Barnaby Rudge

by Ian Brinton



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Barnaby Rudge, A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty

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Fathers and Sons

In chapter fifteen of *Barnaby Rudge* a father and his son discuss family affairs and the romantically inclined and heroic Edward Chester expresses his astonishment at discovering that they are 'beggared wretches.' The father, taking his ease in a characteristically urbane manner, is enjoying 'the lazy influence of a late and lonely breakfast, with the additional sedative of a newspaper' and the air of supercilious self-satisfaction is caught perfectly in the Phiz illustration 'Mr. Chester Takes His Ease in his Inn': with feet up in a cushioned window-seat and cup of coffee held on his lap the elegant 'gentleman' smokes a pipe whilst leaning back at his ease. He addresses his son concerning the necessity for the young man to sacrifice his life for his father's comfort by marrying for money rather than love:

> 'My dear child,' said the father—'for you really talk so like a child that I must call you one—you were bred upon a careful principle; the very manner of your education, I assure you, maintained my credit surprisingly. As to the life I lead, I must lead it, Ned. I must have these little refinements about me. I have always been used to them, and I cannot exist without them. They must surround me, you observe, and therefore they are here.

In this portrait of the 'gentleman' one can see an early version of Dickens's portrait of his own father, John, and the later versions of those paternalistic figures who are prepared to feed off their children will include Mr. Turveydrop and Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House* and, most convincingly, William Dorrit who pretends not to be aware of the means used by his daughter, Amy, in order to keep him in the manner of life to which he has become accustomed. In her recent biography of Dickens, Claire Tomalin describes the young John Dickens as a man 'expansive by nature, with a tendency to speak in loose, grand terms, and an easy way with money.' He wrote the word 'gentleman' on documents, dressed in Regency style and bought expensive items which he could ill-afford. This chapter in *Barnaby Rudge* was composed only a matter of weeks after Dickens had had the embarrassment of dealing with financial incidents concerning his father. In February 1841 he had written to Edward Marjoribanks about being 'vexed not many days before by the practices of my unknown representative who lords it fearfully in my name at watering places and country inns' and one week later he sent his apologies to the journalist Thomas Latimer:

> Your letter has occasioned me great grief and distress. It opens a very painful subject—one that has been a source of constant anxiety, uneasiness, and expence for me for some years; and which I fondly hoped, when I settled my father in Exeter, would haunt me no more.
> I need scarcely tell you (for I am sure you will have anticipated it already) that he should have had no need to borrow money of you, or of any man; and that his making your note of hand payable at my publishers' was a moral outrage which words can scarcely censure enough.

This theme of the father controlling the son is mirrored in the novel by the way John Willet, the self-important landlord of The Maypole, keeps Joe upon a short leash and tells him that the proper time for him to talk is 'no time'. In chapter three the young Joe rises up against his bullying father to say

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> …I cannot bear the contempt that your treating me in the way you do, brings upon me from others every day. Look at other young men of my age. Have they no liberty, no will, no right to speak? Are they obliged to sit mumchance, and to be ordered about till they are the laughing-stock of young and old.

Both Joe Willet and Edward Chester break away from the parental web in order to pursue their own individual paths and in this way they anticipate many other characters throughout Dickens's novel-writing career. Interestingly by the time *Great Expectations* came to be written this disentangling of the nets of being had taken the form of repudiating the sham notion of 'gentleman', which had been foisted upon Pip by both Miss Havisham and the greedy aspirations of the Pumblechook milieu as well as by the inheritance from the criminal taint of Magwitch, in order to discover a life of self-dependence and frugality. Setting up a respectable business with Herbert Pocket he notes that 'We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well.'

Jeremy Tambling points to the connections between this novel and Dickens's own early years when he connects the Haredale home near Chigwell, the Warren, with the traumatic past of the novelist's boyhood working for Warren's blacking-factory 'and since murder was committed in the Warren, it possesses an allegorical status suggesting a perpetuating violence from the past.' Similarly, referring to Barnaby's father prowling around the growing metropolis, 'the text aligns criminality and rootlessness in the city, and putting the father into the atmosphere of Southwark, aligns him as pariah with Dickens's father.'

Prisons and Riots

On September 11th 1841 Dickens wrote to John Forster 'I have just burnt into Newgate, and am going in the next number to tear the prisoners out by the hair of their heads' and one week later observed 'I have let all the prisoners out of Newgate, burnt down Lord Mansfield's, and played the very devil. Another number will finish the fires, and help us on towards the end. I feel quite smoky when I am at work. I want elbow-room terribly.' Edgar Johnson highlighted Dickens's lifelong preoccupation with prisons:

> From the early 'Visit to Newgate' in *Sketches by Boz*, through Mr Pickwick's detention in the Fleet, the frightful description of Fagin in the condemned cell, and Mr Micawber's incarceration in the King's Bench, to the unwritten ending of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, in which the murderer was to gasp out his confession in another prison cell, the sombre theme runs like a dark thread through all Dickens's work.

The 'narrow, sordid old Marshalsea' (in which John Dickens had been imprisoned in 1824) dominated the pages of *Little Dorrit* and Dr Manette could never escape from 'One Hundred and Five, North Tower' in *A Tale of Two Cities*. *Barnaby Rudge* examines the disturbing double-face of imprisonment that fascinated Dickens: confinement that in turn becomes 'home'. This ambivalent feeling is grotesquely pictured in the illustration Phiz did for 'The Pensioner's Entertainment' in *Little Dorrit* where the debtor hosts the poverty-stricken Mr Nandy and expresses grandiloquently the sense of dispensing largesse to the pitiable free man. A less distressing inversion of reality is to be found in Mrs Plornish's parlour in Bleeding Heart Yard where the 'poetical heightening of the parlour consisted in the wall being painted to represent the exterior of a thatched cottage; the artist having introduced (in as effective a manner as he found compatible with their highly disproportioned dimensions) the real door and window.' This 'wonderful deception' allows the inhabitant of constricted urban space to imagine themselves in a world of rural expansion.

Anticipating these later psychological explorations of internment chapter 67 of *Barnaby Rudge* presents the reader with a Newgate which has been sacked and a plethora of notices attached to the gates of the two debtors' prisons, King's Bench and Fleet 'announcing that

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the rioters would come that night to burn them down.' Anticipating the shadow of the Marshalsea which casts its darkness over the world of *Little Dorrit* here the wardens of the threatened prisons attempt to 'set their prisoners at liberty, and give them leave to move their goods.' However, the taint of confinement has already spread its subtle poison:

> There were some broken men among these debtors who had been in jail so long, and were so miserable and destitute of friends, so dead to the world, and utterly forgotten and uncared for, that they implored their jailers not to set them free, and to send them, if need were, to some other place of custody.

Being driven out of what has become 'home' 'they wandered up and down hardly remembering the ways untrodden by their feet so long, and crying—such abject things those rotten-hearted jails had made them—as they slunk off in their rags, and dragged their slipshod feet along the pavement.' Some of those incarcerated in Newgate itself, felons, 'sought their jailers out and delivered themselves up' whilst other convicts were 'drawn back to their old place of captivity by some indescribable attraction.' In his study of *Dickens and Crime* Philip Collins instances the defenders of the solitary system used in the Philadelphia Penitentiary, stigmatised by Dickens in *American Notes* as 'cruel and wrong…torture and agony', extolling the humanity of the imprisonment by instancing the German on whom the English novelist had expended so much sympathy ('My heart bled for him; and…tears ran down his cheeks…'). The man apparently served eight further sentences there and, in 1884, actually rang the bell on the prison gate begging to be allowed to come inside to die. Understanding the perverted sense of reality encouraged by imprisonment Collins added

> Dickens would not have been surprised, nor would he have regarded this wretched career as a vindication of the prison's regime.

In the aftermath of the burning of Newgate in *Barnaby Rudge* some of the escaped prisoners returned to the demolished scene with 'no object in view but to prowl and lounge about the old place' and are 'often found asleep in the ruins, or sitting talking there, or even eating and drinking, as in a choice retreat.'

The power of description in the passages dealing with the progress of the riots is astonishing and the destruction of Haredale's home at Chigwell has a nightmare ferocity which is almost Dantesque:

> There were men who cast their lighted torches in the air, and suffered them to fall upon their heads and faces, blistering the skin with deep unseemly burns. There were men who rushed up to the fire, and paddled in it with their hands as if in water; and others who were restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their deadly longing. On the skull of one drunken lad—not twenty, by his looks—who lay upon the ground with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, white hot; melting his head like wax. When the scattered parties were collected, men—living yet, but singed as with hot irons—were plucked out of the cellars, and carried off on the shoulders of others, who strove to wake them as they went along, with ribald jokes, and left them, dead, in the passages of hospitals. But of all the howling throng not one learnt mercy from, nor sickened at, these sights; nor was the fierce, besotted, senseless rage of one man glutted.

Relating these scenes to the political motivation that prompted Dickens's concern for the poor and underprivileged Edgar Johnson noted that unless selfish indifference to an impoverished quality of life is addressed there will always be a 'hell-fury' which gentlemen blow 'to burning in poor men's hearts'.

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Saint and Sinner: holy fool and hangman

As Gabriel Vardon approaches London at the opening of the novel the city is presented in terms that would not be out of place within the imaginative realm of John Bunyan:

> And, now, he approached the great city, which lay outstretched before him like a dark shadow on the ground, reddening the sluggish air with a deep dull light, that told of labyrinths of public ways and shops, and swarms of busy people.

London becomes visible in the darkness 'by its own faint light, and not by that of Heaven' and the locksmith discovers the wounded Edward Chester tended by the distracted figure of Barnaby Rudge. Seeing the blood on the wounded man Barnaby is 'fascinated by interest or curiosity' whilst also being 'repelled nevertheless by some strong and secret horror which convulsed him in every nerve.' Barnaby refuses to touch the body and cries out 'he's bloody' following this aversion with the plea

> 'Cover him then, wrap him close—don't let me see it—smell it—hear the word. Don't speak the word—don't!'

There is an eerie quality of freedom about Barnaby that not only heightens the intensity of his perceptions but that also links him to the mad world of Poor Tom on the heath in *King Lear*:

> 'We have been afield, mother—leaping ditches, scrambling through hedges, running down steep banks, up and away, and hurrying on. The wind has been blowing, and the rushes and young plants bowing and bending to it, lest it should do them harm, the cowards—and Grip—ha ha ha!—brave Grip, who cares for nothing, and when the wind rolls him over in the dust, turns manfully to bite it—Grip, bold Grip, has quarrelled with every little bowing twig—thinking, he told me, that it mocked him—and has worried it like a bull-dog. Ha ha ha!'

In a blurred confusion of naivety Barnaby associates the Gordon Riots with setting poor people free, releasing those from prison whose liberty has been taken from them and an opportunity to reveal his steadfast and trustworthy sense of loyalty to those in command. Unsurprisingly he ends up in the death cells and tells his mother not to cry for him since he is being hanged for being bold.

In terrifying contrast to Barnaby's naïve world Dickens presents us with another figure of allegorical intensity: Ned Dennis the hangman who walks through the streets 'with his leather gloves clasped behind him, and his face indicative of cheerful thought and pleasant calculation.' The word 'calculation' has an unnerving coldness to it since he prides himself upon his professional skills in calculating precisely the most expedient manner of 'working-off' those who come under his care:

> Mr Dennis might have been likened unto a farmer ruminating among his crops, and enjoying by anticipation the bountiful gifts of Providence. Look where he would, some heap of ruins afforded him rich promise of a working off; the whole town appeared to have been ploughed and sown, and nurtured by most genial weather; and a goodly harvest was at hand.

This goodly harvest turns out to be the hanging of 'Two cripples—both mere boys—one with a leg of wood, one who dragged his twisted limbs along by the help of a crutch', a boy hanged in Bow Street and 'other young lads in various quarters of the town', four wretched women, Hugh and Dennis himself. During the firing of Newgate in chapter 65 Dennis had managed to lock himself in the area of the prison where the condemned cells were and

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instead of helping anyone to escape he contemplated with some considerable equanimity how he would work them off one by one, 'enjoying himself in this quiet manner'. He addresses the condemned:

> 'Now look'ee here, you four. I'm come here to take care of you, and see that you an't burnt, instead of the other thing. It's no use your making any noise, for you won't be found out by them as has broken in, and you'll only be hoarse when you come to the speeches—which is a pity…And always, when a thing of this natur's to come off, what I stand up for, is, a proper frame of mind. Let's have a proper frame of mind, and we can go through with it, creditable—pleasant—sociable.

The tone of voice Dennis adopts is that of 'a pastor in familiar conversation with his flock' and he is truly outraged when these condemned men are freed by Hugh and the rioters:

> 'You won't let these men alone, and leave 'em to me? You've no respect for nothing—haven't you?'

When Dennis turns traitor and gives up Hugh and Barnaby to the soldiers his statement as to purpose could not be clearer:

> 'I'm sorry for it brother,' he added, in a tone of resignation, addressing himself to Hugh; 'but you've brought it on yourself; you forced me to do it; you wouldn't respect the soundest constitootional principles, you know; you went and wiolated the wery framework of society.'

In his own perverted naivety he simply does not recognise that his own behaviour in joining the rioters was illegal and that his support for anarchy was unconstitutional. As a professional killer of men it is his pride in being an expert that is deeply offended and which prompts him to change sides. There is a disturbingly evocative quality to his own whimpering and wheedling as he faces the engine of justice himself and he implores mercy as he recognises that 'it's worse a hundred times, to me than any man':

> 'Let them know that, sir. Let them know that. They've made it worse to me by giving me so much to do.'

There is an echo here not only of Fagin in the condemned cell but also of 'A Visit to Newgate' from *Sketches by Boz* which was likened, after its publication, to Victor Hugo's *Dernier Jour d'un Condamné*.

Further Reading:

Dickens, A Life by Claire Tomalin
Dickens and Crime by Philip Collins

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