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Poorhouses, Pamphlets and Marley's Ghost

By JOHN MORTIMER

One dark afternoon in January, I sat at a round table in the library on East 36th Street in New York City from which J. Pierpont Morgan once oversaw his collection. A square of velvet was laid reverently before me. Then a leatherbound volume was set on the velvet and opened. The first page of handwriting was crossed out, and crossed out again, the obliterations achieved by a sort of undulating scrawl, patterned like the waves on the sea.

The manuscript was written-over in a way seemingly calculated to give nightmares to the printer whose task it was to set it. The first two sentences emerged from the confusion: "Marley was dead to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that." What I was looking at was once the blank piece of paper on which Charles Dickens struggled and had second thoughts and third thoughts when he set out to write "A Christmas Carol." The task was to take him six weeks in 1843.

This ghost story was finished in December, in time for Christmas publication in a salmon and gold binding, with four hand-colored illustrations by John Leech. The price was five shillings, high for those days.

It was written at the height of Dickens's great powers. It would add to his considerable fame, bring a new work to the English language, increase the festivities at Christmas time and contain his most eloquent protest at the condition of the poor. It quickly sold 6,000 copies, but brought Dickens far less money than he had expected, leading to a lawsuit and a quarrel with his publishers. In short, it caused as much elation, anger and despair as do most works of genius.

Those unfamiliar with Dickens's way of working would naturally assume that his imagination and his gift for prose, which could rise above grammar and produce laughter, tears or terror at will, would emerge in a stream of words that called for little alteration.

In fact, Dickens agonized over his plots, suffered with his characters and knew black despair when ideas failed to come on his endless walks. During the composition of

"A Christmas Carol," he wept and laughed and one day walked 15 or 20 miles "about the black streets of London . . . when all the good folks had gone to bed." Years later, when writing "Little Dorrit," he described his usual agonies of creation: "I am in a hideous state of mind in which I walk down the stairs every five minutes, look out of the window once in two. . . . I am steeped in my story, and rise and fall by turns into enthusiasm and depression."

These sudden doubts and elations, these sudden changes of mind, are reflected in the alterations and obliterations in his manuscripts. They show what he called "The story-weaver at his loom," and he was able to write to one of his sons, "Look at such of my manuscripts as are in the library at [Gads Hill, his country home] and think of the patient hours devoted year after year to single lines."

It's sad to think that when all writers are equipped with word processors, future generations will never be able to discover the waves of pain, hesitation and changes of mind that go into every page of a great work of fiction.

As he set out to write "A Christmas Carol," Dickens had been an enormously successful novelist since the publication of "The Pickwick Papers" seven years earlier. However, his most recent effort, "Martin Chuzzlewit," which was being serialized, had not been quite as triumphant and he had exhausted himself writing it.

He was 31 years old, suffering from bouts of bad temper and rheumatism, living in London with his wife and children. He was endlessly engaged in amateur theatricals and giving parties for adults and children. He was a dandy who wore flowery waistcoats -- Thackeray described him as dressed for dinner in "geranium and ringlets."

He was well off, yet he was perceptive and humane enough to denounce what so many of his contemporaries were blind to: England's abandoned underclass, left to rot in filthy city slums and rural hovels, giving birth to children who had no education, no comfort or security and whose brightest hope lay in a life of crime.

Although Dickens wrote a hilarious analysis of ways of pleading for money in "Our Mutual Friend," he responded generously to begging letters. He also took practical and energetic steps to deal with the problem of outcast children. In the year he wrote "A Christmas Carol," the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission had been issued. It had inspired Elizabeth Barrett to write her poem "The Cry of Children":

*And well may the children weep before you
They are weary 'ere they run;
They have never seen the sunshine or the glory
Which is brighter than the sun
They know the grief of man without his wisdom
They sink in man's despair without its calm . . .*

In the autumn of 1843, Dickens had visited Samuel Starey's Field Lane Ragged

School, which educated slum children. In letters now in the Morgan Library, he recommended it to a wealthy philanthropist, Burdett Coutts. In October 1843, he presided over at the first annual meeting of the Manchester Athenaeum, founded to bring culture and education to the "laboring classes."

"Thousands of immortal creatures," he told his audience, "are condemned . . . to tread, not what our great poet calls the 'primrose path to the everlasting bonfire' but over jagged flints and stones laid down by brutal ignorance."

He contemplated writing a pamphlet to be called "An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man's Child." Luckily, he changed his mind and channeled his anger into a Christmas story that would last forever. So Ebenezer Scrooge was forced to turn his reluctant eyes on the phantoms of Ignorance and Want, mankind's children, "yellow, meagre, raged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate too in their humility."

So Dickens faced a nation, calling itself Christian with a faith that told them the poor were blessed and that little children should come unto God. And he did so in a way that would be far more effective than any pamphlet.

Dickens didn't always get good reviews, and in later years he avoided reading them in case they should destroy his confidence and cause him unnecessary pain. However, "A Christmas Carol" was greeted with universal acclaim. Thackeray, writing in *Frasers Magazine*, called it a "national benefit." The *Sunday Times* called it "sublime," and an American factory owner gave his workers an extra day's holiday when he had finished reading it. Even Thomas Carlyle ordered a large turkey and was, his wife reported, "seized with a perfect convulsion of hospitality and arranged two dinner parties." Lord Jeffrey, founder of the *Edinburgh Review* and a stern critic, wrote Dickens that the book "has done more good than a year's work by all the pulpits and confessionals."

Six thousand copies were sold soon after publication, a huge sale for those times. But Dickens's profit was a meager 150 pounds. This led him to break with his publishers, Chapman & Hall. He claimed they ran up expenses on purpose to "disgust" him. When Purley's *Illustrated Library* published a pirated edition of the book, Dickens sued them successfully, but the firm went bankrupt, and he had to pay his own legal costs of 700 pounds.

Like Scrooge, Dickens became subject to sleepless nights, the specter that haunted him being a return to poverty and perhaps his father's fate of imprisonment for debt. It didn't happen, of course. He published the final chapters of "Martin Chuzzlewit" and then left cold and grimy London for Italy and a new phase of his astonishingly productive life.

Sitting in the peace of the Morgan Library, turning those altered and rewritten pages, marveling at the work needed to make the author's voice sound as though it were entirely improvised, I wondered how far we have really come in the century and a half since that endlessly active pen scratched its Christmas message.

All over the world poverty and ignorance are tolerated. Those great Western democracies, the United States and Britain, accept the existence of an abandoned underclass, unemployed, unwanted, uneducated, and ignored. In Russia, poor children live in garbage dumps. In Africa they starve. What we need is another Dickens, a novelist to stir our consciences and succeed where politicians and preachers and pamphleteers have so conspicuously failed.

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