Dickens's First Reading, by One Who Heard It.

It must be twelve or fourteen years ago—I cannot fix the date exactly, though the circumstance made a strong impression on me that I witnessed Charles Dickens's *début* as a public reader. The circumstances surrounding this event were so singular that I am tempted to recall them.

Scene, the literary city of Peterborough—dreamy and quiet enough then, though now a flourishing railroad terminus—a silent city, with a gabled old Norman cathedral, round which the rooks cawed lazily all day—strange, grim narrow streets of brick-built houses, a large Corn Exchange, a Mechanics' Institute, and about seven thousand inhabitants. The Mechanics' Institute brought it all about. That well-meaning but week-kneed species of nation was, I need hardly say, in debt. Mechanics' institutes always are in debt. That is their chief peculiarity, next to the fact that they never by any chance have any money to spend upon their members. Our mechanics among the rule. On the contrary, it was a bright and shining example. No mechanics' institute of its size anywhere round was so deeply in debt; none was more snobbishly exclusive in its membership. We had overrun our resources to such an extent that we could not even pay the rent of the building we occupied, and were in daily danger of being turned out of doors. Lectures on highly improving subjects, by local talent, at the low rate of a penny per head, were the only means we could devise to meet the immediate demands of the case. But the lectures did not pay the printer. Concerts succeeded better, but the committee said they were immoral. We had given two monster tea meetings to pay off the debt, on which occasions all the cake required was supplied gratuitously by the members' mothers, and all the members and their friends came in "shed-loads" and ate it up. Henry Vincent delivered us an oration; George Dawson propounded metaphysical views; Cruden on the intellectual mystification; but with all this we got no better of our debt, and every flounder we made plunged us deeper into the mud. At last it was resolved to write to "our honorable members." This was in the good old days of Whig supremacy, and all the land and all the houses round about us being owned by one great Whig earl, our borough was privileged to return two members to represent the interests of that unprotected earl in the British Parliament. A contested election had just come to a close, and the honeyed promises and grateful pledges of our elected candidates were still fresh in our memories. So to our members the committee addressed their tearful entreaties—"deserving institution," "valuable exercises"—"deserving institution," "valuable agency of self-improvement," "pressing pecuniary embarrassments," and so forth. Member No. 1 sent his compliments and a five-pound note. Member No. 2 delayed writing for several days, and then sent great pleasure in informing us that the celebrated author, Mr. Charles Dickens, had kindly consented to deliver a public reading on our behalf.

What an excitement it caused in the little city! Mr. Dickens at that time had no public appearance as a reader. He had occasionally given readings for benevolent objects from his works to small coteries of friends or in the private saloon of some distinguished patron of art. But he had nervously shrunk from any public *début*, unwilling, as it seemed, to weaken his reputation as a writer by any possible failure as a reader. This diffidence had taken so strong a hold of him that it might even have been overcome but for the insidious persuasions of "our member." "Here was an opportunity," he argued, "for testing the matter without risk: an ancient diluvian country town, an audience of farmers' sons and daughters, rural shopkeepers, and a few country parsons—if interest could be excited in the stolid minds of such a Brobdingnagian assemblage, the success of the reader would be assured wherever he went." On the other hand, if failure resulted, none would be the wiser out of Peterborough. Sleepy Hollow circle, bait took, and Mr. Dickens consented to deliver a public reading in aid of the Peterborough Mechanics' Institute. He only stipulated that the prices of admission should be such that every mechanic in the town might come to hear him, and named two shillings, a shilling, and sixpence as the limit of charge. This limitation!—a fortnight before the reading every place was taken, and half a guinea and a guinea were the current rates on front-seat tickets.

Dickens himself came down and superintended the arrangements, as he always was he as to the result. At one end of the large Corn Exchange before spoken of he had caused to be erected a tall pulpit of red baize, as much like a Punch and Judy show with the top taken off as anything. But it was to be the reader's rostrum. But, as the tall red pulpit looked lonely and very much in want of more than alone, two dummy pulpits, of similar construction were placed one on each side to bear it company. Where the reader mounted into the middle box nothing was visible of him but his head and shoulders. So if it be really true, as was stated afterwards by an indiscreet supernumerary, that Mr. Dickens's step sank under him from first to last, the audience knew nothing of it. The whole character of the stage arrangements suggested that Mr. Dickens was sure of his head, but was not quite so sure of his legs. It was the Christmas Carol that Mr Dickens read; the night was the second one. As the clock struck the appointed hour, a red, jovial face, unrelieved by the heavy moustache which the novelist has since assumed, a broad, high forehead, and a perfectly Micawber-like expanse of shirt-collar and front appeared above the red baize box, and a full, sonorous voice rang out the words "*Marley was dead: to begin with*," then paused, as if to take in the character of the audience. No sense of failure overwhelmed. The voice held all spell-bound. Its depths of quiet feeling when the ghost of past Christmases led the dreamer through the long-forgotten scenes of his boyhood—its embodiment of honest mirth and good fellowship in the good old days of Whig supremacy; and all the land and all the houses round about us being owned by one great Whig earl, our borough was privileged to return two members to represent the interests of that unprotected earl in the British Parliament. A contested election had just come to a close, and the honeyed promises and grateful pledges of our elected candidates were still fresh in our memories. So to our members the committee addressed their tearful entreaties—"deserving institution," "valuable exercises"—"deserving institution," "valuable agency of self-improvement," "pressing pecuniary embarrassments," and so forth. Member No. 1 sent his compliments and a five-pound note. Member No. 2 delayed writing for several days, and then sent great pleasure in informing us that the celebrated author, Mr. Charles Dickens, had kindly consented to deliver a public reading on our behalf.

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