

## **‘The Song of the Wreck’ by Charles Dickens**

In May 1855, Wilkie Collins sent his finished version of his first, original drama, *The Lighthouse*, to Charles Dickens. In his introduction to a later, French translation of *The Lighthouse*, Collins describes his decision to show it to Dickens<sup>i</sup>:

My task accomplished, I wasn’t convinced that I’d been successful. My experience of writing, formed by writing novels, could well have led me astray in the composition and writing of a dramatic work. These doubts determined me to consult Mr. Charles Dickens. Already familiar with his friendly goodness and his frankness, I knew that his examination would be perfectly conscientious, and that the results of this examination would be communicated to me without reserve. Forgive me for saying so, but I still feel proud to say that Mr. Charles Dickens judged my first dramatic work favourably enough immediately to offer to have it performed at his house before a select audience, to put it to the test before a run in the theatre. Needless to say, this offer was immediately accepted with immense gratitude.<sup>ii</sup>

Dickens made numerous suggestions and enthusiastically took over the production for his amateur theatricals, in which Collins had already become a regular participant.

On 24 May, Dickens wrote to Collins, “I have written a little ballad for Mary – ‘The Story of the Ship’s Carpenter and the Little Boy, in the Shipwreck.’”<sup>iii</sup> The words were set to a tune composed by George Linley to Charlotte Young’s ballad ‘Little Nell’ (based on Little Nell from *The Old Curiosity Shop*). Dedicated to Dickens by Linley, it had become a favourite song, his daughter, Mary, singing it to him ‘constantly since her childhood’.<sup>iv</sup> Dickens changed the title to ‘The Song of the Wreck’ and the ballad was sung by Mary (Mamie Dickens), who played the role of Phoebe during the performances of *The Lighthouse*. ‘The Song of the Wreck’ bears some similarities to *The Long Voyage*, a prose piece about shipwreck and survival written by Dickens for *Household Words*, 31 December 1853.<sup>v</sup> The ‘Song of the Wreck’ was described on the playbill devised by Dickens for ‘The Smallest Theatre in the World’ as “a new Ballad, the Music by MR. LINLEY, the Words by MR. CRUMMLES.” The words to the song appeared in full.<sup>vi</sup>

On 2 June he wrote to the composer, George Linley, inviting him to the production at Tavistock House, enclosing a copy of the playbill:

Tavistock House  
Tavistock Square  
Second June 1855

Dear Sir,

It will give me great pleasure – and Mrs Dickens no less – if you have leisure and inclination to come and see The Little Theatricals of which I enclose you a bill.

I have introduced your name into it, because the words of the song are designed for the music you wrote to “Little Nell.” One of my young daughters sings it very prettily and it is a great favourite with all the house – I mean your air; not my words, which belong to the occasion.

Faithfully yours

Charles Dickens

George Linley Esquire

Will you oblige me with an early answer, as our space is very small and the demand upon it very large.<sup>vii</sup>

When *The Lighthouse* was repeated in July at Campden House, Mamie Dickens received favourable reviews for her performance as Phoebe; her singing of 'The Song of the Wreck' 'gained her the warm applause of the audience'.<sup>viii</sup>

Phoebe had a charming representative in Miss Dickens, who, in looks, artless simplicity, and gentle sweetness, was all that Phoebe herself could be imagined to be. Her performance was scarcely acting; but (as a great vocalist once said of Thomas Moore's singing) it was something better. We are sure that no display of histrionic art could have made the character more natural or more affecting. She sang a melancholy little ballad, very appropriately introduced, with so sweet and tuneable a voice, and so much simple pathos, that everybody was affected as well as charmed.<sup>ix</sup>

Although, in his letters, Collins refers to various prompt copies and other copies must have existed for members of the cast and for the play's subsequent amateur revivals, only four manuscripts are recorded by IELM.<sup>x</sup> One is held in the Forster Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, entitled *The Storm at the Lighthouse*.<sup>xi</sup> The different title suggests that this is possibly the earliest surviving copy.<sup>xii</sup> It is written and autographed in Collins's hand in a bound notebook which had come to Forster from Dickens's own collection. It has full stage directions, but does not include either the 'Song of the Wreck', or the Prologue. There are two further copies held at the Berg Collection, New York, one of which (Berg 2) was obtained from the collection of Harry Glemby, an American art and book collector.<sup>xiii</sup> Both copies lack the Prologue or the 'Song of the Wreck'.

The text of the song presented below is a transcription of a further copy held in the British Library. This was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays (W. B. Donne) on 31 July 1857 for performance on the professional stage at the Royal Olympic Theatre. A licence was granted on 1 August and the play opened on 10 August. There are slight variations between this text and the text given on Dickens's original playbill (which appears to be the text which was later published in collections of Dickens's *Poems and Verses*<sup>xiv</sup>). Most of the differences are small - punctuation and contractions - but there are also two major words changed. In verse two the final line on the playbill is 'The *sailor* and the boy' (as opposed to 'The *Seaman* and the boy'), and in verse five the third line reads 'Until it sinks, when *GOD'S* own ways' (as opposed to 'when *his* own ways'). Given that Dickens prepared the playbill himself, the playbill can be taken as the most accurate version; the word changes in the British Library could be the slip of a copyist under pressure to get the play licensed for performance. However, the British Library's version is the only complete extant copy to contain *The Song of the Wreck* within the play itself so I have chosen to transcribe this version below. I also provide the dramatic text immediately preceding and

following the song and the interruption between verses three and four. Capitalisation has been maintained in line with the original. The song appears towards the end of Act 1 following a comic scene but preceding the main event of the play – the arrival of the shipwrecked brig. The song therefore serves dramatically to return the mood of the play from temporary light comedy to the suspense and sombre foreboding of the first and second acts.

**FURLEY.** Ah ha – ha ha! Now’s the time I think to throw in the Dutchman’s strong waters. There my lads, drink away and be happy – Give me a toothful of liquor for myself – Here’s all your good healths. Martin – drink! Phoebe you don’t look half happy enough – jump up lass, and sing us a song. Sing, Phoebe, or I shall never get them to wait long enough for their third course.

**PHOEBE.** Sing. Master Furley.

**JACOB.** Sing, darling – Aye – why not?

**PHOEBE.** What song shall I sing, father?

**JACOB.** Sing my favourite song – the Song of the Wreck. It’s a song of a kind heart under a poor Coat – & that’s the sweetest singing Bird in a Cage I know – sing the song of the Wreck, my dear.

#### **SONG – PHOEBE**

**1**

The wind blew high – the waters raved  
A Ship drove on the land.  
A hundred human creatures saved  
Kneeled down upon the sand.  
Three score were drown’d, three score were thrown  
Upon the black rocks wild  
And thus among them left alone  
They found one helpless child

**2**

A seaman rough, to shipwreck bred  
Stood out from all the rest.  
And gently laid the lonely head  
Upon his honest breast.  
And travelling o’er the desert wide  
It was a solemn joy  
To see them ever side by side  
The Seaman and the boy.

**3**

In famine, sickness, hunger, thirst  
The two were still but one

**Until the seaman drooped the first  
And felt his labours done.  
Then to a trusty friend he spoke  
Across the Desert wide  
O, take this poor boy for my sake  
And kissed the child, and died.**

**PHOEBE. Martin doesn't hear me, father – he doesn't mind the story.**

**JACOB. He listens pet. How can he love you and not listen. Go on – finish it.**

**4**

**Toiling along in weary plight  
Through heavy jungle mire  
These two came later every night  
To warm them at the fire.  
Until the Captain said one day  
O, seaman good and kind  
To save thyself – now come away  
And leave the boy behind.**

**5**

**The child was slumb'ring near the blaze  
O, Captain, let him rest  
Until it sinks, when his own ways  
Shall teach us what is best.  
They watch'd the whiten'd ashy heap  
They touch'd the child in vain  
They did not leave him there asleep  
He never woke again.**

**PHOEBE. Something has altered Martin – he never so much as looked at me while I was singing. He won't notice me now – ! Why does he look so anxiously after his father.**

Reconstructing 'The Song of the Wreck':

Dickens wrote to Linley, 'the words of the song are designed for the music you wrote to "Little Nell"'. Although the music for 'The Song of the Wreck' does not survive and was never published as such, the music for 'Little Nell' is extant in various published copies entitled, "Little Nell, ballad, the words by Miss Charlotte Young, the music composed and inscribed to Charles Dickens, Esqre. by George Linley." Dickens wrote the 'Song of the Wreck' to fit the same rhythmic structure as 'Little Nell' so the words to the 'Song of the Wreck' are interchangeable, easily fitting to the melodic line of the music. Francesco Berger, the musical director of *The Lighthouse*, would have easily arranged the words to the music of the earlier, published ballad. The final line of each written verse is repeated (as is the final line of each of the 'Little Nell' verses) to fit with the four bar musical motif at the end of each section.

The 'Little Nell' ballad contains only 3 verses whereas 'The Song of the Wreck' has five; this is remedied by repeating the music of verses one and two of the 'Little Nell' ballad to accommodate verses three and four of 'The Song of the Wreck'.

The recording:

'The Song of the Wreck' was reconstructed by Dr Caroline Radcliffe and performed by soprano Philippa Althaus and pianist Steven Teo for a performance at the Book to the Future Festival at the University of Birmingham on 27 October 2013 at the Barber Institute Concert Hall. It was included as part of a presentation on Wilkie Collins's *The Lighthouse* which also included a performance of the central scene from Act 1 of the play.

The presentation was repeated in part for the Dickens Fellowship meeting in Central London on 20 May 2014 but the performers were unavailable to attend. They therefore kindly agreed to make an informal recording of the song to be played for the meeting.

The recording was made in one take on very basic hand-held recording equipment in a small practice room with a rather out of tune piano! Listeners are asked to bear this in mind and to view the recording as an informal and spontaneous rendition that does not aim to meet professional standards. It is with extreme gratitude and thanks to Philippa and Steven, who agreed to release the recording, that we are able to now hear Dickens's reconstructed 'The Song of the Wreck' via the Dickens Fellowship website. If anyone would like to sponsor a higher quality recording they would be most welcome to contact [c.radcliffe@bham.ac.uk](mailto:c.radcliffe@bham.ac.uk)

(The recording and arrangement of 'The Song of the Wreck' remains the copyright of Caroline Radcliffe, Philippa Althaus and Steven Teo and shall not be reproduced in any form without their prior, written permission.)

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University of Birmingham, September 2014.

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<sup>i</sup> See the introduction to *Wilkie Collins: The Lighthouse, A Drama in Two Acts*, eds. Andrew Gasson and Caroline Radcliffe, Francis Boutle, London 2013, for a history and full text of *The Lighthouse*.

<sup>ii</sup> Translated from the introduction to *Le Phare*, published in *Une poignée de romans* (translated by E. D. Forgues), Seconde Série, Hetzel & Lacroix, Paris 1864. *Le Phare* occupies pp. 285–346 with the introduction on pp. 277–284.

<sup>iii</sup> The British Academy Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens, 12 vols., eds. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Angus Easson. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1965–2002, vol. 7, p.628, 24 May 1855.

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- <sup>iv</sup> The Poems and Verses of Charles Dickens, Collected and Edited, with Bibliographical Notes by F. G. Kitton, Chapman and Hall, London 1903, p.113. Linley had dedicated an earlier ballad, 'Clara' to Mrs. Dickens in October 1850 (see Pilgrim, vol. 6, p. 193, 17 October 1850).
- <sup>v</sup> *Charles Dickens*, Michael Slater, Yale, New Haven and London 2009, p. 655, note 10 to p. 394.
- <sup>vi</sup> 'Crummles' was Dickens's stage name and the name of the itinerant theatre manager in *Nicholas Nickleby*.
- <sup>vii</sup> A.L.S. Dickens to George Linley, London June 2, 1855 with playbill of *The Lighthouse* at Tavistock Square, 1855 enclosed. Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
- <sup>viii</sup> *The Illustrated Times*, 21 July 1855.
- <sup>ix</sup> *The Daily News*, 'Private Theatricals at Campden House'.
- <sup>x</sup> Index of English Literary Manuscripts Vol. IV 1800-1900, compiled by Barbara Rosenbaum & Pamela White, Mansell, London 1982, p.676.
- <sup>xi</sup> Forster ms. 115 Forster 48.D. (National Art Library).
- <sup>xii</sup> See Robert C. Hanna *Dickens Studies Annual*, Volume 44, 2013, pp. 289-364 for a full discussion of the *Storm at the Lighthouse* text.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Sold at Anderson Galleries, Sale 2099, 15-16 November [1926].
- <sup>xiv</sup> See footnote 4.