

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

Written by
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1

EXT. BEACH. MARGATE. KENT. DAY. 1885.

1

The STEADY FOOTFALL OF A WOMAN'S BOOTS, sinking in wet sand-

The RISE and FALL of a WOMAN'S breath-

MRS GEORGE WHARTON ROBINSON aka '**NELLY**', head down consumed by thought, etching a line across the sand, like charcoal on paper until-

NELLY stops looking out at the endless grey Margate coastline beyond, eyes dark and lost in some deep troubled distraction, a sense she has walked as far as the landscape will let her-

Heart beating, chest rising, she stands until-

She turns, head down, once more walking, as she picks up her pace-

The swoop and call of gulls, skimming the pier, overhead.

2

INT. SCHOOL HALL. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. DAY. 1885.

2

A school hall-

On a raised stage, a YOUNG SCHOOL BOY in fake moustache dressed as a waiter, stands in waiting. Two more SCHOOLBOYS, dressed in climbing costumes, sit at a cafe table close by. A back cloth of the Swiss Alps strung up behind. A young male teacher MR LAMBOURNE [late 20's] hovers distracted, clearly trying to organise an errant backstage.

In the wings just visible, PROP MAKERS and STAGE MANAGERS adjust collars on SCHOOLBOY ACTORS; An angelic LION [6 yrs] waits with OTHERS, bored and tired in floormop wig and painted nose, yawning as he peeks out to the auditorium beyond to see-

REVEREND WILLIAM BENHAM [mid 50's] sits, silently waiting, in the makeshift stalls, reading through a playscript entitled-

No Thoroughfare: A Drama in Five Acts by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.

Beyond a small orchestra of SCHOOLBOYS just visible in a makeshift orchestra pit; a JOLLY SCHOOLBOY PERCUSSIONIST tightens a nut on a wide drum. A TEENAGE VIOLINIST waxes the strings on a viola, a SCHOOLBOY OBOIST and PIANIST quietly tune up, looking to the clock overhead.

The SENSE OF TIME TICKING ON-

DISTANT MURMUR OF VOICES PASSING-

MR GEORGE WHARTON[early 30's] headmaster, clergyman and husband, just visible escorting a PORTLY PARENT along a distant corridor.

GEORGE

Here is the theatre. The boys always perform a short play at the end of term, highly popular with the parents. Theatre is an abiding interest of my wife's. Which of course I delight in!

He smiles at BENHAM, a shared look of quizzical concern, a clock ticking overhead.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Is she still not here?

BENHAM shrugs, smiles benignly.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Mr and Mrs Featherstone may I introduce Mr Benham. Mr Benham is invaluable to the school. He assists my wife with penny readings and other charitable events. You will often find them in corners plotting their next money raising venture.

The CAST, ORCHESTRA and BENHAM wait on-

GEORGE (CONT'D)

(moving on)

Shall we move on?

3 **EXT. CLIFFS. OUTSIDE SCHOOL. MARGATE. DAY. 1885.** 3

NELLY clambering over sandy dune seeing a small town in the distance. She hurries on.

3A **EXT. PATH. NEAR SCHOOL. MARGATE. DAY. 1885** 3A

NELLY ascends a small path in the town. She walks briskly towards a schoolhouse and enters.

4 **INT. HALLWAY. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. DAY. 1885.** 4

MARY, the maid carrying a tray with oil lamps on passing GEORGE and the PORTLY PARENT heading towards the study-

GEORGE
Mary, tea if you please.

MARY quietly disgruntled, slides the tray down,
turning to head back to the kitchen.

A shadowy figure just visible through the glass, NELLY on
the approach-

The SWING OF THE FRONT DOOR open, NELLY hurriedly pulling
off hat and scarf, just seeing GEORGE, closing the door of
his study-

GEORGE (CONT'D)
(hushed)
Mr Benham has been here since-

NELLY
(nods)
Yes..Yes..I am so sorry.

GEORGE
Mr Lambourne has been organising
the boys as best he can.

NELLY
I lost all sense of time.

NELLY hurrying along the corridor, a sense of activity as
she passes-

NELLY (CONT'D)
(in passing)
Careful with those corners,
Langan-

A SCHOOLBOY nods, carrying a huge piece of scenery with
ANOTHER BOY follow NELLY through a distant door into-

5 **INT. SCHOOLHALL. MARGATE. DAY. 1885.**

5

And at once, NELLY is on-

The SCHOOLBOYS smile with relief on seeing-

NELLY
Mr Benham I am so sorry..I am
here..I am here.

NELLY looking to the SCHOOLBOYS with a reassuring smile and
a smile of thanks to LAMBOURNE.

NELLY (CONT'D)
(to all)
Forgive me. Dear Boys.

NELLY, energy infectious, lights up the room as she enters.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Let's go from the third act. Mr Benham must not see all our tricks quite yet or there will be nothing left to show him tomorrow.

BENHAM

It is cold outside.

NELLY

It is. But it clears the mind.

BENHAM

It does. It does.

BENHAM clutches a couple of volumes of DICKENS- *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

It would be good to decide on the readings before the end of term.

NELLY

Yes..Yes of course..I am happy to consider your suggestions. Maybe later?

NELLY wavers, nods, smiles, turning her attention back to the boys.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Laurenson? Tanner? Are we ready? Good.

NELLY smiles at the SCHOOLBOY ACTORS, with encouragement. She nods to MR LAMBOURNE.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Mr Lambourne, are you happy with everything as it is?

LAMBOURNE nods.

NELLY (CONT'D)

(eyeing WAITER)

The moustaches works well, I think.

SUDDENLY **GEOFFREY WHARTON ROBINSON**[6yrs] the angelic lion peers from behind the wings. NELLY, eyes him

NELLY (CONT'D)

No Geoffrey, dear. Not yet. You come in on the final line.

(hushed)

We don't want to scare Mr Benham just yet or he may not return.

GEOFFREY nods, NELLY smiles, hurrying to take her place next to BENHAM.

BENHAM

I recall no lion in Mr Dickens
and Mr Collins Play, Mrs Wharton
Robinson.

NELLY

A little dramatic licence. I am
confident that Mr Dickens would
have let it pass-

NELLY deflects, with a smile.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Shall we begin?

NELLY nods to an OLD STAGE MANAGER.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Yates, would you drop the backing.

The OLD STAGE MANAGER nods, hurrying to drop a scenery cloth,
revealing a mountain landscape.

The SCHOOLBOYS begin a short musical introduction. MR
LAMBOURNE indicates the pace with a nod of his head.

SCHOOL BOY 1

*Well, my lads, the day is
breaking at last.*

NELLY is up at once-

NELLY

..No..the day has broken, Hadley.

On BENHAM noticing-

NELLY (CONT'D)

Lets get it right.

The EARNEST SCHOOLBOY MOUNTAINEER nods.

SCHOOL BOY 1

Well, my lads the day has broken-

NELLY consoled, offers a nod and we are away as the SCENE
BREAKS into life on the stage, as the SCHOOLBOY WAITER serves
coffee to the SCHOOLBOY MOUNTAINEERS, lost in earnest acting-

SCHOOL BOY 1 (CONT'D)

*What do you say to the weather,
now?*

SCHOOL BOY 2

I say the weather will do.

SCHOOL BOY 3

I say doubtful!

SCHOOL BOY 2

I say - bad!

NELLY's hand silently stills the absent tap of an ERRANT SCHOOLBOY's foot against his chair as he sits in a makeshift prompt box close by.

NELLY
(shouting out)
A little louder if you please
John.

The SCHOOL CONDUCTOR NODS to a KEEN VIOLINIST, BOW AT THE READY-

SCHOOL BOY 2
*I can see for myself that there's
a storm coming.*

THEN he nods to a LARGE SCHOOLBOY who rattles a metal storm sheet, whilst the JOLLY PERCUSSIONIST turns a wind drum, and a THIRD SCHOOLBOY SHIFTS a TIN OF PEAS, building in momentum like icy drops of sleeting rain, all just visible in the makeshift wings.

SCHOOL BOY 2 (CONT'D)
I smell the snow-

The RISING SOUNDS of percussive storm LOUDER NOW-

SCHOOL BOY 2 (CONT'D)
*....I feel the hurricane, in the
air.*

TWO SCHOOLBOY MOUNTAINEERS cross the stage, joining the cafe scene

SCHOOL BOY 3
Well are you ready at last?

The BACK AND FORTH OF THE METAL STORM TRAY RATTLING, THE PERCUSSIVE TAMBA BUILDING IN STEADY RHYTHM SUDDENLY SLICING WITH-

6

INT. CARRIAGE. TRAIN. NEAR STAPLEHURST. KENT. DAY. 1865.

6

The TEARING STEADY RHYTHM OF TRAIN WHEELS AGAINST STEEL AND TRACK-

The STREAK of countryside, FLEETING and ABSTRACTED, a BLUR of light and colour beyond.

SCHOOL BOY 4 VO
*I am sick and weary of all this
delay*

Then just visible in the glass, **NELLY**[mid 20's] reflection indistinct yet rippling in the glass-

SCHOOL BOY 3 VO
*You hear what my friend says? Do
you cross the mountain with us or
not?*

7

INT. SCHOOLHALL. MARGATE. DAY. 1885.

7

NELLY, seemingly lost in watching the play, oblivious to BENHAM's brief gaze, quietly observant, noting little to give away her state of distraction bar the steam of her wet boots and the sense that her mind is always elsewhere-

SCHOOL BOY 3
*Fair weather or foul, I have no
time to lose. And I am for
pushing on-*

But still BENHAM clocks it, looking back, resuming watching-

The SCHOOL BOY MOUTAINEERS climbing a mountainous pile of plaster and cardboard Alp. The endless icy landscape beyond and SWIRL of the PERCUSSIVE STORM DEAFENING IN THE ORCHESTRA PIT-

A YOUNG PERCUSSIONIST SWILLS peas in a tin tray, creating the noise of falling rain. It builds and builds-

ALL carrying NELLY far away, deep within her mind-

8

EXT. STREET. FREE TRADE HALL. MANCHESTER. 1857. DAY.

8

POURING RAIN-

The impressive Manchester Free Trade hall looming above-

The TURN of WHEELS over wet cobbles-

The STEAMING FLANK OF HORSES, HOOVES TREADING WET COBBLES AS THEY PULL A CARRIAGE TO A STILL-

FINGERS REACHING UP to UNFASTEN a carriage door, **CHARLEY DICKENS** [18 yrs] stands holding an umbrella waiting-

A young **NELLY** [18 yrs] steps down from the carriage to be greeted by CHARLEY, holding up the umbrella, trying to shroud her from the pouring rain.

CHARLEY
(holding out a hand)
Miss Ellen, welcome. I am Charley
Dickens. Welcome to Manchester.

NELLY smiles, suddenly a glove clasped in her hand falls to the ground. CHARLEY at once bends down picks it up.

NELLY

Thank you..

Behind NELLY, **MRS FRANCES TERNAN** [late 40's] NELLY's mother a bright, lively woman peering out into the grey of Manchester life.

CHARLEY

Welcome..Welcome..Mrs Ternan.

MRS TERNAN

Charley, thank you. So wet.

CHARLEY

Yes, do be careful.

MARIA TERNAN [20 yrs] NELLY's sister smiling clutching a hat box-

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

Miss Maria. Come inside..Come inside..

The SWAY of CRINOLINE skimming the rainy pavements-

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

My father is waiting. The others are already here. What a day!

NELLY, MRS TERNAN guided by CHARLEY towards the entrance of the Free Trade hall passing a poster advertising-

The Frozen Deep by Mr. Wilkie Collins. Under the management of Mr. Charles Dickens clearly visible on a billboard overhead-

MARIA

Nelly, look-

MARIA beaming, eyes searching the poster, at last finding *Mrs Frances Ternan, Miss Maria Ternan, Miss Ellen Ternan*. NELLY, MARIA and MRS TERNAN peering at the poster with quiet awe.

NELLY

Yes, there we are.

MRS TERNAN

The print is a little small, but no matter.

CHARLEY beyond waiting. MRS TERNAN ushering MARIA and NELLY inside. Their bonnets and skirts a flash of colour against the grey of Manchester life all around-

9 INT. CORRIDOR. FREE TRADE HALL. MANCHESTER. 1857. DAY. 9

CHARLEY leading the trio of women along an impressive wood lined corridor. Chairs stacked either side.

He leads them through into-

10 INT. MAIN HALL. FREE TRADE HALL. MANCHESTER. 1857. DAY 10

The opulent and magnificent interior of the Free Trade Hall-

Paintings of the Kings and Queens of England flank one side of the wall as CHARLEY leads them towards-

A beautiful theatre in the final moments of construction at the far end of the vast hall. CARPENTERS, STAGE MANAGEMENT, GASLIGHT ENGINEERS working around the distant figure of **CHARLES DICKENS** [mid 40's] lost in directing the STAGE HANDS and STAGE MANAGEMENT in placing the scenery on the stage.

DICKENS

Yes..Yes..If we could have the flat over there..We need to create as much space as possible..We'll probably have to bring everyting to the left..What worked at Tavistock house will seem lost here..Our set looks like a toy theatre if we do not-

CHARLEY leading NELLY, MRS TERNAN and MARIA towards the stage-

CHARLEY

Father-

DICKENS turns and at once he is lost behind a huge flat of painted rocks being manoeuvred into place on the stage. Once the scenery has past, he is revealed. He jumps down from the stage, springing across the hall, smiling, arms outstretched delighting in their arrival-

DICKENS

At last we have a full company! Mrs Ternan welcome.

MRS TERNAN

Mr Dickens.

(surveying theatre)

What a beautiful theatre you have built for us.

DICKENS

We have tried. I am glad. Welcome Miss Maria..A good journey I hope?

MARIA

Yes..Yes..Mr Dickens. Thank you.

MRS TERNAN

It was quite comfortable.

DICKENS

Good. Good. And you must be Miss Ellen Ternan.

DICKENS stops, mid way through shaking their hands, pausing on NELLY, with a smile.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

You've met my eldest son Charley of course.

NELLY

Yes..yes..He very kindly rescued my glove.

DICKENS

Ah, the gallant chevalier!

DICKENS grips CHARLEY's shoulder in passing, turning to present them to the MEMBERS of the COMPANY-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Ladies and gentleman may we welcome our newcomer, Miss Ellen who is helping us in our hour of need.

(to NELLY)

We wish your sister Frances well. Is it the Haymarket or Phoenix we have lost her to?

NELLY

The Haymarket. She is so sad not to be here.

MRS TERNAN

But Nelly will give you a wonderful performance-

DICKENS

I have no doubt.

DICKENS smiles, the MEMBERS of the company on the approach, welcoming. DICKENS, in a spiral of energy, enthusiastically enjoying the performance of these introductions-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Now Maria, Mrs Ternan you know everyone from our previous rehearsals..

MRS TERNAN

Yes..Yes..I remember..Some familiar faces. I remember.

DICKENS

Miss Ellen may I introduce you to our family of actors-

MR EGG[early 40's]**MR LEMON** [mid 40's] and **MISS SABINE** [early 30's]smiling and shaking hands, surrounding MRS TERNAN, NELLY and MARIA.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Mr Lemon, Mr Egg, Miss Sabine...Mr Berger, our brilliant young composer-

MR BERGER [mid 20's] amongst the SWELL of welcoming actors-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Mr Evans, Mr Piggot..I would like to introduce you to our author Mr Collins-

DICKENS looks beyond, eyes searching with wry irritation-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

But as ever he is late..And of course some of my own family-

MAMEY DICKENS [17 yrs] and **KATEY DICKENS** [16 yrs] DICKENS' eldest daughters and **GEORGINA HOGARTH** [early/mid 30's] CATHERINE'S SISTER close by-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

My daughters Mamey, Katey and my sister in law Miss Georgina Hogarth. And here is-

DICKENS rounding up four boys **FRANK** [13 yrs], **ALFRED**[12 yrs], **SYDNEY** [10 yrs] **HENRY DICKENS** [8 yrs] tapping their heads with percussive aplomb on every name-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Frank-

(tap)

Alfred-

(tap)

Sydney-

(tap)

Henry....

(tap)

Where is youngest boy-?

EDWARD 'PLORN' DICKENS [5 yrs] nervously peers out from behind DICKENS, DICKENS mock searching behind his coat tails.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Plorn. Don't hide there.

DICKENS at once scoops PLORN up in his arms, smiling. NELLY watching enchanted, the names and faces already a blur.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
And that is it..I think..And..of course, my wife-

Beyond, **CATHERINE DICKENS** [early 40's] DICKENS' wife, heavy and swollen seated someway off. NELLY looks over, their eyes briefly meeting.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Now I suggest maybe in half an hour..Is that enough time ladies to settle your bonnets..? - I would like to rehearse-

DICKENS just seeing-

DICKENS (CONT'D)
...but without our author-

WILKIE COLLINS[mid 30's] DICKENS colleague and friend running towards him, from across the hall, tripping over his bags, with fashionable aplomb-

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Mr Collins..Who is at last here!
Why is it I am waiting for you,
Wilkie? Why must you always be late?

COLLINS in smiling greeting, embracing DICKENS-

COLLINS
Because it irritates you, Charles,
and it amuses me to see you in bad temper!

LAUGHTER-

11

INT. STAGE. FREE TRADE HALL. LONDON. 1857. DAY.

11

The SET and THEATRE now fully installed. A few STAGE HANDS finishing off small bits of carpentry and adjusting set. The set now lit with oil lamps.

The ACTORS wait on stage, finding their positions. NELLY amongst them, ushered by MRS TERNAN into place.

Downstage, to one side, DICKENS and WILKIE in whispered debate-

COLLINS

I cannot see a scene we can afford
to lose, Charles.

DICKENS pen in hand, mapping out potential cuts on a page of
the script-

DICKENS

But it is too long. And it will
bore if it is too long. It was too
long in London and it will be too
long in Manchester. Though it pains
me... Wilkie-

DICKENS hands the script back to COLLINS, offering him a look
at his suggested cuts, his gaze direct.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Cut.Cut.Cut.

COLLINS throws his hands up exasperated but concedes, scoring
ferociously through the text with his pencil.

COLLINS

It is done! It is done!
(hushed)
You may tell Mr Egg he has lost his
last soliloquy.

DICKENS

(hushed)
You must do it. As author I shall
not deny you that.

COLLINS

You are insufferable.

DICKENS scribbles more on the script, then hands it once more
back to COLLINS.

DICKENS

And here..And here..

COLLINS

Butcher!

DICKENS smiles, walks to centre stage to address the company
of ACTORS-

DICKENS

Now everyone please be careful.-
Our little theatre is not yet
complete-

DICKENS nods to MR STANFIELD giving a finishing touch to the
set, paintbrush in hand.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

And as we are rehearsing Miss Ellen in today let us be considerate. I am keen to review the last act, just the final entry of Wardour and Aldersly so places friends.

(directing MARIA)

Maria, if we could have you over there.

DICKENS gently positions MARIA, moving back across the stage-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

And-?

DICKENS' eyes graze over NELLY mildly lost, awaiting direction.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

We have the ladies in a group over here. Miss Ellen..Mrs Ternan.

MRS TERNAN

Just over here, Nelly dearest. Mr Dickens may I suggest the women are positioned a little further upstage?

DICKENS

Yes..Let us have you here.

MRS TERNAN

Thank you.

MRS TERNAN nods to NELLY to follow her, taking their positions in a small cluster close by.

MARIA

Should I stand a little wider?

DICKENS

Yes, very good, Maria..But not too far, for it is your face and not mine that will be holding the attention of our audience I feel sure.

LAUGHTER-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Where's Collins?

COLLINS looks up, from his script, both actor and writer, hurrying onto the stage.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
I will need you standing close to
the rear if I am to carry you in,
Wilkie. You're ready?

COLLINS
(hurrying off)
No..Yes..Yes.

COLLINS disappears behind a flat, then puts his head
back around-

COLLINS (CONT'D)
Should you not come? I cannot
carry myself.

NELLY smiles, enjoying the banter as DICKENS disappears off
to the side of the wings.

DICKENS
Of course..yes..Yes.
(pointing to CHARLEY)
Charley, there, relax the arms. A
little less stiff.

CHARLEY nods, taking his place, DICKENS disappearing once
more off stage.

MUTTERINGS and THEN-

NELLY looking down at her part on sides of paper in her hand.

NELLY
(aside to MRS TERNAN)
Do I speak after the gun?

SUDDENLY DICKENS enters carrying COLLINS -

MARIA
Frank!..Frank!!

MARIA raises her hands to her face, looking suitably
alarmed.

DICKENS
Then my line...*Saved, Saved for
you!*

COLLINS
Don't you put me down here?

DICKENS releases COLLINS, MARIA now cradling COLLINS in
her arms.

DICKENS
*He's footsore and weary, Clara.
But I have saved him..And so
on..and so on..*

DICKENS gestures for MR LEMON to step forward.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
(pointing)
Yes, there very good. Then your
line Wilkie-

COLLINS looks up as all crowd around him.

COLLINS
*Where is Wardour?! Help him!
Never mind me!*

DICKENS already on the floor now, in dying pose.

DICKENS
(to MR LEMON)
Mark, this is when you see me.

MR LEMON falls at DICKENS feet.

MR LEMON
*Wardour! Dear Wardour! Old friend
whom I have wronged, remember and
forgive me.*

DICKENS
Very good. You are forgiven.

MORE LAUGHTER-

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Then the scene plays as is.

DICKENS directing from his dying pose.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Do not be afraid to project. We
have over 2,000 seats.
(shouting out)
Catherine, do say if you cannot
hear us.

CATHERINE just visible perched on a seat looks up, not listening, somewhat bemused. CLOSE by her sister GEORGINA and the DICKENS CHILDREN, watching appreciatively.

CATHERINE
(distracted)
What?

GEORGINA
(calling back)
We can hear you very well, Charles.

DICKENS

Very good. Everyone speak up.
Maria, you take me in your arms.

MARIA

*Richard, dear Richard, look
at your old playmate.*

DICKENS

Then music-

MR BERGER at the piano to the side of the stage, begins to play-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Not yet Berger. I am just marking
through the cues... which lasts
until the curtain has fallen by
which time I am nearly dead. Then
we kiss. Then gun. BANG! Then-
(looking to NELLY)
Epilogue-?

NELLY looks up, in waiting-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Epilogue.

NELLY walks forward a little, clutching a few pages of script.

NELLY

*This is a tale of woe. This
is a tale of sorrow. A love
denied. A love restored to
live beyond tomorrow. Lest
we think silence is the
place to hide a heavy heart,
remember to love and be
loved is life itself.
Without which we are nought.*

NELLY quietly captivating, a little nervous yet oddly touching, DICKENS momentarily lost until-

MRS TERNAN

(hushed aside)

Maybe a little louder, Nelly.

DICKENS turns, addresses all-

DICKENS

The curtain closes. Loud applause.
Yet audible the crying of 2,000.
Bravo. Bravo. I suggest a full
dress rehearsal in two hours time.
Thank you gentleman-

DICKENS eyes flick to NELLY.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Thank you ladies.

The COMPANY of ACTORS already dissolving, lost in their conversation as they head off to dressing rooms and costume fittings.

COLLINS
Oh Charles, your last speech I think could benefit from cutting.

DICKENS
You think so?

COLLINS
I do.

DICKENS
(deflecting)
Catherine-?

CATHERINE looks up barely listening.

COLLINS
Shall we discuss it?

DICKENS
Yes. Later.

COLLINS, shakes his head, concedes. DICKENS reaches for a small flask of brandy in his coat pocket, swigs, sees NELLY alone, the Arctic landscape behind.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
(almost to himself)
She has something.

COLLINS noting DICKENS quiet distraction, looking on. NELLY disappearing into the scenery of the *Frozen Deep*.

12

INT. ONSTAGE. FREE TRADE HALL. MANCHESTER. 1857. NIGHT.

12

A weeping MARIA, her face stained with tears, DICKENS in her arms, swathed in rags, beard, grey and powdery, dying in MARIA's arms, illuminated on stage by a row of lit gaslights, as the play comes to its end.

MR LEMON kneels down close to a dying DICKENS as he lies in MARIA's arms, her body shuddering with tears.

DICKENS reaches out a hand, patting MR LEMON's arm in final embrace.

DICKENS

*Come nearer! My mind clears,
but my eyes grow dim. You will
remember me kindly for Frank's
sake? Poor Frank! Why does he
hide his face?*

MR EGG looks away, his face streaming with tears.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Is he crying?

Just seen beyond in the wings, some of the ACTORS and STAGEHANDS watching, NELLY amongst them, all held in the absolute moment, NELLY watching DICKENS with a quiet intensity-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

*Nearer Clara - I want to look
my last at you. My sister,
Clara! Kiss me Sister, kiss me
before I die.*

MARIA kisses DICKENS-

Just visible in the wings, a STAGE HAND sets light to gunpowder, mimicking the blast of a ships gun/cannon.

NELLY, lost in DICKENS' performance, oblivious to the curtain sweeping closed-

MRS TERNAN

(urgent/hushed in
passing)

Nelly..Nelly..

NELLY hurries on stage, to deliver her epilogue.

13

**INT. AUDITORIUM. FREE TRADE HALL. MANCHESTER. 1857.
NIGHT.**

13

THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE-

DICKENS, arms outstretched at the front of the stage, leading his cast in triumphant encore-

MARIA flushed and beaming, DICKENS presenting her centre stage-

NELLY looking on, bashfully happy. She sees DICKENS smiling at her down the line.

14

INT. DRAWING ROOM. HOTEL. MANCHESTER. 1857. NIGHT.

14

DICKENS, FINGERS TREMULOUS ON PIANO KEYS-

DICKENS
..Queen Victoria...

DICKENS BANGS HIS FINGERS ON THE KEYS.

COLLINS
Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and
Gothanburg!

COLLINS BY DICKENS SIDE BANGS FURTHER ALONG THE KEYBOARD-

DICKENS
King Leopold I of Belgium!

AND AGAIN, DICKENS FINGERS BANG ON KEYS THEN TREMULOUS THIS
BACK AND FORTH OF FINGER BANGING GOES ON-

COLLINS
Prince Frederick!

DICKENS
Hans Christian Anderson!

COLLINS
William Thackeray!!!

FINGERS BANG, BANG AND BANG AGAIN BASHING OUT IMPROMPTU
FANFARE!

DICKENS
No, No I am sorry, it is not
enough that we should play before
these mere mortals...

DICKENS smiles, his audience enraptured as he once more
BANGS THE PIANO KEYS-

DICKENS (CONT'D)
It is Manchester who have given
us the highest accolade. It is
Manchester whose approval I have
looked to. And it is Manchester
who has surely bestowed tonight's
success. Friends we are
victorious!

And at once DICKENS and COLLINS playing, a madcap,
joyful duet. MISS SABINE hovering close by. Yet DICKENS
too busy for anyone is lost in fun, playing on with
COLLINS as all break into lively spontaneous dancing.
MAMEY and KATEY, GEORGINA HOGARTH in the mix.

MR LEMON scoops up NELLY in passing. NELLY laughing,
lost in a mad dance with MARIA and OTHERS. DICKENS,
knocking back another drink, foot silently tapping
against the floor, quietly revelling. His eyes briefly
meet with NELLY, both lost in the sheer joy of it all.

DICKENS suddenly stands, behind MR EGG, moving his arms and legs almost as if a puppet master with his puppet.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Come come, Augustus you must
dance and have no notion of
walking.

Mr EGG reluctantly concedes as DICKENS forces him, gaily onto the dance floor.

14A INT. DRAWING ROOM. HOTEL. MANCHESTER. 1857. NIGHT. 14A

The ENTIRE COMPANY gathered around the piano. BERGER plays *Three Fishes* as they sing. DICKENS at the heart, enjoying the company in full song.

15 INT. CORRIDOR. HOTEL. MANCHESTER. 1857. NIGHT. 15

NELLY stands to one side of the room, flushed and exhausted.

DICKENS stands performing some kind of mesmerizing/hypnosis trick on MISS SABINE who sits opposite DICKENS, making the room still as he works with MISS SABINE

DICKENS
Now raise your arms Miss
Sabine. Very slowly.

MISS SABINE raises her arms, all compelled to watch.

NELLY
It is remarkable.

NELLY looks up, sees CATHERINE, standing on the periphery.

CATHERINE
(with a smile)
One of his magic tricks.

CATHERINE's eyes graze over NELLY, letting an awkward silence hang-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
You are an admirer of my
husband's work, Miss Ternan?

NELLY
(nods)
Yes of course. At the moment I am
lost in *Little Dorrit*. It has a
darker heart perhaps. Though I am
gripped between laughter and
heartbreak.

(MORE)

NELLY (CONT'D)

Until now I thought *Bleak House* was the novel that would stay with me the most. It has this alarming spirit of unease. Lady Deadlock haunted by her past..I am drawn back to those pages again and again. And yet there is so much that also makes me smile.

CATHERINE

It is a fiction designed to entertain.

NELLY

No..no..surely it's more than that. It makes us think. It changes us.

CATHERINE considers NELLY, with thoughtful gaze then looks back at DICKENS, a sudden heavy sadness overwhelming her which she deflects with a smile-

CATHERINE

He will be up all night and cross all day.

CATHERINE moves off, clearly heading to bed.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Good night, Miss Ternan.

NELLY

Good night.

SILENCE-

A DISTANT DOOR CLOSES-

NELLY looks back at DICKENS, MISS SABINE now hypnotised and dancing a jig or the like, the party in uproar, DICKENS at the helm.

16

INT. DRAWING ROOM.HOTEL. MANCHESTER. 1857. DAWN.

16

It is nearly dawn, the fire is low and the gas lamps now out.

DICKENS sunk amongst the company of ACTORS; some dozing, some listening enraptured, some searching the wine bottles for the last dregs of wine. MRS TERNAN wide eyed is now being mesmerised by DICKENS.

MRS TERNAN

There are too many cats..too many cats and not enough birds.. I need wings.

(MORE)

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)

Hold the baby..hold the
baby..No..No..She has gone...With
no wings..Where is she?..Where is
she?..Is she safe?...Please tell me
she is safe.

MRS TERNAN transfixed, her face etched with shock and terror,
the whole room held, watching her. DICKENS smiles, a little
uneasy.

DICKENS

Ah-

DICKENS smiles, unsure, then he squeezes MRS TERNAN's
hands, releasing her back to reality.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

And now you are back with us, Mrs
Ternan.

MRS TERNAN coming to, exhales.

MRS TERNAN

I am back where?

MARIA grips her hands, close to her.

MARIA

Mother..Mother..I think you
remembered Fanny. On the boat.

MRS TERNAN

What did I say?

NELLY

(close to)

You were trying to save her,
mother.

MRS TERNAN

I am sorry Mr Dickens. I think I
have strayed into some family
history.

DICKENS

Indeed?

The whole COMPANY leaning forward, listening, unsure where
this is leading-

MRS TERNAN

My eldest daughter Fanny was thrown
from her cot when my husband and I
were touring in America some years
ago.

(MORE)

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MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)

We were on a paddle steamer which was rammed by another boat. She was saved, miraculously between two mattresses.

DICKENS

The angels were watching.

NELLY

They were.

DICKENS moved by the closeness of these women, together, smiling at MRS TERNAN. She relaxes.

MRS TERNAN

I am done Mr Dickens.

MRS TERNAN slightly thrown, gathering herself to stand.

COLLINS

As am I. An extraordinary story.

COLLINS finishes up the last of the wine, steering himself wearily to bed, picking up his shoes and jacket on route-

COLLINS (CONT'D)

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

COLLINS pats DICKENS back affectionately in passing-

COLLINS (CONT'D)

Good night.

The ACTORS stagger off to bed, a sense of good nights all round.

MR EGG

Five o'clock. Bed.

NELLY lingers at the window. She pulls back the shutter, a thin shaft of dawn light searing through-

ALL

Good night-

NELLY, MARIA and MRS TERNAN the last to leave.

DICKENS

You were quite wonderful tonight, Maria.

(to all/ ie MARIA)

I did try to console her in hushed aside but all she could whisper is 'O! So sad. O! It is so sad!' Such a good pale little face.

DICKENS cups MARIA's face, kissing her gently on the forehead, a little drunk and heady from too much wine.

MARIA

I am afraid I couldn't stop the tears. You were too good.

MRS TERNAN

You will not find a better Clara.

MARIA smiles, following MRS TERNAN out-

MARIA

Thank you Mama.

MRS TERNAN

Now I must take these angels to bed.

(almost to self/ looking at girls)

So precious.

MRS TERNAN and MARIA go to exit.

NELLY

(as goes)

I could stay up all night. I am too awake to sleep.

NELLY walks towards the window.

NELLY (CONT'D)

There is daylight.

From beyond-

MRS TERNAN

(calling back)

Nelly dearest, we all need sleep.

NELLY makes to go, DICKENS, one finger pulling back the curtain peering out.

DICKENS

This is my favourite time. When the day is creeping up on us-

NELLY hesitates, caught between staying and going. She crosses the room, stands by the window opposite him, following his gaze.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

..and we must put in order the chaos of the night. Stand guard once more, ready for life.

Outside STREET URCHINS jostle for meat scraps, as the MEAT PACKERS unload carcasses from a cart, ready for market. A PROSTITUTE heads home, clearly a little worse the wear from the night before. A COUPLE embrace in the shadows.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is a profound secret and mystery to every other.

NELLY

Until that secret is given to another to look after. Then perhaps two human creatures may know each other.

(beat)

Do you not think so?

NELLY's directness suddenly piercing DICKENS but he deflects.

DICKENS

Has Mrs Dickens gone to bed?

NELLY

Some time ago.

He finishes up his drink, lost deep within himself.

DICKENS

She has such terrible headaches.

(beat)

Sleep.

17

INT.BEDROOM. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885.

17

The glow of an oil lamp-

NELLY's reflection refracted in a dressing table mirror as she dresses for dinner. The fall of an earring, a wrist dabbed with perfume, lightly pressed against her neck. GEORGE hovers close by grappling with his shirt cuff and cufflink-

NELLY

Pull it taut-

NELLY goes to help him, pulling the cuff taut, and threading it neatly through-

NELLY (CONT'D)

Upright like a brigadier and then..

GEORGE watches her, clearly a familiar act, his breath warm on hers.

GEORGE

Thank you.

NELLY nods, resumes dressing, GEORGE watching her-

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Were you on the beach again today? Miss Brooke thought she saw you.

GEORGE sinks on the bed, leaning forward to lace his shoe.

NELLY

Yes.

GEORGE waits for more. NELLY already slipping away from him, remote once more.

He hesitates, looks down at NELLY's shoes close by. He picks one up, tips it a little, a pool of sand just visible, grazing the insole. GEORGE considers, with quiet concern.

18

INT. PARLOUR/LIBRARY. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885. 18

The aftermath of a pleasant if small dinner party, a GOVERNOR and his WIFE, LAMBOURNE and his YOUNG WIFE, REVEREND BENHAM and GEORGE hosting and happy at the helm. A tray of sweet wine and tea close by. A fire burning in the grate and the oil lamps lit.

GEORGE

I was just showing Malcolm-

GEORGE lost in conversation with the GOVERNOR a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* in his hand, leaning against a bookshelf-

GEORGE (CONT'D)

See it is signed.

NELLY passes around tea, topping up a glass here or there.

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Apparently he modelled the character of Lucie Manette on Nelly. The families were very close when Nelly was a child.

NELLY

George, please. I am sure he drew inspiration from many people. Our guests do not wish to be bored with-

GEORGE

My wife adores his novels. Of course he's often very funny but...I find a little bleak.

(MORE)

GEORGE (CONT'D)

One wonders what demons raged in his mind.

BENHAM

Indeed.

GEORGE

Thackeray, now there's a writer.

NELLY

You can't compare them.

BENHAM

Oh I agree. I am for Mr Dickens. There are times that I have envied Mrs Wharton Robinson to have known him- even as a child.

NELLY thoughtful, BENHAM animated sipping on his after dinner wine.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

A true humanitarian, wittily observant yet burning with a political bonfire that elevates and brings urgency to his work. A writer- yes, at times bleak, but one who makes us laugh at our own absurdity. We see ourselves clearly in all our folly. Yes, he is still with us!

NELLY suddenly stands, the scrape of her chair, sudden and surprising, blowing out a candle on a table.

NELLY

Thank you Mr Benham.

NELLY fiddles, intent on getting the nub of the waxed candle out.

BENHAM

It is a subject in which I sometimes run away with myself.

BENHAM's eyes dart to NELLY.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

As Mrs Wharton Robinson knows only too well.

BENHAM looks to NELLY, offering conciliatory smile.

GOVERNOR

Run away....Run away..I for one am determined to revisit him immediately. Where would you suggest I begin?

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LAMBOURNE
Martin Chuzzlewit.

BENHAM

Yes..Of course..So many to choose from. Where to start? Any novel but for brief pleasure I would suggest browsing through a copy of Dickens weekly literary magazine-

NELLY turns back to see BENHAM peering at a copy of *Household Words*, A printed journal composed by Charles Dickens, one of several on a shelf.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

Household words. A collection of many of his writings and indeed chapters of his novels. I am sure Mrs Wharton Robinson would not mind if you cared to borrow-

NELLY

Of course. Of course.

GEORGE

My wife has nearly every edition. We have run out of shelves.

MARY enters with more refreshment-

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Ah good. Thank you Mary.

They nod their thanks in passing, GEORGE once more drawing the GOVERNOR and his WIFE into conversation. BENHAM reaches for a copy of the *Frozen Deep* playtext-

BENHAM

The Frozen Deep. You have the text of Mr Collins' play?

NELLY turns, suddenly on edge. BENHAM's eyes already grazing over several notes made in some folded pages slipped between the pages of the playtext. On these papers, the lines are scored through, the sense of this as a once worked text. And just visible, pressed in the folds of the these pages-

A tiny lock of hair.

NELLY

Yes. It is not a good play.

NELLY with gentle precision, takes the playtext out of BENHAM's hands, snapping it shut and sliding it once more into the shelf.

NELLY (CONT'D)

But I will find you one.

BENHAM oddly thrown, yet trying to gather himself, curiosity stirred as NELLY's eyes search the titles.

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NELLY (CONT'D)

(beat)

David Copperfield. For our reading?

BENHAM

Will you walk again tomorrow?

NELLY

(beat)

Perhaps.

BENHAM

May I join you?

NELLY hesitates, pulling a text down from a shelf, seemingly distracted.

NELLY

I walk at quite a pace.

19

INT. BEDROOM. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. 1885. NIGHT.

19

NELLY brushes her hair, GEORGE undressing close by. Both silent, neither able to make the first move. Suddenly, NELLY turns on him.

NELLY

Why must you do that? Flaunt my connection? It is dull.

GEORGE

Dull to have known Charles Dickens?

GEORGE looks at NELLY, with a quizzical smile.

NELLY

I was a child.

NELLY climbs into bed next to him.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Yet to refer to him as bleak.
It is a misconception-

GEORGE

What? I do not understand what you are talking of, Nelly. This constant agitation.

SILENCE-

GEORGE (CONT'D)

Nelly-

NELLY deflects turning to wind the clock on the bedside table.

NELLY

I am just tired.

20

INT. BEDROOM. SCHOOLHALL. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885.

20

Darkness-

NELLY, eyes flickering closed, on top of GEORGE, the steady rise and fall of her naked back as she grips him, lost in lovemaking, intense and connected with GEORGE until reaching shuddering climax, GEORGE looks at her, a sense of her flying ahead without him-

NELLY, sated, leans forward, the moment dissolving across her face.

GEORGE tenderly cups the back of her head and neck with the palm of his hand, his lips close to her cheek, the warmth of her breath on his neck, the rhythm sobering. They lie, GEORGE turns, looks for her, NELLY's eyes closed.

DICKENS VO

It was a murky confusion - here and there blotted with a colour like the colour of the smoke from damp fuel-

21

INT. ORCHESTRA GALLERY. ST MARTIN'S HALL. 1857. DAY.

21

Through ornate railings, NELLY, MARIA, MRS TERNAN and **FANNY TERNAN** [early 20's] NELLY's older pretty sister, silently peering down-

DICKENS mid reading, addresses a packed AUDIENCE, lost in performance. His eyes briefly graze NELLY's, a flicker of surprise, quickly dismissed as he resumes intense, hunched over the podium.

DICKENS

As we struggled on, nearer and nearer to the sea, from which this mighty wind was blowing dead on shore, its force became more and more terrific..

The AUDIENCE enraptured, NELLY tightly gripping the programme for DICKENS reading of *David Copperfield*.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Long before we saw the sea, its spray was on our lips, and showered salt rain upon us.

CUT TO:

NELLY grips the handrail, leaning towards DICKENS, eyes fixed.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

As the receding wave swept back
with a hoarse roar, it seemed to
scoop out deep caves in the beach,
as if its purpose were to undermine
the earth.

CUT TO:

DICKENS stalking the stage, papers in hand, captivating the
AUDIENCE-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

*Another cry arose on shore; and
looking to the wreck, we saw the
cruel sail, with blow on blow, beat
off the lower of the two men, and
fly up in triumph round the active
figure left alone upon the mast.*

CUT TO:

DICKENS eyes briefly graze over his AUDIENCE, hesitating on
seeing NELLY-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

*At length Ham neared the wreck. He
was so near that with one more of
his vigorous strokes he would be
clinging to it, -when, a green vast
hillside of water, moving on
shoreward, from beyond the ship, he
seemed to leap up into it with a
mighty bound and the ship was gone.*

CUT TO:

NELLY sinks back in her seat, cheeks flushed, exhausted yet
exhilarated, as if she has been in the very same storm.

SILENCE-

APPLAUSE-

DICKENS comes to, as if out of a trance, exhausted, the
life blood almost seeped out of him.

22

INT. AUDITORIUM. ST MARTIN'S HALL. 1857. DAY.

22

DICKENS with COLLINS consumed by a throng of VICTORIAN
LADIES, a swell of DIGNITARIES waiting to usher him
away-

VICTORIAN LADY

Truly Mr. Dickens it is
never so alive as when it is
spoken by its author.

DICKENS eyes catching on NELLY with MRS TERNAN, FANNY and MARIA.

DICKENS
(calling over)
Mrs Ternan.
(to VICTORIAN LADY)
Excuse me.

DICKENS hurrying to catch up, desperately trying to leave the constant WELL WISHERS and FANS behind-

MRS TERNAN
Mr. Dickens, it was remarkable. Such control, such mastery in your performance.

The WOMEN swarm, DICKENS standing happily amongst them.

DICKENS
(hushed)
I am told these readings double sales.

LAUGHTER-

DICKENS eyes dart to NELLY, in waiting-

MARIA
It was quite brilliant, Mr Dickens.

DICKENS
It was?

FANNY
Absolutely.

DICKENS
Miss Frances. We have missed you.

FANNY
Not enough it seems.

NELLY flushes, FANNY squeezing NELLY with sisterly pride. DICKENS charmed by this, MRS TERNAN smiles, deflecting.

MRS TERNAN
Mrs Dickens is not here today?

DICKENS
No, not today.

MRS TERNAN

What a pity! To have missed it.
You have blown us all off course.
What a storm! It was as if we
were on the heath with Lear.

LAUGHTER.

DICKENS smiles, yet he looks to NELLY, eyes quietly searching.

DICKENS

It did not disappoint?

NELLY

Well-

DICKENS hesitates, latching on to NELLY's words, like a dog with a bone.

DICKENS

I do not like 'well'.

NELLY flushes, urged on by her giggling sisters.

MARIA

Nelly has read every chapter
twice.

NELLY

Yes but-

FANNY

Nelly, Mr Dickens wants to hear.

NELLY wavers, caught under DICKENS' watchful eager eye-

DICKENS

I am ready.

NELLY

...I may have read every chapter
twice but I didn't really hear
it..See it..Until now. Hearing
it..Hearing you-

DICKENS

Yes. Yes.

NELLY

I felt I was in the storm..I was
there... I was in it..I was on
the beach with Copperfield seeing
the body of his friend, drowned-
(visibly struggling)
It was unbearable-

NELLY moved, DICKENS touched by her emotion.

DICKENS

I am glad.

DICKENS delights in NELLY's obvious connection. MRS TERNAN seeing this.

COLLINS

(calling over)

Charles, come and talk to these gentlemen. I have assured them that your next novel will be your best. There is so much anticipation. They cannot wait- Nor can I!

DICKENS nods, stalling for time, aware of a DIGNITARY gesturing to him across the room.

DICKENS

Where will you play next?

NELLY

We are engaged to play in Doncaster for three weeks.

DICKENS

So far away.

MRS TERNAN

It is not Australia, Mr Dickens.

DICKENS

And what are you playing?

DICKENS his eyes still on NELLY-

NELLY

Two tragedies and a farce.

DICKENS

A farce!

NELLY

The Pet of the Petticoats.

DICKENS

A terrible title but-

DICKENS' smiles, making his goodbyes-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

..very good races Doncaster.

DICKENS already lost, almost smothered by the assembly of DIGNITARIES and ADMIRERS and JOURNALISTS waiting on his every word.

DICKENS looks back, watching the departing TERNAN FAMILY, eyes searching for-

NELLY has gone.

23

INT. GADS HILL. 1857. EVENING.

23

A dark, study, heavily lined with bookshelves. DICKENS sits at his desk, writing letters yet the sense of his mind elsewhere, distracted.

SUDDENLY a creak of a floorboard, DICKENS looks up-

DICKENS
(calling out)
Catherine-

The door opens, CATHERINE stands in the doorway-

CATHERINE
Yes?

DICKENS
Shall we sit together?

CATHERINE
If you wish.

DICKENS
No..If you would prefer not..

CATHERINE
I did not sleep well last night.
Perhaps I will go to bed now.

DICKENS sinks, a little-

DICKENS
Yes, of course yes.

CATHERINE makes to go-

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Collins has an idea for *Household Words*. A trip to the North. A Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices. Might just be a couple of inches in it.

CATHERINE
Where will you start?

DICKENS
(beat)
Doncaster.

CATHERINE nods, barely listening, moving on-

CATHERINE
Turn up the lamp. You cannot write in this light.

The door closes-

DICKENS sits alone, reading, staring down at the darkened page, mind clearly elsewhere.

23A **INT. BEDROOM. GADS HILL. KENT. 1857. DAY.**

23A

Over DICKENS leaving his dressing room as he moves towards the bedroom. He opens the door to the bedroom, surprising CATHERINE putting on her nightdress. Her naked back. She turns, caught, alarmed. A sense of her shock and embarrassment.

24 **EXT. RACECOURSE. DONCASTER. 1857. DAY.**

24

The SWELL of RACEGOERS breath held in anticipation and just visible amongst them-

NELLY, pretty in lilac bonnet and gloves, pressed against the wooden fence, waiting. Beside her MRS TERNAN, FANNY, MARIA, DICKENS and COLLINS close by.

The SOUND OF THUNDERING HORSE HOOVES galloping past building-

NELLY, DICKENS, COLLINS, MRS TERNAN, FANNY and MARIA all waving and cheering madly, eyes tracking the STEAMING GLOSSY FLANKS of the horses passing in a blur, racing towards a finishing line until-

MARIA

Nelly, it is yours. It is yours.

NELLY leaps with excitement, instinctively gripping the nearest hand, DICKENS'. DICKENS cheering with delight-.

CUT TO:

25 **EXT. RACECOURSE. DONCASTER. 1857. DAY.**

25

The SPILL of RACEGOERS across the racecourse, counting their winnings and lost in babbling conversation.

NELLY

Five shillings..Five shillings.

COLLINS tears up his betting slip in fury, MARIA and FANNY consoling him, taking his arm, either side.

COLLINS

It was fixed. It was fixed.

MRS TERNAN

I hope you are not a bad sport,
Mr Collins.

COLLINS

I'm very bad!

MRS TERNAN

Then you must win. Shall we bet
again?

COLLINS

Yes. Again.

LAUGHTER-

DICKENS and NELLY follow, MRS TERNAN close behind.

DICKENS

So what will you do with your
winnings, Nelly?

NELLY

I shall seek a good return on a
sensible investment.

NELLY smiles, teasing.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Or I shall spend it all at once!
Though I may spend half a
shilling on a copy of *Household
Words* to be sure the two
apprentices returned safely
from their lazy tour.

DICKENS

They did. Though they did not
want to go home.

NELLY

But what of their families?

DICKENS

They were of course missed but -

DICKENS eyes catch on hers, with restless fragile
intensity-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

...they did so enjoy being
away.

SUDDENLY COLLINS passes them, rounding behind DICKENS,
to hurry them on.

COLLINS
We have been rumbled.
(beat)
You've been rumbled, Charles.

COLLINS grips MRS TERNAN's arm, urging them forward.
NELLY and DICKENS hurry ahead.

RACEGOER
Mr Dickens...Mr Dickens..How
very unexpected?

DICKENS stops, resigned mid footfall, smiling
apologetically to NELLY, as the RACEGOER and FRIENDS swarm-

RACEGOER (CONT'D)
(to anyone)
Mr Charles Dickens, ladies and
gentlemen. In Doncaster!

A gathering Crowd, several RACEGOERS craning their necks to
see-

DICKENS
Thank you..Thank you.

NELLY looks on helpless, eyes darting to MARIA and
FANNY, giggling. DICKENS subsumed in handshakes and
delighted RACEGOERS. NELLY, looks on. DICKENS back at
NELLY, smiles apologetically. MRS TERNAN seeing this.

26 **INT. LANDING/ BEDROOM. PARK COTTAGE. LONDON. 1857.DAY.** 26

A peeling bedroom-

The BURST and LIFE of FANNY, NELLY and MARIA carrying cases,
newly returned home.

FANNY
Home!

27 **INT. BEDROOM. PARK COTTAGE. LONDON. 1857. DAY.** 27

Later -

Suitcases are dropped, hat boxes are dumped on the bed. The
slow unpacking and chaos of the nomadic life as NELLY, MARIA
and FANNY kneel shaking out dresses and pulling out shoes and
clothes from the chaos. FANNY absently sings to herself,
considering the sleeve of a dress, faded and frayed.

FANNY
This will not stretch to another
season. I cannot mend under the
sleeve again.

MARIA looks up from unpacking, reaching a hand out.

MARIA

The cuffs are still good and there
is lace on the collar we can still
save.

FANNY

You think?

CLOSE UP on FINGERS, considering delicate lace.

MARIA

(nods)
I'll unpick it.

FANNY smiles, her thanks, MARIA taking the dress, FANNY
resumes unpacking, her song underscores.

NELLY

Maria, also this hem..My stitching
is awful.

NELLY holds up her dress, MARIA takes it, smiles-

MARIA

I will..again.

NELLY

Thank you..thank you..Thank you..

MARIA's HAND gently brushing NELLY's cheek. The FALL of
NELLY's hair, lost in quiet focused sorting of clothes.

MRS TERNAN

(entering)
I am collecting washing.

NELLY holds up some dirty garments.

NELLY

Here..

MRS TERNAN looks down, having just picked up an armful of
dresses.

MRS TERNAN

(in passing)
Nelly-

Underneath a signed copy of *David Copperfield*. MRS TERNAN
picks it up, opening it.

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)

It is signed.

NELLY hurriedly goes to take it.

NELLY

A souvenir.

MRS TERNAN

It is to be treasured.

MRS TERNAN holds it out, FANNY looks up curious-

FANNY

Yes..Indeed.

FANNY smiles, NELLY nods, taking the book, pocketing it, a little self-conscious.

28 **EXT. DRIVE. GAD'S HILL.KENT. 1857. DAWN.** 28

A handsome house. Light illuminating some windows.

29 **INT. DRESSING ROOM. GADS HILL. KENT. 1857. DAWN.** 29

A darkened dressing room-

The SOUND of DICKENS urinating into the pot. He then goes over to a waiting basin. DICKENS hands cupping icy water, washing his face in the bowl. He stands, drying his face, reflection caught in the mirror, restless, half dressed-

CATHERINE OOV

(calling out)

Charles-

On DICKENS fingers fumbling in the dark, hurriedly buttoning up his shirt and reaching for his jacket.

30 **INT. BEDROOM. GADS HILL. KENT. 1858. DAWN.** 30

CATHERINE stirring from slumber, sits up peering through the gloomy morning light-

CHARLES, a shadowy figures stands in the doorway of the dressing room now almost dressed-

CATHERINE

Why are you up so early?

DICKENS

I must go to London.

CATHERINE

Now? But there will be no train.

DICKENS

Then I shall walk.

CATHERINE
It will take you all day.

DICKENS
Then it will take me all day.

DICKENS turns, his back to CATHERINE, resuming dressing.
CATHERINE eyes pricking with tears, looks away.

31 **EXT. FIELD. NEAR GADS HILL. LONDON. 1857. DAWN.** 31

DICKENS walking across the field in the dawn light. The mist hovering. Dew heavy on the tall grass-

Eyes focused, heart fixed towards London.

Gads Hill left far behind.

32 **INT. AUDITORIUM. HAYMARKET THEATRE. LONDON. 1857. NIGHT.** 32

Darkness-

SIR PETER.
*What! You rogue! Don't you ask the
girl's consent first?*

DICKENS face illuminated by stage light, dark eyes lost in quiet yet animated watching, captivated by NELLY on stage playing the part of Maria in *School for Scandal*-

NELLY/MARIA.
*For Shame, Charles, I protest Sir
Peter, there has not been
a word.*

FROM THE BACK OF THE AUDIENCE-

HECKLER
(shouting out)
BECAUSE WE CAN'T HEAR A WORD!

LAUGHTER-

DICKENS turns, furious.

SIR OLIVER.
*Well then the fewer the better, may
your love for each other never know
abatement.*

CUT TO:

NELLY on stage, ill at ease, but DICKENS is enraptured, oblivious, to the general GROANS and FIDGETING amongst the audience.

CHARLES

*No sanctuary near but love and you.
You can indeed each anxious fear
remove, for even Scandal dies if
you approve.*

AUDIENCE MEMBERS peer forward, whispering, on recognising DICKENS, yet DICKENS watches on, eyes only for NELLY, on stage.

CUT TO:

The final moments of the play, NELLY/MARIA, face rouged, caught mid scene, the black of the auditorium ahead of her.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

*"Bless'd were the fair like you;
her faults who stopp'd, and closed
her follies when the curtain
dropp'd!*

The HANDSOME LOVER turns to NELLY/ MARIA, carefully cupping her hand.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

*No more in vice or error to engage,
Or play the fool at large on life's
great stage."*

On DICKENS, listening intently-

The curtain falls.

DICKENS

BRAVO!

DICKENS, clutches the seating rail, in standing ovation.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

BRAVO! BRAVO!

The CURTAIN RISES-

NELLY's eyes silently searching, flushing on seeing, DICKENS lost in watching her.

33

INT. DRESSING ROOM/CORRIDOR. BACKSTAGE. THEATRE. LONDON. 1857. NIGHT. 33

DICKENS squeezed into NELLY's tiny dressing room, raising a toast to NELLY, surrounded by MRS TERNAN, FANNY, MARIA, and OTHERS-

DICKENS

One of the finest performances I
have ever seen. Sheridan would be
dancing in his grave.

Cheers. Laughter. The EBB and FLOW of WELL-WISHERS and ACTORS celebrating, DICKENS pressed against the wall, as he smiles, to let a PRETTY ACTRESS pass, a bouquet of flowers in hand, brushing his face.

MRS TERNAN

You were very good, Nelly, dearest.

MRS TERNAN, kisses her. FANNY close by.

NELLY

Really?

FANNY

There is such clarity in your performance, Nelly.

NELLY sinks a little, FANNY squeezes her hand, relenting.

MARIA

You looked so beautiful.

NELLY squeezes MARIA, spying DICKENS, the sense of impromptu party all around, strung between dressing room and corridor.

MRS TERNAN

Mr Dickens, why did you not warn us you were coming?

DICKENS

A last minute impulse.

BUCKSTONE

Mr Dickens-

MRS TERNAN goes off, lost in conversation with the manager MR BUCKSTONE, he shakes DICKENS hand with a flourish in passing.

DICKENS

My dear Buckstone-

MR BUCKSTONE

Always a pleasure to have you grace our theatre.

DICKENS

Thank you..Thank you..A wonderful night.

The HANDSOME ACTOR passes-

HANDSOME ACTOR

Miss Ellen, you were marvellous.

NELLY smiles, face aglow, squeezing the HANDSOME ACTOR's hand. DICKENS seeing this.

NELLY

Thank you, Mr Arnott.

DICKENS oddly nervous, smiles, hovering between staying and going, unsettling NELLY, the HANDSOME ACTOR moves away. All around the party in full swing, NELLY and DICKENS stand close by, wedged between dressing room door and corridor-

MRS TERNAN

And how is your writing Mr Dickens?

DICKENS

Ferocious. Up at seven; a cold bath before breakfast, and blaze away, until three o'clock. I fight not to be distracted.

DICKENS suddenly loses himself watching NELLY in conversation with the HANDSOME YOUNG ACTOR. She turns, seeing DICKENS-

NELLY

Won't you sit?

NELLY gestures to a chair close by-

DICKENS

No..I don't think..

NELLY's face falls, hurrying to shroud her disappointment.

NELLY

Of course...Yes..Yes..It is very late I am sure you must be tired.

DICKENS

So much to do I don't know whether my head is on or off-

DICKENS flushed blusters, watching as NELLY is effortlessly drawn away by the HANDSOME ACTOR along a corridor to a cluster of WAITING FRIENDS-

HANDSOME ACTOR

Nelly, you must meet my very good friends...

NELLY

Yes..Yes..I would be delighted to meet them.

DICKENS sips his drink, desperately trying not to follow NELLY as she smiles and laughs. MRS TERNAN hovers, eyes holding DICKENS'-

MRS TERNAN

She is much in demand.

The STILL of a pretty if peeling sitting room-
SUDDENLY the SOUND of a door opening, LAUGHTER-

MRS TERNAN OOV
Come through..come through-

A lamp is lit, casting its warm glow across the frivolous, makeshift sitting room, adorned with the artefacts of past performances, pieces of stage set, clearly now in use as furniture. MRS TERNAN smiles, greeting DICKENS caught in the flurry of FANNY, MARIA and NELLY as they unpeel coats and discard hats and rogue door hooks.

MRS TERNAN
Fanny, Maria, we must feed our guest. There is some cold meat in the larder. And a little bread and fruit.

DICKENS
Please.. Please do not trouble yourself.

MRS TERNAN
Nelly, a drink for Mr Dickens.

NELLY hurries off in search of wine and food.

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)
Sit here. It is the only seat in the house that does not sag if you shift in search of comfort.

NELLY, flushes, thrusting a glass of wine in DICKENS' hand, aware of his gaze travelling over the garish and rather threadbare fixtures and fittings-

DICKENS
Thank you. This is warm and charming-

NELLY
Do not lean too far back, Mr Dickens.

DICKENS lurches back, clutching the arm of the chair.

NELLY (CONT'D)
The arm has a habit of coming unattached.

LAUGHTER-

FANNY
(entering)
Ham and plums and some biscuits.

MARIA
And cheese..We have cheese.

MARIA smiles with delight, placing the cheese next to FANNY's board of food on the side.

DICKENS
Then I will never leave.

LAUGHTER-

DICKENS smiles, eyes holding on NELLY's as they fall on the food.

35

INT. SITTING ROOM. PARK COTTAGE. 1857. NIGHT.

35

LATER-

DICKENS, talking to a tired and lazy audience, on the edge of sleep-

MARIA
And then what did you say?

DICKENS
What I should have said was "*Mr Anderson though your Ugly Duckling has delighted, you have slept in this room for five weeks now. You must go home. "*

FANNY
But you did not?

DICKENS
I did not.

NELLY
Why didn't you?

DICKENS
It would have broken his heart. So instead I inscribed a volume of my latest work *From his friend and admirer Charles Dickens*. Though I should have added..*May you never outstay your welcome so long again."*

LAUGHTER-

DICKENS looks across at MARIA stifling a yawn. NELLY and FANNY following his gaze, lost in listening to him.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

And now it seems I have done the same.

MARIA stirs.

ALL

No..No..

They all make to stand-

DICKENS

I will thank you, ladies, for such a pleasurable night. Life is nothing without good company.

NELLY smiles, DICKENS smiles-

MRS TERNAN

Let me show you out.

36

INT. HALLWAY. PARK COTTAGE. ISLINGTON. 1857. NIGHT.

36

The soft glow of the lamp illuminating MRS TERNAN and DICKENS as she helps him on with his coat.

DICKENS

It is a very pretty cottage.

MRS TERNAN

If lacking in space.

MRS TERNAN hands DICKENS her coat.

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)

The rewards of our profession are rarely monetary. But I would have it no other way.

DICKENS

No one is useless in this world if they may lighten the burden. If I may be of assistance...

MRS TERNAN holds DICKENS look with direct gaze.

MRS TERNAN

(hushed)

My daughters are fine young women but I am anxious sometimes for their future.

(beat)

I cannot risk Nelly's reputation.

DICKEN hesitates, MRS TERNAN unwavering.

DICKENS

I hope nothing I could offer would
compromise her.

MRS TERNAN hesitates, looking up, just seeing NELLY, standing
in the doorway.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

So, good night.

37

EXT. STREET. NEAR GARRICK CLUB. LONDON. 1857. NIGHT.

37

A dimly lit street-

A YOUNG BOY pulling a cart, wheels turning on the cobbles.

DICKENS sidestepping him, quickening his pace, passing the
shadowy figures of LATE NIGHT REVELLERS, sensing footsteps
behind him-

YOUNG PROSTITUTE

Shilling a blow, Sir.

DICKENS hesitates, turns, a YOUNG PROSTITUTE[12 yrs]
loitering in the shadows-

DICKENS

I will give you five-

DICKENS fishes a shilling out of his coin-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

...if you go home safely tonight.

The YOUNG PROSTITUTE hesitates, reaching out, taking the
coins from him.

YOUNG PROSTITUTE

I can play house, Sir. Want me as
your wife, sir?

DICKENS hesitates, one hand reaching out, touching her face,
seeing she is no older than twelve.

DICKENS

Where is your mother?

The YOUNG PROSTITUTE laughs, ducking away. On DICKENS
watching, distraught and troubled, the bob of dark curls
disappearing down a dimly lit street. DICKENS turns walks
away, turning into-

DICKENS POV as he walks. He sees the faces of GRUBBY STREET CHILDREN and YOUNG PROSTITUTES face after face, caught in a labyrinth of alleyways.

DICKENS VO

Last Saturday I sat next to a gentleman at dinner and he asked me in some fury why it was that our city should help those who do not help themselves.

DICKENS keeps walking passing an almost hellish world of poverty and sickness, BABIES crying in YOUNG MOTHERS arms-

DICKENS VO (CONT'D)

By 'those' he meant the many fallen women that we see around us every day and their offspring, many who rely on this hospital today. I replied.

SCAB RIDDEN INFANTS staring blankly out of rundown doorways.

DICKENS VO (CONT'D)

The two grim nurses, poverty and sickness bring these children before you and preside over their births, rock their wretched cradles, nail down their little coffins, pile up the earth above their graves. Their unnatural deaths form one third of the annual deaths in this great town. "But what of God?" He piously replied. "What of him?" I asked.

An ATTENTIVE AUDIENCE of WEALTHY BUSINESSMEN and WIVES, BENEFACTORS, INTELLECTUALS and PATRONS.

Above reads a banner-

Prosperity to the Hospital for Sick Children-

DICKENS caught amidst the marble busts of prominent statesmen.

DICKENS

"I feel sure God looks leniently on all vice that proceeds from human tenderness and natural passion."

CLOSE ON NELLY shining with pride. Some way to the back MRS TERNAN, FANNY and MARIA looking on. JOHN stands a few inches behind, looking on.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
I hope we will too and give
generously tonight.

40

INT. FREEMASONS HALL. LONDON. 1857. EVENING.

40

NELLY, MRS TERNAN, MARIA and FANNY standing standing behind a table on which are silver collecting plates and a collecting box.

NELLY
Good night, Sir..Thank you.

They smiles at the SPILL of PEOPLE putting change and notes into the plates.

MRS TERNAN
Surely you can do better than that,
Sir?

MARIA
Five pounds, Nelly. Five
pounds.

DICKENS crossing the room-

DICKENS
Goodnight..Goodnight..Thank you.

DIGNITARIES and GUESTS draining from the room, heading home.

DICKENS (CONT'D)
Maria have you fleeced them?

DICKENS moving over to greet NELLY, MRS TERNAN, MARIA and FANNY lining up the donation boxes.

MARIA
With every ounce of my soul,
Mr Dickens.

FANNY
We can barely carry them.

DICKENS nods, oddly dishevelled, distracted tonight. He smiles at them all-

DICKENS

Thank you. Thank
You..Goodness..I did not
believe we would raise so much
money...Where does one begin?

DICKENS fingers lightly grazing the boxes, heavy with
money, lined up on a table.

NELLY

They will take some counting.

He looks at NELLY, her smile quietly disarming him.

DICKENS

Yes..Yes.

MRS TERNAN

Such an achievement.

DICKENS

We must celebrate.

NELLY

Yes..Yes..We must.

41 **INT. DRAWING ROOM. TAVISTOCK HOUSE. LONDON. 1857. EVENING.** 41

A wide, drawing room, some furniture covered in dust sheets-

DICKENS tentatively leading MRS TERNAN through the ghostly
darkened landscape of Tavistock House.

MRS TERNAN

You are moving in or out Mr
Dickens?

A dust sheet covering a grand piano and the occasional
chair just visible in another room.

DICKENS

I am thinking of letting it.

FANNY, NELLY and MARIA close behind, the collecting boxes
being carried by DICKENS valet, JOHN, lugging boxes that he
puts on the floor.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

My wife prefers to live outside
of the public glare. London
tires her and Gad's Hill is where
she likes to retreat with the
children.

NELLY takes in the silence, the endless emptiness, evident
in every room.

MRS TERNAN
Gad's Hill. Is that in
Rochester-

DICKENS
(nods)
It is close. Walking distance.

MRS TERNAN
Nelly was born in Rochester.

DICKENS laughs, delighted at the coincidence, looking to
NELLY.

DICKENS
I was schooled in Chatham.

NELLY
Yes but my earliest memories are of
Newcastle.

DICKENS
Newcastle I do not know so well.

FANNY and MARIA taking in the room. FANNY turns, seeing
DICKENS smiling at NELLY. MRS TERNAN peers through the
window, out into the murky darkness-

MRS TERNAN
Ah a garden.

A grand piano, covered in a dust sheet, NELLY pulls a corner
aside to reveal dusty keys. LIPS CLOSE to an ivory key, she
blows-

DICKENS
(leading her)
Would you like to see it?

MRS TERNAN laughs, DICKENS leading her out.

MRS TERNAN
(following him)
It is getting dark.

DICKENS
Come..Come. Let me show you.

DICKENS leads MRS TERNAN out, leaving FANNY, MARIA and NELLY.

MARIA
He always seems so alone.

FANNY
Yes.

NELLY presses down on a piano key, testing the note, caught on a repetitive middle C-

FANNY (CONT'D)
(hushed)
It is like a mausoleum.

On NELLY watching DICKENS leading MRS TERNAN around a darkened garden.

42

INT. DRAWING ROOM. TAVISTOCK HOUSE. LONDON. 1857. NIGHT

42

NELLY caught peering at DICKENS desk; meticulously laid out papers, manuscripts and pencils, sharpened and in a row.

MRS TERNAN OOV
(calling back)
Nelly-

MRS TERNAN, MARIA and FANNY preparing to leave, standing in a distant hallway. DICKENS hovers, considering the many boxes now lined up on the floor.

MRS TERNAN
We must leave you. Fanny has an audition in the morning and must rest her voice.

DICKENS
Yes of course yes.

MARIA
We have a wager on how much was collected. I think five hundred but Fanny thinks-

FANNY
More..More..

DICKENS smiles, making his goodbyes as they reach for gloves and coats, pulling them on as they head towards the door.

DICKENS
I will count them right away.
They must be banked tomorrow.

MRS TERNAN
You will be up all night.

DICKENS
I don't sleep well anyway.

NELLY

We could help you. Together it will
take us no time.

FANNY

You have rehearsal in the
morning, Nelly.

MRS TERNAN

Nelly and I will stay and help Mr
Dickens. If he does not object.

DICKENS

Well..No..I..thank you.

FANNY

Mama-

MRS TERNAN offers firm gaze, ushering FANNY and MARIA out.

MRS TERNAN

We shall not be late.

FANNY disappearing out into the dark night looks back at
NELLY, smiling reassuringly.

MARIA/ FANNY

Good night.

DICKENS

Good night.

The door closes-

SILENCE-

DICKENS stands awkward, hovering, unsure what comes
next.

NELLY

Where shall we count them?

DICKENS

Yes..Yes..Through here
(gesturing)
Yes, through here.

NELLY turns looking to MRS TERNAN but she ignores NELLY,
following DICKENS through.

A snaking line of coins piled into small pillars on a
table-

NELLY and DICKENS lost in counting facing one another. They whisper to one another, MRS TERNAN snoozes in a chair close by-

NELLY

Fourteen hundred and ninety
eight, fourteen hundred and ninety
nine..two shillings and tuppence.

NELLY finishes counting triumphant.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Nearly one thousand five
hundred pounds.

DICKENS

No?..Really..

They laugh. Triumphant.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

We are rich...

NELLY

Yes.

DICKENS

They will be delighted...Until
the next time.

DICKENS scoops up the money, easing it back into the boxes in piles.

NELLY

(sudden)

Do you like this life?

DICKENS

Well - it is not always of my own
making but-

NELLY waits. DICKENS silent, cutting himself off.

NELLY

I don't think I would. Being so
constantly on show, so constantly
watched.

DICKENS

I have my work. It is a
great foil. They try but
they cannot always find you
there.

NELLY

They?

DICKENS

The hawkers. The men who
need to make money. Who look
to trip you up. And then
there are the admirers.
Those who wish you to be
more than you can possibly
be.

NELLY

And what is that?

DICKENS

Good...I suppose.

DICKENS smiles, caught out, looking away.

44

INT. DRAWING ROOM. TAVISTOCK HOUSE. 1857. NIGHT.

44

Later - on MRS TERNAN still asleep.

Flickering candlelight-

NELLY and DICKENS sharing a picnic supper perched at a
cooks table. A half open bottle of wine, the remains
of a make shift supper.

CLOSE on DICKENS-

DICKENS

My father was sent to a
debtor's prison when I was
twelve. I worked in a blacking
factory thereafter, sealing
bottles, sticking labels.

(beat)

It was hateful.

NELLY

You were fond of your father?

DICKENS

He was my first audience. I
honed my comic lines on him.

DICKENS spoons the last mouthful of eggs, caught out.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

You are too good at this. I have
told you too much. You, now. You.

NELLY

No really..There is little to
tell..

(conceding)

My father - An actor. Son of a
Dublin grocer. Also in debt.

(MORE)

NELLY (CONT'D)

Also dead. When I was seven. In an asylum. Mother never talks about it. I had a brother. He died at 10 months. Though how a boy would have fit with three girls. We are as thick as thieves.

NELLY looks to MRS TERNAN.

NELLY (CONT'D)

She is devoted to us. Our life is unpredictable.

NELLY aware of DICKENS concentration on her.

DICKENS

You are-

DICKENS laughs, relishing NELLY.

NELLY

What?

DICKENS

You are so free.

NELLY

And you are not.

DICKENS

I dream sometimes that there is a place where no-one knows who I am, or asks me what I think, or even cares for my opinion. Somewhere..where I can just...live...heart beating...chest rising..Just breathe.

DICKENS flushes, deflects, topping up his glass. The mood suddenly sombre-

NELLY

It is late. She will sleep all night if we leave her.

NELLY peers through MRS TERNAN still asleep in a chair.

DICKENS

Of course. I will ask John to bring the carriage round-

DICKENS makes to go, suddenly something makes him stop.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Tell me a secret.

NELLY

What kind of secret?

DICKENS

Anything..Something..
Something you have never
told anyone or perhaps never
thought of telling.

NELLY

(beat)

My middle name is 'Lawless'.

(beat)

Now your turn. What is your
secret?

DICKENS

Ellen Lawless Ternan. That
is my secret.

They hold each others gaze. SUDDENLY beyond MRS TERNAN stirs,
the moment broken, her eyes opening.

45

EXT. HARBOUR. MARGATE. DAY. 1885

45

NELLY, stiff in bonnet and corset, walking across the sand,
BENHAM by her side. They have been walking in silence for
some time. The grey wash of sea beyond, lapping at their
boots as they walk, faces flushed, pressed to the wind.

NELLY

I like to search for faces amongst
the patterns in the sand.

BENHAM

And do you find them?

NELLY

Sometimes. Mostly monsters and
angels.

BENHAM smiles, NELLY smiles. The DRAG of a FISHING BOAT
crossing their paths. They navigate their way past the
FISHERMAN pulling the boat across the sand.

BENHAM

So I thought *Great Expectations*
might be a choice for our readings.
David Copperfield is of course a
contender but *Great Expectations*
wins out for me in the end.

NELLY

Very good.

BENHAM

Do you agree?

NELLY

It is a fine novel.

OTHER FISHERMAN and a FISHERWOMAN sit knotting nets. They walk on, BENHAM silent, her steady, calm companion, yet noting her distraction.

BENHAM

Mrs Wharton Robinson... Forgive me if I am intruding but...I see you are so often...distracted..There is some..As if a part of you is... absent. I do not wish to intrude. You talk I am sure to your husband-

NELLY

No-

A COUPLE pass, part of the ebb and flow of life, walking in another direction, NELLY nods, in brief greeting, wavering momentarily, waiting for them to pass.

BENHAM

Not all wives do..To confide in the person you love the most..Sometimes that is hard.

NELLY

George is a good man. A very good man.

BENHAM

Of course.

NELLY lost deep within herself.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

But you are troubled.

SILENCE-

BENHAM (CONT'D)

It comes and then it goes but it returns. I wish to help you...I hope I can be someone you can trust.

SILENCE-

NELLY

Really. I am quite well.

BENHAM

You are not.

NELLY

Please, Mr Benham...

BENHAM

I will listen without judgement.

NELLY turns, looks at BENHAM, the grey scene beyond.

46

INT. BEDROOM. PARK COTTAGE. 1857. DAWN.

46

Dawn-

NELLY waking listening to distant, muffled conversation. Reaching for her nightgown, NELLY pulls it across her shoulders, slipping out of bed. MARIA, sleeping by her side, barely stirs.

47

INT. CORRIDOR. PARK COTTAGE. 1857.DAWN.

47

NELLY's bare feet walking down the stairs. Beyond the door ajar, MRS TERNAN and FANNY in another room, locked in heated debate.

FANNY

She is barely 18.

MRS TERNAN

I have never had to concern myself with regard to you or Maria. There is always another tour for you and your younger sister..Mr. Buckstone has already enquired if Maria might be free for Pantomime. But Nelly...Nelly is different. I love her. I love her dearly but - her talent lies elsewhere. Charles Dickens is not merely some opportunist, some adventurer. I am thinking of what life will offer her. I am thinking of her future.

FANNY

But what future would that be, mother?

MRS TERNAN

Our profession is hard enough. You do not give it up. It gives you up.

MRS TERNAN suddenly stops mid sentence, seeing NELLY, standing in the doorway, hearing all.

48 INT. OUTSIDE TOILET. YARD. PARK COTTAGE. 1857. DAWN. 48

NELLY sits on the toilet, head sunk in her hand. Blotting her tears with a piece of ripped up news paper-

Footsteps-

NELLY furiously scrunches up the paper, wiping away her tears, ignoring the tap at the door.

NELLY
Go away Fanny.

49 EXT. YARD. PARK COTTAGE. LONDON. 1857. DAWN. 49

FANNY sinks down on a flower pot, outside the toilet door.

FANNY
I will stay here all day if I have
to.
 (beat)
Nelly-

50 INT. TOILET. YARD. PARK COTTAGE. 1857. DAWN. 50

NELLY, devastated-

NELLY
I am a terrible actress. It is
true. Please do not lie.

NELLY stands, her forehead against the cool of the door.

FANNY OOV
Nelly, you are the truest person I
know in life. But you are not an
actress.

NELLY closes her eyes stung, but oddly resigned.

NELLY
Did no one think of telling me?

FANNY OOV
Nelly-

NELLY
You have clearly discussed it. What
other arrangements have been made
which I do not know about?

FANNY OOV
It is only because we care so.

NELLY

I will not be bought or sold,
Fanny. Whatever it is...it is not
that.

NELLY fights back the last furious tears-

FANNY OOV

Do you love him?

NELLY's eyes open, her face betraying all-

NELLY

He is married-

51

EXT. YARD. PARK COTTAGE. LONDON. 1857. DAWN.

51

FANNY, hands pressed to the door, hesitating-

FANNY

That has not stopped him falling in
love with you.

SILENCE UNTIL-

The door slowly opens, NELLY, face stained with tears, peers
around. FANNY smiles, rubbing a blot of ink on NELLY's nose
with her thumb.

FANNY (CONT'D)

(eyeing inky nose)

You have the prime minster all over
your nose.

CLOSE UP ON NELLY, the pain of hearing this truth, yet
smiling with affection for her FANNY-

52

EXT. BEACH. MARGATE. KENT. 1885. DAY.

52

CLOSE UP ON NELLY the same look of pain- with BENHAM once
more on the beach, looking out at a YOUNG MAN and his SON
flying a kite far off-

NELLY

I was an actress.

BENHAM

An actress.

NELLY

Not a very good one.

(beat)

My husband has indulged my interest
in the theatre but he is ignorant
of my past.

NELLY looks to BENHAM, hovering on telling him.

NELLY (CONT'D)
It is hard to reconcile this with
life as the wife of a headmaster.
So I have hidden it.

A BOY far off with his FATHER in the rock pools.

NELLY (CONT'D)
I was not a child when I met Mr
Dickens. I was eighteen. George
believes I am considerably younger
than I am.

BENHAM stares, with sudden comprehension. NELLY stops. The
cliffs fierce and towering behind them. The ocean in front.

NELLY (CONT'D)
He knows nothing of the depth of my
affection..
(beat)
My former affection for Mr Dickens.

BENHAM
I see.

BENHAM hesitates, a seeping realisation evident in his eyes.

BENHAM (CONT'D)
You will never tell your husband.

She looks out at the grey churning sea.

NELLY
He must never know. Never.

BENHAM, listening intently, yet giving nothing away. She
turns, looks at him.

NELLY (CONT'D)
Mr Benham, I have such remorse.

53

EXT. GARDEN. AMPHILL SQUARE. CAMDEN. 1858. DAY.

53

Spring-

NELLY, eyes closed, surrounded by flowers, a birthday
cake held in front of her-

MARIA
Open your eyes.

MARIA, FANNY, MRS TERNAN, the FLIGHTY ACTRESS and
OTHERS Cheers as NELLY blows out the candles. A
beautiful house just visible beyond-

MRS TERNAN
Happy Birthday, darling.

ALL
Happy birthday..Happy Birthday.

NELLY
Maria, is it raisin?

MARIA smiles, NELLY smothers her in kisses, excited and excitable, twirling across the grass.

A distant rap at the door-

NELLY absorbed, opening presents. A few moments later a MAID appears.

MAID
(to NELLY)
Miss Ellen, Mrs Dickens to see you.

NELLY's face falls, the noise of the party hushes to a still-

FANNY and MARIA look to one another. MRS TERNAN goes to greet her, NELLY gently stops her. NELLY heads inside leaving behind the chaotic party, lazy on the grass-

54

INT. PARLOUR. AMPHILL SQUARE. 1858. DAY.

54

CATHERINE DICKENS standing in the parlour, oddly fragile, rouge dotting her pale cheeks. She turns on seeing NELLY standing in the doorway.

CATHERINE
I thought this was the right house...

NELLY enters, plumping a cushion on a seat, and offering it in gesture.

NELLY
Please. Won't you sit down?

CATHERINE, eyes silently tracing over the pretty sitting room, eyes alighting on a series of tiny prints of costumes hung on the wall.

CATHERINE
I had heard he had found you somewhere close on the square-

CATHERINE peers closer.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
(peering closer)
Such attention to detail.

NELLY follows CATHERINE's gaze-

NELLY
It is all just paste and
glass.

Outside, distant whoops and laughter-

NELLY (CONT'D)
You find us in disarray.

NELLY nods towards half packed cases.

NELLY (CONT'D)
My mother and sister Frances
are to go to Italy. My sister
is to be a governess to the
Trollope family.

CATHERINE
Really?

NELLY
Mr Dickens has kindly made the
introduction. He has been more
than charitable to my family.

CATHERINE nods, considering NELLY, with cool
resignation.

CATHERINE
My husband has always been very
generous.

CATHERINE holds out a small velvet box to NELLY-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
Happy Birthday Miss Ternan.

NELLY takes it, with surprise, flushing.

A game of musical chairs or the like just visible
playing out in the garden-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
Won't you open it?

NELLY hesitates, looking down at the box in her hand,
tentatively fingering the paper.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
It is a gift from Charles.
It was mistakenly delivered
to me.

NELLY, inwardly reeling, carefully unpeels the paper, tearing it a little-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
The jewellers naturally
believing-

Opening it, her breath catches on seeing-

A beautiful bracelet, embedded with deep red Rubies-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
Charles was eager that I ensure
it found its way to its
rightful recipient.

NELLY, catches on this, embarrassed by such obvious cruelty from DICKENS-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
He is fond of you.

NELLY flushes-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
And you of him?

NELLY hesitates-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
That is a silly question. He
is Mr Charles Dickens..Even
in those early years
together even I could not
fail to be impressed. But
you will find, you must
share him with his public.
They will be the constant
and in truth you will never
absolutely know which one he
loves the most. You or them.
I do not believe he knows
himself. But they will not
give him up, of that you can
be sure, Miss Ternan. They
will love him beyond the
grave.

(close to)
Will you love him as long?
(beat)
I am interrupting your
party.

CATHERINE, making to stand, nods, holding NELLY with quiet passive scrutiny.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Charley said you were not that pretty. I could not remember but I see now my son was being kind to me.

NELLY

I am really far too old for parties. There is not a soul under twenty in attendance.

CATHERINE

Well Charles should be here soon and he is nothing if not youthful.

CATHERINE makes to go-

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

I wish you a very happy birthday.

Far off the party in full swing.

55

EXT. GARDEN. AMPHILL SQUARE. 1958. DUSK.

55

The aftermath of the party, drained of GUESTS, the TERNAN family seated, sober after CATHERINE's visit-

NELLY, the ruby bracelet resting between her fingers, MARIA and FANNY seated close by, unsettled. MARIA sketches, letting the pencil suddenly still in her hand.-

SUDDENLY COLLINS and DICKENS spill through the back gate moving into the house. DICKENS tracing his fingers along a papered wall, peering at it with delight.

*
*
*

DICKENS

New paper on the wall?

*
*

MRS TERNAN

Yes. Do you like it?

*
*

DICKENS

Very much..very much..You have made it home.

*
*
*

MRS TERNAN

We have tried. It is a most beautiful house.

*
*
*

DICKENS

Isn't it?

*
*

MRS TERNAN

Thank you.

*
*

DICKENS beams, COLLINS by his side, sensing all is not quite right. *

COLLINS
And the chairs? New? *

MRS TERNAN
Yes-? *

COLLINS
We are too late? Are we too late? *

NELLY snaps the box shut, hurrying to pocket it.

MRS TERNAN
You have missed the cake.

COLLINS snatches the last piece of cake off a table, positioned under a tree.

DICKENS
No, say it is not so. Have we missed all the fun?

DICKENS standing with COLLINS both dressed in party hats and beaming, a tension puncturing their fun.

MRS TERNAN
We had hoped you would provide it.

COLLINS

There is only one thing for it.
We will have to whisk her away.

NELLY scoops up a stray ribbon, wrapping it around her finger, busying herself as she walks back to the house, passing DICKENS. He gently stops her, a hand on her arm, quizzical as she refuses to meet his gaze.

DICKENS

Say you will come?

On NELLY, caught in the conflict of feelings. MRS TERNAN, MARIA and FANNY looking on.

56 **EXT. STREET. LONDON. 1858. EVENING.**

56

NELLY squeezed between DICKENS and COLLINS, being quietly led-

NELLY

Where are we going?

DICKENS smiles, heady and happy, NELLY concedes, a growing fury bubbling underneath.

DICKENS

You shall see.

57 **INT. HALLWAY. COLLINS HOUSE. LONDON. 1858. NIGHT.**

57

COLLINS pulling off his coat, NELLY and DICKENS close behind, showing them in-

COLLINS

Come through..Come through.

NELLY looks to DICKENS confused.

A pair of ladies shoes-

A ladies coat-

Several hats resting on a hat stand. NELLY's eyes grazing over them with bemused curiosity-

58 **INT. DRAWING ROOM. COLLINS HOUSE. LONDON. 1858. NIGHT.**

58

A pretty drawing room-

CAROLINE GRAVES [late 20's] handsome and flushed, yet in delicate informal negligee, already coming through, greeting DICKENS warmly-

CAROLINE GRAVES
Wilkie, why did you not say?

COLLINS kisses CAROLINE, brief yet betraying an intimacy, that unsettles NELLY.

COLLINS
We are celebrating a very special birthday.

DICKENS
Caroline may I present Miss Ellen Ternan.

COLLINS
It is her birthday today!

CAROLINE greets NELLY warmly, hands cupping hers in greeting-

CAROLINE GRAVES
Happy Birthday. I have heard only good things.

NELLY looks to DICKENS, not quite comprehending. DICKENS quickly looks away, deflects, peering at a picture on the wall.

DICKENS
Caroline a new painting? Quite slap up. Is the Butler about-?

COLLINS
Yes..Yes..She is about..Here she is..
(moving off)
I shall find wine!

HARRIET GRAVES, CAROLINE's daughter [5 yrs] comes rushing in, in night gown-

DICKENS
My but she squeals-

DICKENS scoops HARRIET up, swinging her in his arms-

CAROLINE GRAVES
May I take your wrap and gloves?

NELLY
Thank you. But I prefer to keep them on.

CAROLINE, swallows silent affront, gesturing for NELLY to sit-

NELLY (CONT'D)
What a lovely home.

CAROLINE GRAVES
Yes..Yes..Wilkie found it..

59

INT. DRAWING ROOM. COLLINS' HOUSE. LONDON. 1858. NIGHT.

59

Distant laughter and screams-

CAROLINE and NELLY sit alone, in awkward silence.
CHARLES, COLLINS and HARRIET lost somewhere deep within
the house.

CAROLINE GRAVES
Charles christened her 'the
butler' on their first meeting.

Distant squeals, DICKENS just audible, lost in raucous
game.

NELLY
It is all a game with him.
(beat)
She is very dear.

NELLY looks away, quietly wanting to put distance
between her and CAROLINE.

CAROLINE GRAVES
Does this offend you Miss
Ternan?
(silence)
Wilkie despises marriage and as
a widow it suits me well. We
live very happily.
(silence)
But you do disapprove I see. We
have fallen in love with men of
standing, Miss Ternan-

NELLY
I am not in love.

Squeals of delight-

HARRIET rushing in DICKENS fast on her tail, collapsing
into a heap on a faded chaise-

NELLY (CONT'D)
(sudden)
It is late. Really...It is too
too late. I must leave. Please
excuse me Miss Graves.

DICKENS sobering, hearing the urgency in NELLY's voice-

DICKENS

Nelly-?

60

INT. CARRIAGE. NEAR AMPHILL SQUARE. LONDON. 1858. NIGHT

60

NELLY silent, DICKENS close by her side-

DICKENS

And still she is silent-

NELLY reaches out to open the carriage door, drawing to a still. DICKENS reaches out for NELLY, stiffening on his touch-

NELLY

Mr Buckstone has offered me *The World and The Stage*. It has a ridiculous plot. A titled lady saved from debt by her sister, an actress.

DICKENS

But a very amusing final scene.

NELLY

It was *you* that secured me the role.

DICKENS hesitates, NELLY sees in his silence, that it was.

NELLY (CONT'D)

And did you mean to deliberately humiliate me tonight?

DICKENS

You did not like Miss Graves?

NELLY

You expect me to associate with a woman living so openly with Mr Collins outside of marriage? Entertaining guests as if she were-

DICKENS

Nelly-

NELLY

I do not wish to appear ungrateful. You have been generous, some might say too generous to my family. But I did not realise that I was to be your whore.

DICKENS, floundering-

61

EXT. FRONT STEP. AMPHILL SQUARE. 1858. NIGHT.

61

DICKENS hurries after NELLY, fumbling in her clutchbag.

DICKENS

Nelly-

NELLY, tear stained and bereft, holds out the bracelet box to DICKENS-

SILENCE-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

It was a mistake-

DICKENS reluctantly takes the box. NELLY searches in her bag for her key.

NELLY

Did you send Catherine to me?

DICKENS

Yes.

NELLY

How could you be so cruel to her?

DICKENS wavers, yet remains silent.

NELLY (CONT'D)

She is the mother of your children.

DICKENS

And for that I will always be grateful but I do not love her.

NELLY

But why-?

NELLY's eyes search with genuine despair.

DICKENS

She understands nothing. She sees nothing. I thought if she saw you she would understand that I have nothing with her. I wanted her to see *it*.

DICKENS, consumed by a fury, NELLY shocked, by the volcanic passion.

NELLY

It? What is it, Charles?
What is it that we are?
Would you call us friends?
Perhaps we are friends. We
listen to one another as if
we were. You have been
kind..so kind to my
family..A friend...And yet
you do not feel like a
friend.

DICKENS stills her hands, cupping her fingers clasping
the key.

NELLY (CONT'D)

And when your wife asked
me...when she asked me if I was
fond of you... I could not
honestly reply. I wanted to say
'No' -

A POLICE OFFICER passing, drawn by the noise.

POLICE OFFICER

Can I be of assistance Sir?

DICKENS offers a half smile of reassurance to the POLICE
OFFICER.

POLICE OFFICER (CONT'D)

Is this young lady troubling
you, Sir?

DICKENS

No..No..Thank you..She is not
troubling me at all. All is
well.

The POLICE OFFICER nods, moving on-

They stand in silence by the door, DICKENS' hand still
resting on NELLY, the key in the lock.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

May I come in?
(silence)
Nelly-?

DICKENS and NELLY sit in silence, across the room from
one another, NELLY's quiet fury sobered now. Yet
neither able to make a move. A lamp lit low the only
light.

A vein in DICKENS' temple pulsing, lost in some deep internal conflict which he cannot speak of, a deep inner consultation of the self until-

The PRESS of a floorboard overhead. They both look up, hearts catching in their chests. A cough. MRS TERNAN rolling over in bed.

The house once more falls silent.

DICKENS

It is late.

NELLY nods, makes to stand. DICKENS stands. They look at one another, NELLY makes to show him out. At once he catches her hand, leaning into her, his forehead pressed to hers. NELLY hesitant, sees the despair flickering, in DICKENS face.

NELLY's eyes meet his. They stand, close, lips not yet meeting, breath warm, held in one another's gaze, lost in silent communion until-

DICKENS leans into NELLY, head bowed, his forehead close to her cheek, his body almost buckling. NELLY eases her arms around him, holding him in almost rocking embrace. His fingers intertwine with hers-

CLOSE UP ON their hands, intertwined, tentatively exploring, finding one another in these tiny flickering moments of silent physical connection.

On NELLY, CLOSE UP, in her face all the conflicting emotions, their lips almost meeting, the barest whisper of a kiss.

They stand, entwined and silent-

63 **INT. BEDROOM. GADS HILL. KENT. 1858. DAY.**

63

DICKENS standing with a CARPENTER who is putting shelving and a partition between the dressing room and CATHERINE and DICKENS bedroom. He turns, CATHERINE staring at him, he looks at her with quiet, remorseless gaze.

63A **EXT. HEATH. LONDON. 1858. DAY.**

63A

The crown of a hill, DICKENS just visible head,, NELLY hurrying to keep up, they are lost in conversation. We are behind them.

DICKENS

...I would walk from the Aldwych to
Camden to Highgate then back to
Westminster and then on to
Millbank.

NELLY
You have London in your blood.

DICKENS
Alright?

NELLY nods, breathless yet exhilarated.

NELLY
Yes. Yes-

DICKENS
I walk at quite a pace.

Their feet walking on.

64 **INT. BEACH. MARGATE. KENT. 1885. DAY.**

64

NELLY walking, boots sinking in the sand-

A tiny figure etched across the sand, a dot amidst the vastness of the landscape.

65 **INT. CARRIAGE. TRAIN. NEAR STAPLEHURST. KENT. DAY. 1865.**

65

The TEARING STEADY RHYTHM OF TRAIN WHEELS AGAINST STEEL AND TRACK-

The STREAK of countryside, FLEETING and ABSTRACTED, a BLUR of light and colour beyond.

Then just visible in the glass, NELLY's reflection indistinct yet rippling in the glass-

A SHADOWY FIGURE OF A MAN CAUGHT IN THE GLASS OPPOSITE HER.

66 **EXT. PATH. HAMPSTEAD HEATH. LONDON. 1858. DAY.**

66

Dawn-

NELLY and DICKENS just visible walking through the early morning fog, lost in conversation. NELLY strides ahead, turning, holding out a hand pulling him up the hill-

SUDDENLY-

CHARLEY
Father-

CHARLEY DICKENS, books in hand, stops in surprise, eyes falling briefly on NELLY, with quiet recognition.

DICKENS
Charley, what are you doing here?

CHARLEY

I walk this way, if I have taken
the earlier train-

DICKENS

You remember Miss Ternan-?

CHARLEY nods to NELLY in greeting, stiffening a little.

CHARLEY

Of course.

NELLY

Charley, how are you? You look
well.

CHARLEY

I am.

DICKENS

Charley is working in the city.

NELLY

How very clever.

CHARLEY

Not really. A friend of
father's.

NELLY

You are well?

CHARLEY

Quite well. Thank you Miss
Ternan.

NELLY

I still have the glove.

NELLY holds up her gloved hands with a smile.

NELLY (CONT'D)

...which you rescued for me. I
would have been most unhappy to
have lost it. They are my
favourite pair.

CHARLEY

I am sure you would have found
another. Perhaps not of equal
colour or quality but easy enough
to pick up-

NELLY stung, DICKENS fury evident in his face. NELLY
deflects, saving face-

NELLY

We were about to take breakfast.
Will you join us?

CHARLEY

Thank you. I am already late.

CHARLEY raises his hat to NELLY, moving swiftly on.
Suddenly he stops-

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

Father.

(beat)

Will we see you at home?

DICKENS silent. CHARLEY continues his journey along the path. DICKENS and NELLY together, yet oddly separate.

67

EXT. GARDEN. GADS HILL. 1858. DAY.

67

A beautiful summers day-

DICKENS family enjoy a garden party, playing mad three legged races on the lawn, orchestrated by DICKENS, who stands caught between reading a newspaper and watching the race.

DICKENS

Faster Plorn. Faster. You keep
letting everyone else win. The
extra leg is there to add to your
speed.

CATHERINE sits close by drinking tea. GEORGINA seated close by.

DICKENS clutches a newspaper in his hand which he slams down infuriated.

CATHERINE

You could not keep it quiet
forever, Charles.

CATHERINE pours herself some tea, looking at DICKENS with distracted concern.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

No matter. You must deny it.

GEORGINA

Rumour can always be denied.
We will host Christmas here.
Invite everyone we know. Do not
worry.

CATHERINE

And then you must stop this.

DICKENS stiffens.

DICKENS

But what if I do not want to?

CATHERINE

Don't be foolish. You cannot keep her a secret.

Hiding her hurt, CATHERINE withdraws her hand, caught between affection and furious despair. He turns holding her look with direct intent.

DICKENS

Yes I can.

68

INT.DRAWING ROOM GADS HILL. KENT. 1858. DAY.

68

The squeak of tin wheels-

CATHERINE VO

I can't read it. Will you read it.

Through a door, PLORN pushing a toy train along the floor, looks up, watching-

CHARLEY takes a copy of a newspaper from CATHERINE who sits silent and stiff on a chair. He silently braces himself, reading aloud.

CHARLEY

There is some domestic trouble of mine, long standing, on which I will make no further remark it being of a sacredly private nature. However-

CATHERINE turns, a look of shocked despair flickering across her face as she sees PLORN peering through the doorway.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

..it has lately been brought to an arrangement, which involves no anger or ill-will of any kind. My wife Catherine and I have decided to separate.

The headline on the newspaper now clear -

CHARLES DICKENS SEPARATES FROM WIFE.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

The whole origin, progress and surrounding circumstances have been throughout, within the knowledge of my children.

The SQUEAK SQUEAK of the tin train just audible as he wheels it away, disappearing along a distant corridor.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

It is amicably composed, and its details have but to be forgotten by those concerned in it.

69

EXT. GARDEN. AMPHILL SQUARE. 1858. DAY.

69

NELLY knelt, repotting plants. Looking up to see MARIA, on the approach, pulling off her bonnet and hat en route, holding up a newspaper

CHARLEY VO

I most solemnly declare that all the lately whispered rumors touching upon my association with a certain young lady are abominably false. Upon my soul and honour there is no-one on earth more virtuous and spotless than this young creature.

NELLY wipes down earthy hands, taking the offered paper, reading with shock.

70

INT. SMOKING ROOM. GARRICK CLUB. 1858. DAY.

70

Through a haze of cigar smoke-

CHARLEY VO

And whosoever says otherwise after this denial, will lie as willfully and as foully as it is possible for any false witness to lie, before Heaven and Earth.

A FAT GENTLEMAN sits reading the newspaper, the details of DICKENS separation spilling out-

Several other GENTLEMAN sunk in Chesterfields, looking up from the same newspaper, falling into comment-

DICKENS passes, cigar in hand, nodding in stiff greeting-

The GENTLEMEN resume their reading-

DICKENS moving silently on.

71 INT. DRAWING ROOM. GADS HILL. 1858. DAY.

71

CATHERINE hands sunk in her lap weeping.

CHARLEY stands, bitterly hurt and wretched, hovering between consoling CATHERINE and screaming in rage.

GEORGINA stands in a doorway, looking on.

71A INT. DRAWING ROOM. AMPHILL SQUARE. LONDON. 1958. DAY.

71A

CLOSE on NELLY with MRS TERNAN-

MRS TERNAN

He has tried to protect you.

NELLY

But yet I am humiliated.

MRS TERNAN

There is nothing to deny.

NELLY

No.

The SILENCE hangs-

MRS TERNAN

What else could he do?

NELLY

Yes.

MRS TERNAN

He is an honourable man.

NELLY

He is.

MRS TERNAN

And you are-

NELLY

Mama-

MRS TERNAN

The most beautiful, wonderful, clever young woman.

NELLY

But what am I do do with these things. He cannot marry me.

MRS TERNAN

(beat)

No. But what is marriage?

(MORE)

Blue Revisions dated 11th June 2012 81A.

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)

I have been married and it was at
times, the loneliest place, Nelly.

(MORE)

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)
Do not think that it will offer you
anymore than you already have.

They hover on the edge-

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)
I have witnessed some of the
strongest friendships, some of the
most lasting unions between men and
women who were never married. I
have envied them.

NELLY
(close to MRS TERNAN)
What do I do?

MRS TERNAN's hand gently smoothing back a stray lock of
NELLY's hair.

MRS TERNAN
Fanny and I leave for Italy at the
end of the month. Come with us if
you wish. I will book you a
passage. It is easily done.

NELLY softens, leaning her cheek into MRS TERNAN's hand,
letting her be comforted.

MRS TERNAN (CONT'D)
This life is precarious. We must
take our chances when we can.

MRS TERNAN moving on, leaving NELLY alone.

72 **INT. HALLWAY. TAVISTOCK HOUSE 1858. DAY.** 72

COLLINS, clutching a copy of *The Times*, hurrying upstairs.

73 **INT. DRAWING ROOM. TAVISTOCK HOUSE. 1858. DAY.** 73

DICKENS bent over a desk, writing-

COLLINS
Have you gone completely mad?

COLLINS, clutching a newspaper, steady on the approach.

COLLINS (CONT'D)
The *Times* for God sake.
Tell me you have spoken to
Catherine first?

SILENCE-

COLLINS (CONT'D)

Christ, Charles. What were you thinking of?

COLLINS lost in fury, pacing the room. DICKENS at his desk.

DICKENS

Catherine is the only person I have ever known with whom I can find no common interest. I am impulsive. I claim no immunity from blame. But how, Wilkie? How does one stay married to someone one no longer loves?

COLLINS

With difficulty. I can see there is no love, but there is a cruelty here.

DICKENS

What cruelty? Surely to continue is cruel, Wilkie. To Catherine? An end is an end.

COLLINS

You've stirred a hive of bees, Charles. You know how this works. You make comment. They print. Then twist. Silence is surely preferable.

DICKENS

Is that what they would prefer? Silence..Yes..Then they will have silence.

74 **EXT. HEATH. LONDON. 1858. DAY.**

74

DICKENS walking across the heath, closed within himself. A MAN strides past, looks to acknowledge him. DICKENS, keeps walking, head down, silent.

75 **INT/EXT. GADS HILL. 1858. NIGHT.**

75

CHARLEY standing at a window, watching with concern, DICKENS through the window in the backyard, face glowing illuminated by a huge bonfire, stoked with letters and bundles of papers which DICKENS hurls with some speed and fury into the towering pyre.

He stands, exhausted, yet focused on the task in hand, as he reaches for a pile of papers, flicking through them, rejecting them one by one as these too go into the fire, the flames illuminating the dark night.

75A INT. DRAWING ROOM. AMPHILL SQUARE. LONDON. 1958. DAY. 75A

NELLY alone, standing by the window the bracelet in her hand, lost in troubled thought. She absently weaves it through her fingers, the rubies glinting

76 INT. DRAWING ROOM. COLLINS HOUSE. LONDON. 1858. EVENING. 76

COLLINS sunk in a chair as NELLY paces the room, clearly distraught-

COLLINS

He can never divorce Catherine,
Nelly, you must know that.

COLLINS grips her hands, gentle, reassuring.

COLLINS (CONT'D)

He has burnt all his letters. He
has even asked me to burn all our
correspondence.

NELLY

There is an insanity to his
behaviour-

COLLINS

Charles is many things but he is
not insane. He is distraught.

NELLY

And I am not?

COLLINS

You have a choice. You may
distance yourself from him. Find
a new life. A different life.

NELLY stops, catching on this.

NELLY

What different life? What is there
for me?

NELLY looks up just seeing CAROLINE passing a doorway, her eyes briefly grazing over NELLY as she leads BUTLER to bed.

COLLINS

He is a good man *trying* to be a
good man. But he is a great man.
You see him, Nelly. I watch you
together. You see him and he sees
you.

(close to)

What more does one want in life?

DISTANT LAUGHTER, CAROLINE and BUTLER lost in some playful conversation-

CAROLINE
(calling down)
Wilkie-

WILKIE with a half smile-

COLLINS
Coming.
(close to)
We have to break these
conventions. Smash 'em up. We
are the pioneers.

NELLY
Pioneers? You men - you live
your lives while it is we who
have to wait. You see a freedom
which I don't see.

COLLINS, at a loss-

COLLINS
(exiting)
The Butler will not sleep if I do
not read to her.

NELLY nods, alone in the quiet domesticity of COLLINS' house. She hesitates, three pairs of shoes, COLLINS', CAROLINE's and BUTLER's just visible by the door.

The CREAK of FLOORBOARDS-

NELLY looks up-

FOOTSTEPS walking over head.

SCENE 77 moved now SCENE 71A

77 OMITTED 77

78 **INT. TAVISTOCK HOUSE. SQUARE. LONDON. 1858. DUSK.** 78

NELLY passes her coat to JOHN, he takes it closing the door behind him leaving NELLY. She stops on hearing the murmur of DICKENS voice, clearly aloud to himself. She walks finding DICKENS seated at his desk.

DICKENS
You are here.

NELLY nods, pulling off the last of her things.

NELLY

My name is whispered with yours
and yet I have nothing.

DICKENS takes her by the hands, leading her over towards a waiting chair.

DICKENS

Sit down.

DICKENS hovers, pours her a glass of water.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Have a glass of water.

NELLY quizzical, takes the offered glass, drinks.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

I do not regret it-

NELLY

Charles-

DICKENS

I have broken something that needed
breaking. I have finished it.

NELLY

Yes it is finished.

DICKENS

No, the book..the book.

NELLY hesitates, DICKENS picks up a sheaf of inky papers, the last chapter of Great Expectations, it's title just visible on the front page. He hands them to her.

NELLY

Yes, I see.

DICKENS nods, takes a seat across from her.

DICKENS

(tentatively offering up)
Will you read this last part?

NELLY wavers, takes it. She opens, reads. She looks up, he's watching her. She looks back resumes reading.

Time has passed-

NELLY looks up, the pages clutched in her hands. She is moved, yet lost for words, DICKENS watchful, with anxious flickering gaze.

DICKENS

You do not like it?

NELLY

No. I like it. I like it very much.

DICKENS smiles, relieved, stands, at last able to breath.

DICKENS

Wilkie thinks I should change the ending.

NELLY

No..No. You must not..To bring Estella and Pip together at the end but not to unite them.

DICKENS

She is changed. That is enough.

NELLY

Yes..It is a sad ending but Estella finds her heart, an understanding at last...

DICKENS

Exactly.

NELLY

At times, often Pip is not heroic-

DICKENS

Yes..He is filled with the ambitions, the vanities, the flaws in all of us-

DICKENS and NELLY's eyes connect, a sense of total understanding between them, he smiles.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

I know what I have done. But to stay.. To stay as it was. I could not..I cannot..When in my head..My heart-

NELLY moved, DICKENS searching back through the sheaves of manuscript.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Here..Here..I wrote this..an earlier chapter.

(reading

*You are part of my existence,
part of myself.*

NELLY

Yes I remember.

DICKENS nods, spurred on, continuing to read.

DICKENS

*You have been in every line I
have ever read. You have been in
every prospect I have ever seen
since- on the river, on the sails
of the ships, on the marshes, in
the clouds, in the light, in the
darkness, in the wind, in the
woods, in the sea, in the
streets. You have been the
embodiment of every graceful
fancy that my mind has ever
become acquainted with-*

DICKENS stands, raw and open to NELLY-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

*To the last hour of my life, you
cannot choose but remain part of my
character, part of the little good
in me, part of the evil.*

NELLY moved-

NELLY

Let us go away.

80

EXT. FIELD. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.

80

EXTREME CLOSE UP ON NELLY's bare feet, navigating over pebbles in a stream.

SUDDENLY by her side, DICKENS' heavy boots-

DICKENS HANDS reaching over, guiding her across the stream.

Beyond a field, on a slight incline, DICKENS leading her.

80AA

INT. BEDROOM. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.

80AA

On NELLY, her face flickering with emotions. The shadow of DICKENS, the shape of him, just out of view-

SUDDENLY his FINGERS intertwine with hers, their palms flat together, clenched and then released as DICKENS comes-

DICKENS, just a shadow, never seen, just a sense of him sinking down next to her, rolling onto his back. NELLY's face relaxes, her head turns a little, lost in the flicking seconds of release after love making.

80A **INT. BEDROOM. FRANCE. 1865. DUSK.**

80A

CLOSE on DICKENS, his reflection in a mirror, distracted, his face mostly in shadow. One eye caught by the light. Beyond him in the reflection, NELLY in bed, staring at him. A sense of the aftermath of love making - not perfect, but somehow binding them.

DICKENS
(almost to self)
You are my magic circle of one.

81 **EXT. FIELD. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.**

81

The SCRATCH of DICKEN's quill, ink blotting his fingers.

He sits under the shade of trees, writing in a notebook.

NELLY sits across from him, revealing she is now heavily pregnant. The remains of a simple picnic on a cloth close by; a flagon of wine, the last few crumbs of bread and cheese.

DICKENS looks up from writing, sensing-

NELLY watching him, her hands on her dress, now clearly pregnant. SUDDENLY she looks down, the flicker of something, looks up, smiles, sharing this with him.

82 **EXT. FIELD. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.**

82

CLOSE UP on ripe apricots, gripped in a cloth in DICKENS WIDE HANDS as he walks. He gently tips them on the picnic cloth-

NELLY looks up, with surprise, happy. She reaches for his hands, his fingers blotted with ink. She attempts to wipe the ink away, to no avail.

83 **EXT. FIELD. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.**

83

Late afternoon-

The stooped frame of an ELDERLY MAN walking towards DICKENS and NELLY sunk in the grass-

ELDERLY MAN

Monsieur Tringham, Madame Tringham,
êtes-vous prêts pour le départ?
Aimeriez-vous avoir un peu plus de
temps?

*
*
*
*
*

DICKENS

Non, nous sommes prêts.

*

Beyond an ELDERLY WIFE sits in a cart smiling, waiting. The ELDERLY MAN gathers their belongings. DICKENS and NELLY following him.

84 **EXT. PATIO. HOUSE. FRANCE. 1865. EVENING.**

84

The aftermath of supper, the candle is low, a bottle drained of wine-

A MAID quietly clears around them.

NELLY

(in french)

Thank you, Audrey.

NELLY stands, close by DICKENS as he sits reading over a letter, she slips an arm around him reading over his shoulder.

DICKENS

I have agreed to fifty more readings.

NELLY

Where?

DICKENS

Glasgow, Manchester, Dublin. I have been asked to give a reading in Paris.

NELLY

Shall I join you?

The SILENCE hangs-

DICKENS

There are whisperings-

NELLY

Where?

DICKENS

In Paris. And if they are in Paris then they will soon be in London. Forster and Wilkie are concerned. I have been out of circulation-

On NELLY-

NELLY

You must go.

DICKENS

It is what I am, Nelly.

NELLY

To the world, yes Charles but to me..

NELLY suddenly concedes, cupping his face, smothering him with kisses-

NELLY (CONT'D)

...So much more.

DICKENS reaches for his pen, in search of paper.

DICKENS

No..No..Then I shall not go.

NELLY

No..No..You shall.

DICKENS

No..My mind is quite made up.

NELLY
You will. Paris.
(with a smile)
Paris. How wonderful.

NELLY, playful, close to him.

NELLY (CONT'D)
(close to)
How can you not?

85

INT. PARLOUR/LIBRARY SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. DAY. 1885.

85

A darkened study the lamps not yet lit-

A fire glowing in the hearth, casting its light across the fading darkness of the room.

CLOSE ON NELLY as she sits in the half light-

The shelves of books, endless copies of Dickens Novels, Oliver Twist, Great Expectations, Edwin Drood and beyond until-

A DOORBELL RINGS far off-

FOOTSTEPS passing the study door, rising and falling as they dissolve far off-

NELLY reaches up, her fingers pulling out a copy of *The Frozen Deep*-

SUDDENLY a door opens, MARY enters-

MARY
Sorry, Ma'am. I didn't see you there.

NELLY
It is quite alright Mary.

MARY goes to light the lamp.

NELLY (CONT'D)
I will do it.

MARY hesitates, nods, makes to withdraw-

MARY
Is there anything else, Ma'am. The Guests will be arriving shortly and the glasses are not yet laid.

NELLY
That is everything.

MARY nods, exits. NELLY looks down at the book in her hand. She opens it-

The open book, a dark curl of baby hair, pressed between the pages.

NELLY's finger hesitantly touches it-

86

INT. BEDROOM. HOUSE. BOULOGNE. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.

86

CLOSE UP ON A bloodied STILLBORN BABY-

NELLY lies on a bed, exhausted from the birth.

SUDDENLY the MIDWIFE, comes into view, brusquely wrapping the STILLBORN CHILD in a cloth and picking it up, to take away. She walks across the room-

DICKENS at once, stops her, reaching out a hand. He fumbles in his pocket for a small pen knife, and then-

CLOSE UP ON DICKENS' HANDS, FINGERS GRAZING the STILLBORN CHILD's head, taking a dark lock between his thumb and forefinger and very gently cutting off a few strands of hair.

The MIDWIFE hesitates, taking the STILLBORN BABY away-

DICKENS goes over to NELLY, gently placing the locks in her hand. He closes her fingers around it.

The DOCTOR has been standing close by-

DOCTOR
(in French)
I am sorry. Even if they are
born perfect in every other way.
It happens.

The DOCTOR holds out a pen for DICKENS to sign the certificate.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
(in French)
Someone must sign. It is
necessary.

DICKENS hesitates, looks at NELLY.

DICKENS
(in French)
He will be buried?

DOCTOR
(in French)
Yes. Of course. Yes.

EXTREME CLOSE UP on DICKENS HANDS as he signs *Monsieur Tringham* on the death certificate.

87 **INT. PARLOUR/LIBRARY. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885.** 87

NELLY closes the book shut, putting it back on the shelf.

AUDIBLE SOUNDS OF PREPARATIONS FROM DEEP WITHIN THE HOUSE-

The sound of last minute music practise, the occasional shout of boys, the fleeting snatch of conversation, MARY passing the doorway outside. The sound of a SCHOOLBOY singing just audible-

NELLY stands, the sense of the sea in the late afternoon light through the window.

88 **EXT. FIELD. FRANCE. 1865. DUSK.** 88

Dusk-

ON NELLY's face, etched with absolute desolation. She stands barefooted in the stream.

89 **INT. CORRIDOR. HOUSE. BOULOGNE. FRANCE. 1865. DAY.** 89

Dawn-

DICKENS picking up a manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*, from a table as he moves on.

NELLY stands in her coat and hat, the light from the open doorways, slowly dimming to darkness as shutters are closed by a MAID. DICKENS packs the last of his things, close by.

DICKENS

Have you left the keys on the table?

NELLY absently nods.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Only I promised Monsieur Duboit..There is a very nice family from Rouen who wish to winter here.

DICKENS passes her.

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Nelly?

The distant shutters, closing, sinking them into darkness-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Say something.
(silence)
SAY SOMETHING!

NELLY silent until-

She caves, her body suddenly overwhelmed with grief, DICKENS looking on, unable to help her, wanting to but stricken by the overwhelming pain and grief that he sees. Her sobs audible, fighting her way out of this agony. Her tears at last subsiding, she slowly gathers herself.

NELLY

We shall miss our train.

90

EXT. PLATFORM. FOLKESTONE STATION. KENT. 1865. DAY.

90

The swirl of steam and swell of COMMUTERS hurrying along a platform past a STATION GUARD-

STATION GUARD

(calling out)

All passengers arrived from France
this train for London.

DICKENS reaching out to help NELLY onto the train, gloved hands briefly touch, NELLY nearly misses her footing. NELLY quietly reassuring, DICKENS following her on the train-

A TICKET COLLECTOR punches their tickets-

TICKET COLLECTOR

My wife says she should marry
Rokesmith and be done.

DICKENS smiles, clutching a sheaf of papers, blotted with familiar scrawl, title *Our Mutual Friend* just visible.

DICKENS

Perhaps the next chapter.

The squawk of gulls overhead.

91

INT. CARRIAGE. TRAIN. NEAR STAPLEHURST. KENT. DAY. 1865.

91

The TEARING STEADY RHYTHM OF TRAIN WHEELS AGAINST STEEL AND TRACK-

The STREAK of countryside, FLEETING and ABSTRACTED, a BLUR of light and colour beyond.

Then just visible in the glass, NELLY's reflection indistinct yet rippling in the glass-

PULL OUT TO REVEAL NELLY, quietly absent, face pale, staring out of the train and seated opposite her-

PULL OUT TO AT LAST TO REVEAL THE SHADOWY FIGURE CAUGHT THE GLASS AS DICKENS lost in correcting papers, blotted with familiar scrawl, the title *Our Mutual Friend* just visible.

A distant GUFFAW, from the neighbouring compartment. DICKENS looks over at NELLY-

DICKENS
Sleep and when you wake we shall
be home.

NELLY catches on this, she looks at him. Then closes her eyes, trying to sleep, grief ever present, the ruby bracelet on her wrist.

92 **EXT. TRACK. COUNTRYSIDE. STAPLEHURST. DAY. 1865.** 92

The train, pistons pumping, whistling along the track-

93 **INT. CARRIAGE. TRAIN. NEAR STAPLEHURST. KENT. DAY. 1865.** 93

The TEARING STEADY RHYTHM OF TRAIN WHEELS AGAINST STEEL AND TRACK-

The SCRATCH SCRATCH of his pen, against paper.

CLOSE UP ON NELLY looking out of the window, trying to sleep, eyes catching on the fleeting landscape.

DICKENS lost in total concentration-

Suddenly, the train violently jolts-

The scream of PASSENGERS and screech of metal as carriages visibly buckle-

The smash of glass, hands reaching out, NELLY, at once, WHIPPED out of her seat arms thrown forward in useless protection, FLUNG through a split carriage, and HURLED through splinters of glass, a world upturned-

DICKENS OOV
(shouting out)
Nelly-

94 **EXT. GRASSY BANK. NEAR TRACK. STAPLEHURST. DAY. 1865.** 94

NELLY, eyes flickering open, her body twisted, her arm at an odd angle, perhaps broken-

Around, the scatter of luggage, a trunk split open; silk undergarments caught on a rowan bush.

NELLY's POV of the buckled wreckage of the train. DICKENS clambering out of a severed carriage, scrabbling down the grassy bank, towards her.

Around him the TWIST OF WRECKAGE, BODIES LITTERED, the GROANS OF THE WOUNDED, SMASHED UP SEATING, LUGGAGE HURLED ACROSS THICK GRASS AND BRAMBLES, CHAOS ALL AROUND.

PORTER

Sir-

Beyond the screams and shouts of the injured, a PORTER dazed, but in charge, moving amongst them.

PORTER (CONT'D)

We are asking everyone able bodied if they could help with the most injured.

DICKENS

Yes of course. I must help. Water. People will need water.

PORTER

(beat)

Is it Mr Dickens, Sir?

DICKENS hesitates, nods looking to NELLY, concerned not wanting to leave her-

DICKENS

Yes.

PORTER

Were you travelling alone, Sir?

NELLY's eyes catching on DICKENS, willing him to turn away.

NELLY

(hushed/exhaled)

Go..go.

NELLY's heart beat, thumping in her head until-

DICKENS OOV

Yes..Yes. Quite alone. This young lady is in need of assistance.

DICKENS turns, with a look of absolute despair as he walks away, as he turns his head away from view.

PORTER

We are dealing with the most injured first.

NELLY's vision fades, the blurry figure of DICKENS walking away.

DICKENS OOV
I'll do what I can...

NELLY's hands clasp the PORTER, not wanting to let him go, slipping in and out of consciousness.

PORTER
Madam, I will get one of the ladies to attend to you as soon as.

The PORTER nods to two YOUNG LADIES on the approach.

PORTER (CONT'D)
(moving off)
This way, Sir.

The two YOUNG LADIES pass, coming quickly to NELLY's aid with DICKENS seen following the PORTER.

YOUNG LADIES
You poor dear.

Beyond the young TICKET COLLECTOR, wide eyed and dead, thrown across the twisted track. NELLY, with the two YOUNG LADIES, comforting her.

YOUNG LADIES (CONT'D)
We are here...We are here.

DICKENS moving amongst the dead, the dying and the wounded offering brandy.

A page of *Our Mutual Friend* caught in the grass of the embankment. DICKENS flattens it out, splattered with ink and blood, pocketing it before moving on-

95

INT. SCHOOLHALL. MARGATE. DUSK. 1885.

95

A thin pamphlet/ programme *No Thoroughfare: A Drama in Five Acts by Mr Wilkie Collins* placed down on a chair by a SCHOOLBOY methodically moving a long a row of seats. The rows of chairs being laid out by two SCHOOLBOYS beyond-

The back of the hall, a MAID hurries to finish last minute decorations, polish glasses and light lamps and candles on a table laid out with a magnificent buffet-

The first PARENTS arriving led by MARY, GEORGE coming forward to greet them, offering brief exchange, gesturing towards a table.

CLOSE ON GEORGE turning to LAMBOURNE-

GEORGE
(hushed)
Where is my wife?

96 **EXT. CHURCH. MARGATE. 1885. DUSK.**

96

NELLY walking fast. A small church ahead of her. We might sense the sea. Spiky winter trees, her breathing as she walks.

97 **EXT. CHURCH. MARGATE. 1885. DUSK.**

97

NELLY enters a small graveyard. She is a lone figure standing amongst the gravestones.

BENHAM (O.S.)

Ellen Ternan.

NELLY turns, surprised. BENHAM standing near the entrance of the church, caught in the half light. His face slightly shadowed by a hat.

NELLY

(nods)

Yes. That was my name. You have always known this?

BENHAM

Suspected. Things you said, comments, memories of Mr Dickens that were not a child's memories.

NELLY stands, distracted, BENHAM sensing she needs something from him. BENHAM gestures to a bench to one side of the small cemetery.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

I saw him read once. It was magical. Row upon row craning forward, marvelling at this transformation. One forgets that he was more than writer, more than actor. He would pull you soaring, spinning into the heart of another world.

BENHAM smiles, betraying his utter admiration.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

I have lived my life in the pages of those novels.

BENHAM smiles, suddenly moved.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

I should not have expected their author to live so quiet a life.

BENHAM quietly considers NELLY.

BENHAM (CONT'D)

You inspired him.

NELLY

Perhaps. I don't know. I would say
Maybe we inspired each other. It
was not easy our friendship. Never
quite knowing when one would see
him, when or even if he would
arrive. It was often fragile -And
yet there were days of such
joy..such celebration..When we
would talk..laugh together..But
there were moments towards the end
when I dreaded his visits...perhaps
even his touch. But we needed each
other. In our secret life. I was
his magic circle of one.

(beat)

There was a day, when he took me to
the house, where I was to live.

She gets lost in her thought.

BENHAM

Mrs Wharton Robinson-

NELLY, trying to make sense of it, searching for words.

NELLY

I have thought about it often. The
moment when I finally accepted what
our life was to be.

(beat)

He knew he would leave me first.
That he would die first.

NELLY lost deep within herself.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Charles understood that however
painful it is, we are alone.
Whoever we are with, we are alone.
And he was right. *Great*
Expectations. He wrote an ending -
It was his first instinctive
ending. A good ending, the best
ending- Pip and Estella do not come
together. Pip sees that she will
never be his. Later they wanted him
to change it. Some people thought
it too brutal. So instead Pip
finals words are - "I saw the
shadow of no parting from her" - He
ends the book in shadows, you see,
a place of uncertainty, of
haunting. And that is where I have
been living. Do you see-?

BENHAM stares at her.

BENHAM

Yes.

NELLY

And I will not live there anymore.

They sit; it is almost dark.

97A **EXT. ELIZABETH COTTAGE. WINDSOR. 1865. DAY.**

97A

The front of a pretty cottage, DICKENS walks towards a front door, turns to NELLY guiding her in.

98 **INT. BEDROOM. ELIZABETH COTTAGE. WINDSOR. 1865. DAY.**

98

The PRESS of a FOOT on a floorboard-

NELLY's stands, arm heavily bandaged peering into a bedroom. She enters, eyes tracing over the simple yet comfortably furnished sitting room.

DICKENS hovers in the doorway, clutching his hat.

SILENCE-

DICKENS

The house is to your liking?

SILENCE-

NELLY

Yes. I am happy to see the castle from the window.

DICKENS

And there is a fire in every room. I have taken the liberty of employing a nurse who will attend to you. A local woman but of good kind.

NELLY hesitates, nods-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

It is a sleepy market town, but there is a very fine butchers. And the church is newly restored. You must visit.

NELLY

Yes.

DICKENS

The fast train from Paddington takes 18 minutes. Or alternatively there is a train to Windsor from Victoria or Waterloo which also serves well.

SILENCE-

DICKENS (CONT'D)

Nelly-?

NELLY stares out at the castle, floating far off across the fields, suspended above the mist.

NELLY

It is as if it is floating.

NELLY forces a smile, quietly broken.

NELLY (CONT'D)

You will come to see me?

DICKENS

Yes.

NELLY

Weekly?

DICKENS

Of course. Twice if I can.

NELLY

I see. And if I need anything-?

DICKENS

You need only ask.

NELLY

And am I to expect you at weekends and holidays?

DICKENS

Nelly-

NELLY

Of course I am sure when you can.

DICKENS

Please-

NELLY

And shall we keep Tringham?

DICKENS

(beat)

Yes.

NELLY

Then this is how it is to be now,
Charles.

DICKENS caught in its unbearable hold.

DICKENS

Whatever I have tried to do in
life, I have tried with all my
heart to do it well. Whatever I
have devoted myself to I-

DICKENS unable to find words-

NELLY

Don't, Charles. Don't explain.

DICKENS looks at her, suddenly exhausted, all his inner
defences crumbling.

NELLY (CONT'D)

There is nothing to say.

NELLY looks at him calmly.

DICKENS stares back at her.

NELLY (CONT'D)

Everyone has their secret. And
this is ours.

DICKENS

Yes.

NELLY reaches over to him awkwardly, her arm giving her
discomfort. She kisses him gently on the forehead - almost as
if he were a boy.

NELLY

So much more complicated than
anything one could write in a
book.

Yet he seems aged and frail, vulnerable, depleted, leaning
into NELLY.

NELLY pulls off her coat and hat-

Beyond, the MURMUR of VOICES, MUSICIANS TUNING UP-

MARY on the approach, carrying a tray of drained punch
glasses-

MARY

Where have you been? Mr Wharton
Robinson has been looking for you
everywhere.

NELLY nods, face flushed from the cold.

NELLY

Mary, will you tell my husband I
wish to see him.

MARY, clearly anxious, nods, moving on.

MARY

The doorbell's not stopped and
they're half way through the punch.

Through an ajar door, PARENTS seated, the RUSTLE and RIPPLE
of excitement, the play about to begin-

100

INT. PARLOUR/LIBRARY. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885. 100

The clock chimes seven-

A SENSE OF GROWING NOISE, THE SOUND OF PEOPLE'S CHATTER, A
WORLD OF PARENTS JUST AUDIBLE PASSING OUTSIDE THE DOOR-

NELLY waiting-

GEORGE OOV

Nelly-

The DOOR SWINGS OPEN, GEORGE enters-

GEORGE

You are late. It is nearly dark.
Where have you been?

NELLY springs up, going over to GEORGE, reaching out for him.

NELLY

George. I am so sorry. I am here. I
am here.

She grips him tighter. GEORGE softening, holding her, with
genuine concern, his eyes searching hers-

GEORGE

Are you quite well?

NELLY, on the edge of speaking-

NELLY

Yes, George. Quite well.

GEORGE looks at NELLY, his hands cupping her face, her hair
windswept, cheeks flushed.

GEORGE

Are you sure?

NELLY

I walked with Mr Benham today. We talked about Mr Dickens-

GEORGE

Yes-

NELLY

George-

NELLY wavers, suddenly unable to continue-

GEORGE

The memories of a child, Nelly.

GEORGE holds NELLY's eyes with complicit understanding.

NELLY

Yes-

SUDDENLY FROM BEYOND-

GEOFFREY OOV

ROAR!

SUDDENLY GEOFFREY enters, a mop of golden curls, his face painted like a lion, with rope mane, rushes roaring into the drawing room, straight into NELLY's arms.

NELLY

Darling, you will frighten our guests-

GEORGE

I think he is trying to frighten his mother.

NELLY laughs, the moment broken, hurriedly buries her tear stained face into his neck, kissing his cheeks, then GEORGE. They stand in the half light of early evening, entwined in silent embrace until-

NELLY

Geoffrey. Go. You must take your place.

GEOFFREY runs off, leaving NELLY and GEORGE.

GEORGE

Are you ready?

NELLY nods, laughs, at the sheer exhaustion of it all, gripping his arm-

NELLY

Yes, George. I am ready.

GEORGE opens the door and walks into the light of the hallway. We are with NELLY as she goes through the door.

101

INT. HALL. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885.

101

The FACES OF THE PARENTS silent and watching-

CLOSE TO NELLY, behind her head. The sense of the SCHOOLBOYS on stage, the sequence we saw at the beginning, alive on the stage-

SCHOOL BOY 1

*Well, my lads, the day has broken
at last.*

CLOSE IN ON NELLY watching the play unfold, the camera moving around her-

SCHOOL BOY 1 (CONT'D)

*What do you say to the weather,
now?*

SCHOOL BOY 2

I say the weather will do.

SCHOOL BOY 3

I say doubtful!

SCHOOL BOY 2

I say - bad!

A sense of GEORGE by NELLY's sides.

CLOSE ON NELLY.

NELLY's POV- DICKENS, as seen in Manchester, in the last throes of dying on the stage of the Free Trade Hall-

DICKENS

*Come nearer! My mind clears, but my
eyes grow dim. Kiss me, kiss me
before I die.*

CLOSE ON DICKENS as he dies, his eyes glaze over, falling limp in the arms of MARIA, not seen, his dead eyes glazing over as if looking straight at NELLY-

CLOSE ON NELLY tears glistening, a life shared together held in that look-

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INT. HALL. SCHOOLHOUSE. MARGATE. NIGHT. 1885.

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AT ONCE RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE-

A row of SCHOOLBOYS, GEOFFREY at its heart bowing before a delighted audience.

ALL

Bravo..Bravo.

NELLY flushed and happy, eyes stung with tears of pride, clapping. She looks over to BENHAM, he smiles at her, with shared understanding.

BENHAM

(mouthed)

Bravo.

NELLY turns to GEORGE, gripping his hand. GEORGE squeezes it, yet clearly something irrevocably changed. They turn back, smiling at GEOFFREY a mop of golden curls.

THE END