

DICKENS, RAMO SAMEE, AND THE THREE POTATOES

BY J. S. P. GROVE

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(QUARTERLY DEVOTED TO CHARLES DICKENS)

To many readers the combination embraced in my title may at first seem strange. But some may recall that some six words comprising the basis of this contribution, 'practising Ramo Samee with three potatoes,' are from 'An Unsettled Neighborhood,' an article which Dickens wrote for the November number of *Household Words* in 1854. At the time, the allusion to what is now to be explained would be well understood and enjoyed by the readers. To-day, few but approaching centenarians with good memories could be expected to give direct information on the point. Younger people, by means of descended hearsay, or almost accidental acquirement of the desired source, might be able to elucidate the problem, which last is the case of the writer.

The quotation at first sight impresses the idea that the name is Egyptian or Oriental, something after those of the Arabian Nights, one of the books beloved of Dickens, and so often incidental to his writings; and that the 'practising with three potatoes' may have been imitative of a juggler or conjurer. This, it will be seen, is the solution. Dickens, as we all know, had a great love of drama, music, and almost anything associated with the stage. This love included the conjuring element, as we learn by reading Forster's life of the Author, his published letters, and the late Mamie Dickens's kindly remembrance of 'her father as she knew him.'

The 'Unsettled Neighborhood' is thus described:—

As to visitors, we really had no visitors at that time. Stabber's band used to come every Monday morning and play for three quarters of an hour on one particular spot by the 'Norwich Castle'; but how they first got into a habit of coming, or even how we knew them to be Stabber's Band, I am unable to say. It was popular in the neighborhood, and we used to contribute to it: dropping our halfpence into an exceedingly hard hat with a warm handkerchief in it, like a sort of bird's nest (I am not aware whether it was Mr. Stabber's hat or not), which came regularly round. They used to open with 'Begone, Dull Care,' and to end with a tune which the neighborhood recognized as 'I'd rather have a Guinea than a One-Pound Note.' I think any reference to money, that was not a summons or an execution, touched us melodiously. As to Punches, they knew better than to do anything but squeak and drum in the neighborhood, unless a collection was made in advance — which never succeeded. Conjurers and strong men strayed among us, at long intervals; but I never saw 'the donkey' go up once. Even costermongers were shy of us, as a bad job, seeming to know instinctively that the neighborhood ran scores with Mrs. Slaughter, greengrocer, etc., of Great Twig Street, and consequently did n't dare to buy a ha'porth elsewhere; or very likely being told so by Young Slaughter, who managed the business, and was always lurking in the coal department, practising Ramo Samee with three potatoes.

I had often wondered who Ramo Samee was, but had a hazy idea of having seen the name in print; and it

was while re-looking recently amongst some old play-bills of the time when the *Nicholas Nickleby* drama was first produced at the Hull Theatre Royal, that I incidentally came across mention of our so-long-missing juggler. He had performed at Hull between December 26, 1838 and January 4, 1839, inclusive, and the play-bills spoke of his being from the then new London Victoria Theatre, where he had performed for 100 nights. The programme for December 28 included mention of three dramas and farces, *Nicholas Nickleby* for the third night of its first production, and Ramo Samee's performance. Dickens and the juggler therefore were on the stage together.

It will be noticed that Dickens — unless Ramo continued juggling in later years — had carried his mind back sixteen years in naming him, to the period when he himself was twenty-six years of age. As we find by reference that Dickens himself soon after blossomed into being a conjurer, one thinks Ramo Samee's doings must have helped on his inborn enthusiasm for that branch of science.

On December 3, 1842, Dickens is thus found writing to Professor Felton in America as to a coming birthday celebration on Twelfth Night: —

I have provided a magic lantern and divers other tremendous engines of that nature. But the best of it is that Forster and I have purchased between us the entire stock-in-trade of a conjurer, the practice and display whereof is entrusted to me. And oh, my eyes, Felton, if you could see me conjuring the company's watches into impossible tea-caddies and causing pieces of money to fly, and burning pocket handkerchiefs without hurting 'em, and practising in my own room, without anybody to admire, you would never forget it as long as you live. In those tricks which require a confederate, I am assisted (by reason of his imperturbable good humor) by Stanfield; who always does his part exactly the wrong

way, to the unspeakable delight of all beholders.

A year or so later one finds Dickens at his tricks again. Macready was in America, his wife remaining in England, and on January 3, 1844, Dickens thus writes him as to a home-gathering which had taken place: —

Mrs. Macready looked brilliant, blooming, young and handsome, and she danced a country dance with the writer hereof in a thorough spirit of becoming good-humor and enjoyment. Now you don't like to be told that! Nor do you quite like to hear that Forster and I conjured bravely; that a plum pudding was produced from an empty saucepan, held over a blazing fire kindled in Stanfield's hat without damage to the lining; that a box of bran was changed into a live guinea pig, which ran between my god-child's feet, and was the cause of such a shrill uproar and clapping of hands that you might have heard it (and I daresay did) in America; that three half-crowns, being taken from Major Burns and put into a tumbler-glass before his eyes, did then and there give jingling answers to the questions asked of them by me, and knew where you were and what you were doing, to the unspeakable admiration of the whole assembly. Neither do you quite like to be told that we are going to do it again next Saturday, with the addition of demoniacal dresses from the masquerade shop; nor that Mrs. Macready, for her gallant bearing always, and her best sort of best affection, is the best creature I know. Never mind, no man shall gag me, and those are my opinions.

In August-September, 1849 (*vide* Forster) Dickens was at Bonchurch, and a bill of a juggling entertainment there in those 'old merry days' by 'The Unparalleled Necromancer, Rhia Rhama Rhoo's' (none other than our Dickens, under a name apparently imitative of Ramo Samee) scheduled the following: —

THE LEAPING-CARD WONDER. — This wonder is the result of nine years' seclusion in the mines of Russia.

THE PYRAMID WONDER. — Five thousand guineas were paid for the acquisition of this wonder, to a Chinese Mandarin who died of grief immediately after parting with the secret.

THE CONFLAGRATION WONDER. — An annuity of £1000 has been offered to the necromancer by the Directors of the Sun Fire Office for the secret of this wonder — and refused !!!

THE LOAF-OF-BREAD WONDER. — Ten years in the Plains of Tartary were devoted to the study of this wonder.

THE TRAVELING-DOLL WONDER. — The necromancer's attendant usually faints on beholding this wonder, and is only to be revived by the administration of brandy and water.

THE PUDDING WONDER. — The extreme liberality of this wonder awakening the jealousy of the beneficent Austrian Government when exhibited in Milan, the necromancer had the honor to be seized, and confined for five years in the fortress of that city.

Five years later, in October, 1854 (about which date Dickens would be penning his article for *Household Words*, with its mention of Ramo Samee), he was staying at Boulogne, and saw a conjurer doing tricks at the military camp, whom he acknowledged, in writing to Forster, to be the most consummate master of legerdemain he had ever seen. The conjurer scorned help, stood among the company without any sort of apparatus, and, by the mere force of sleight of hand, and an astonishing memory, performed feats having no likeness to anything Dickens had

ever seen done, and totally inexplicable to his most vigilant reflection. 'So far as I know, a perfectly original genius,' says Dickens, 'and that puts any sort of knowledge of legerdemain, such as I supposed that I possessed, at utter defiance.' Nor was Dickens a mean authority as to this, says Forster, being himself, with his tools at hand, a capital conjurer.

In a letter to his daughter Mamie on November 14, 1865, Dickens explained how the flower trick and the exhibition of a Sphinx head on a table were done. In 1896, in her book, she writes as to her father: —

One of his conjuring tricks at their home entertainments comprised the disappearance and reappearance of a tiny doll, which would announce most unexpected pieces of news and messages to the different children in the audience; this doll was a particular favorite and its arrival eagerly awaited and welcomed.

Having thus given an outline of Dickens's association with conjuring from 1838 (the date of the advent of Ramo) to 1854 (the date of Dickens's reference to him), a period which comprises most of what is known of the novelist as necromancer, conjurer, or juggler, one cannot but recall and reflect that Ramo Samee, the wandering performer from the East Indies, was an entertainer to his great liking, to have so caught his eye and mind as to be remembered through a lapse of many years.

THE INNS OF LITERATURE

BY 'PENGUIN'

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'THERE is nothing which has yet been contrived by man,' Dr. Johnson once declared, 'by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn,' and Hawkins tells us he heard the same authority assert that 'a tavern chair is the throne of human felicity.' In which of the tavern chairs in the world of letters would it be most pleasant to take one's ease? Some of the earliest inns of English literature are among the best. What would not one give to have lain at the Tabard in Southwark on the night that the Canterbury Pilgrims put up there; or to have been entertained by Mrs. Quickly at the Boar's Head, Eastcheap, when Falstaff was the principal guest? Fielding's inns, too, would be well worth a visit. Mr. Tow-ouse's house, in *Joseph Andrews*, was not so comfortable as it should have been, though one could put up with a great deal to enjoy the company of Parson Adams. And, judging from the entertainment it furnished, I doubt whether the public-house near Bristol, to which Tom Jones was recommended by the Quaker, would have been classed by Dr. Johnson as a 'good' tavern. On the other hand, the Bell at Gloucester had an excellent landlady in Mrs. Whitefield, while the inn at Upton, which was the scene of so many remarkable adventures, was 'a house of exceeding good repute, whither Irish ladies of strict virtue, and many northern lasses of the same predicament, were accustomed to resort in their way to Bath.'

There are plenty of inns in Scott's novels, among them two or three at

which it would have been not at all pleasant to stay. The Cumbrian alehouse, in the *Two Drovers*, besides having a surly and extortionate landlord, was the scene of the quarrel between Robin Oig and Henry Wakefield; while Tib Mumps, the landlady of that other Cumberland alehouse where Dandy Dinmont first met Vanbeest Brown in *Guy Mannering*, was in league with robbers. Another house with not much to recommend it, except the chance of meeting Bailie Nicol Jarvie, was the Clachan of Aberfoil, in *Rob Roy*. It is described as a hovel, and its landlady admitted guests only with reluctance; for, as she told Francis Osbaldistone, 'between sogers and Saxons, and caterans and cattle-lifters, and hership and bluidshed, an honest woman wad live quieter in hell than on the Hieland line.' Against these we may set the Black Bear, in *Kenilworth*, kept by Giles Gosling, who was second only to the famous Harry Baillie 'in the power of pleasing his guests of every description,' and who, being moderate in his reckonings, was justly 'proud of his house, his liquor, his daughter, and himself.' And one might have gone farther and fared worse than at the Cleikum Inn, St. Ronan's, in *St. Ronan's Well*, a book that is often disparaged, though it is well worth reading if only because it is Scott's sole attempt at actual contemporary fiction.

No novelist has introduced more inns and public-houses into his stories than Dickens. *Pickwick* alone offers us more than a score from which to choose.