

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Story of the day:

Bleak House by Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was in love with goodness.

If you have never read one of his books, you are in for a great treat.

You'll meet characters that will stay with you all your life long: Mr. Quilp, the evil dwarf who lies on a table and kicks his legs with glee; Ebenezer Scrooge, the grouchy old miser who is visited by three ghosts on Christmas Eve; Mr. Micawber, the lovable family

man who spends too much money and never can find a job and is always hoping that "something will turn up"; Esther Summerson, who brings goodness and light wherever she goes, and is loved by everyone, though she herself doesn't seem to notice it. You will meet the Artful Dodger, a clever orphan boy who walks around London in a top hat and picks people's pockets. You will meet rascals and saints, fools and wise men, gentle women and witches and many things in between.



Dickens always wrote about marriages too, as he did in *Bleak House*, which I think is the greatest of all his novels – bursting full of characters, good and bad, crazy and sane, a dotty old lady and a vampire of a lawyer and a wicked junk collector who dies of spontaneous combustion. You'll remember them as long as you live.

So then, two old soldiers are walking down the street. One of them, Mr. George, has a problem. He's being pressured by a lawyer and a loan shark to give up some letters of a friend of his who has passed away, whom he served with in the army.

The lawyer and the loan shark want them as a sample of his friend's handwriting. Mr. George is in debt to the shark. They say they will make things easy for him if he gives up the letters. That's all he knows. Should he do it?

His old comrade in the army, Matthew Bagnet, won't say yes or no. First they have to consult "the old girl." That's what Mr. Bagnet calls Mrs. Bagnet. Right now isn't a good time, because the old girl is preparing the greens for supper.

“George,” says Mr. Bagnet. “You know me. It’s my old girl that advises. She has the head. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained. Wait till the greens is off her mind. Then, we’ll consult. Whatever the old girl says, do – do it!”

Mr. Bagnet is really proud of the old girl, and he’s grateful too. That old girl, he says, once made her way from Canada back home to England with nothing but a grey cloak and an umbrella. The old girl could set you up in life with a half penny’s worth of white lime, some fuller’s earth, some sand, and the change out of sixpence, and presto – you’ll have a thriving business.

It was the old girl who advised Mr. Bagnet that he wasn’t best at the fiddle or the flute. She borrowed a bassoon for him instead, and presto – he gets a living now by playing music on the bassoon.

“The old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “is a thoroughly fine woman.

Consequently, she is like a thoroughly fine day. Gets finer as she gets on. I

never see the old girl’s equal. But I never own to it before her. Discipline must be maintained!”

Some people wouldn’t care for the old girl, because all she does, she does for her adoring family, not for herself. She’s not fashionable. She doesn’t read magazines to find out what clothes to wear. When we meet her, we meet genuine womanhood and motherhood:

Mrs. Bagnet is not at all an ill-looking woman. Rather large-boned, a little coarse in the grain, and freckled by the sun and wind which have long tanned her hair upon the forehead; but healthy, wholesome, and bright-eyed. A strong, busy, active, honest-faced woman of from forty-five to fifty.

Clean, hardy, and so economically dressed (though substantially), that the only article of ornament of which she stands possessed appears to be her wedding-ring; around which her finger has grown to be so large since it was first put on, that it will never come off again until it shall mingle with Mrs. Bagnet’s dust.

So the Bagnets and their big brood of children and Mr. George have supper, and after the meal and the cleaning up, when Mrs. Bagnet is quietly plying her needlework, Mr. Bagnet asks his friend to tell what’s on his mind, which he does.

“That’s the whole of it, is it, George?” says Mr. Bagnet.

“That’s the whole of it.”

“You act according to my opinion?” says Mr. Bagnet.

“I shall be guided,” replies George, “entirely by it.”

“Old girl,” says Mr. Bagnet, “give him my opinion. You know it. Tell him what it is.”

That’s a wonderful and comic moment. “Give him

my opinion!” – and Mr. Bagnet has no idea what Mrs. Bagnet is going to say.

Mrs. Bagnet tells George that it’s Matt’s opinion that you shouldn’t get mixed up with sneaks, and that “the plain rule, is to do nothing in the dark, to be a party to nothing under-handed or mysterious, and never to put his foot where he cannot see the ground.”

We love the old girl, and it’s because of her energy and wisdom and her being a real woman with a woman’s feelings that Mr. George will be reunited with his mother, whom he hasn’t seen since he left home as a young man, and whom he is too embarrassed to seek out, because he feels too much like the prodigal son. Though Mr. Bagnet and the

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children adore her as the heart of the family, Mrs. Bagnet never lords it over them, but rules like a queen who doesn't know that she's the queen, while her husband enjoys her respect, and is not lowered one inch in the esteem of anyone around him.

She is the strong family woman described in the book of Proverbs:

A good wife who can find?

She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her;

and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm,

all the days of his life.



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