of civilised life. And besides," he continued, "you're wrong about that French code. Your hero Armitage has led you astray there. Believe me, the letters of the alphabet *aren't* an arbitrary matter – a random collection of dots on the page. They're the flesh of meaning."

"I wish that were true, Charles. But I've often had to guess at meanings, mistaking an 'o' for a 'c' or an 'i' for an 'l' or a 'y' for a 'g.' The letters in Dr. Howe's system are too small for fine distinctions – and I've got a *lady's* hands. The ends of my fingers aren't coarse or hardened. If I liked your novels less or was ignorant of the pleasure they give to readers, I'd let the matter rest. But I don't like to imagine Dr. Howe's pupils struggling to understand you when your story might be made transparent. I mean you no disrespect, but men with sight can't know how difficult it is to read Roman letters with one's fingers."

"The matter goes beyond questions of legibility. The followers of Monsieur Braille will lose their English. Forget Crusoe. They might as well be cannibals howling their gibberish at the moon. I simply cannot force that Frenchman's system on my readers. The English alphabet is modest – but it *is* English."

Kat laughed, though she wasn't sure if her uncle was joking. "Aunt Harriet, I'd like to see you on the island, spear in hand!"

“We cannot possibly ‘howl’ a language designed solely to be read,” Harriet countered, frowning.

“Charles, your imagination runs away with you!” Letitia added. “Cannibals and isles of the blind, indeed! You have a new novel in the making. And you forget your own knowledge of French, Brother. I’ve heard you myself and I know you are a fluent speaker.”

“My dears, Dr. Howe really does know best. He advocates for small Roman letters – those at all the American institutions do. Whatever title I select, my novel will be embossed in Roman letters, not in Braille. I’m sorry to disappoint you but I must do what I feel is best for my blind readers, though I *am* a sighted man!”

Eager to claim the last word in his contest with the women, Dickens claimed his hat and umbrella from a chair by the wall and headed for the door. “Until Saturday, then,” was his parting line, spoken as he crossed the threshold.