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AN UNUSUAL DICKENS AUTOGRAPH

In Volume I of the Nonesuch Edition of the *Letters of Charles Dickens*, there is printed—on pages 180-181—a letter that begins “Respected Sir,—I have given Squeers one cut on the neck and two on the head. . . .” The marginal annotation indicates that this letter was addressed to “Master Hastings Hughes.” The original autograph of this unusual letter has recently been presented to the Colby College Library by “Master Hughes’s” grandson, Mr. George Forbes Hughes of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

A close examination of the text of the letter shows that there are a good many differences between what Dickens actually wrote and what is printed in the Nonesuch Edition. For example, “Master Hastings Hughes” in the book corresponds to “William Hastings Hughes Esquire” in Dickens’ autograph. “Twelfth December” in print appears as “December the twelfth” in the autograph; the comma and dash after “Respected Sir,—” in the book replaced a mere period in the hand-written letter. Whereas the book prints “sheeps” with quotation marks around the word, there are no quotation marks in the original. The book prints “choaked” and “mamma” and “to-morrow”, but Dickens wrote “choaked” and “mama” and “tomorrow.” The printed book omits one entire sentence: “I said I was sure you would give him leave.” Where the printed text reads “a long letter,” Dickens wrote “a longer letter.” And the book contains two initials “P. S.—” before the postscript, which are lacking in the autograph.

In view of all these departures from the original, we...
think it best to reprint the entire letter exactly as Dickens wrote it. But before doing so, let us give the recipient of the letter a posthumous chance to tell us how it came to be written. Sixty-five years after Dickens addressed his envelope to “William Hastings Hughes Esquire/Donnington Priory./Favored by the reverend R. H. Barham.”, that same William Hastings Hughes wrote the following comment on the letter:

Milton, Massachusetts
November 19th, 1903.

When *Nicholas Nickleby* was coming out, in monthly numbers, I was between four and five years old. My father shewed me the pictures, and told me the story. I was much disgusted at the ending, because no proper rewards were given to Nicholas and the boys, nor punishments to Squeers and family. He said that the ending might be altered by the author, if I could persuade him to take my view of the matter, and that if I would dictate a letter it should be sent to him: which I proceeded to do. No copy of the letter was kept, but its purport is sufficiently clear from Dickens’ reply, which came to me “favored by” Canon Barham, author of the *Ingoldsby Legends*, who must have seen Dickens just before coming to make us a visit.

Fifteen years or so afterwards I saw Dickens, acting with other literary men, in aid of the Guild of Literature and Art; but never met him till some few months before his death. I was in London at the time, and his daughter Mrs. Collins had asked me to take an old man’s part for herself and her sister in a little comedy which was to be given to help some Charity. I had gladly complied, telling her that, as I had been her father’s correspondent before she was born, she and her sister could well regard me as a parent on the occasion. Dickens perfectly remembered the exchange of letters and his amusement at my intense baby interest in his story. He coached us for the play with infinite pains and patience. When I last saw him he was seated between his two daughters, on the platform at the back of the temporary stage, chatting to them and swinging his legs, “as jolly as a sandboy” at the success of the performance—and at its being well over. I should have said then that he was as likely to live another twenty years, and enjoy life, as any man of his age. He died three weeks afterwards.

The letter appears at the beginning of the first Volume of Dickens’ letters, which were published by Miss Dickens after his death.

W Hastings Hughes.

And now, thanks to the generosity and kindness of Mr.
George Forbes Hughes, the Colby College Library is able to present Dickens' exact words in their entirety:

Doughty Street. London.
December the twelfth 1838.

Respected Sir,

I have given Squeers one cut on the neck and two on the head, at which he appeared much surprised and began to cry, which being a cowardly thing is just what I should have expected from him—wouldn't you?

I have carefully done what you told me in your letter, about the lamb and the two sheeps for the little boys. They have also had some good ale and porter, and some wine. I am sorry you didn't say what wine you would like them to have. I gave them some sherry which they liked very much, except one boy who was a little sick and choked a good deal. He was rather greedy, and that's the truth, and I believe it went the wrong way, which I say served him right, and I hope you will say so, too.

Nicholas had his roast lamb as you said he was to, but he could not eat it all, and says if you do not mind his doing so, he should like to have the rest hashed tomorrow, with some greens which he is very fond of and so am I. I said I was sure you would give him leave. He said he did not like to have his porter hot, for he thought it spoilt the flavour, so I let him have it cold. You should have seen him drink it. I thought he never would have left off. I also gave him three pounds of money—all in six pences to make it seem more—and he said directly that he should give more than half of it to his mama and sister and divide the rest with poor Smike. And I say he is a good fellow for saying so, and if anybody says he isn't, I am ready to fight him whenever they like.—There.

Fanny Squeers shall be attended to, depend upon it. Your drawing of her is very like, except that I don't think the hair is quite curly enough. The nose is particularly like
hers, and so are the legs. She is a nasty disagreeable thing and I know it will make her very cross when she sees it, and what I say is that I hope it may. You will say the same, I know—at least I think you will.

I meant to have written you a longer letter but I cannot write very fast when I like the person I am writing to, because that makes me think about them, and I like you and so I tell you. Besides it is just eight o’clock at night, and I always go to bed at eight o’clock except when it is my birthday, and then I sit up to supper. So I will not say anything more besides this—and that is my love to you and Neptune, and if you will drink my health every Christmas Day, I will drink yours—Come.

I am
Respected Sir
Your affectionate friend

CHARLES DICKENS

I don’t write my name very plain, but you know what it is, you know, so never mind.

A NEW EDITION OF THE DICKENS CAROL

DICKENS lovers everywhere will, we feel sure, take pleasure in the recent publication by the Colby College Press of A Christmas Carol as abridged “for reading aloud at Christmas time” by that expert on such readings aloud, Mr. Philo C. Calhoun, of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Colby Library Associates will doubtless remember the amazing exhibition of copies of A Christmas Carol in the Colby College Library at the time of the centenary of that work—