

# THE LITERARY DIGEST

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## A CHILD'S INTERVIEW WITH DICKENS

**I**N all the flood of Dickens material that is regaling us in this centenary year, little if anything has been said that equals for genuine human interest Kate Douglas Wiggin's account in *The Outlook* of a railway journey that she took with the famous writer when he was on a reading-tour through the States. She was a small child then, of course, and she and her mother were on their way from their home in the village of Hollis, Maine, to Charlestown, Massachusetts. Dickens was on his way from Portland to Boston. She had read every story that Dickens had published up to that time, and in her childish imagination she had pictured him as one of the greatest men that ever lived. The train stopt for two or three minutes at North Berwick, Maine, and she joined several older persons who were gazing through the car windows, and then and there began what was to be a real adventure for her. She tells us:

There on the platform stood the Adored One. His hands were plunged deep in his pockets (a favorite posture), but presently one was removed to wave away laughingly a piece of the famous Berwick sponge-cake offered him by Mr. Osgood, of Boston, his traveling companion and friend.

I knew him at once: the smiling, genial, mobile face, rather highly colored, the brilliant eyes, the watch-chain, the red carnation in the buttonhole, and the expressive hands, much given to gesture. It was only a momentary view, for the train started, and Dickens vanished, to resume his place in the car next to ours, where he had been, had I known it, ever since we left Portland.

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When my mother was again occupied with her book, I slipped away and entered the next car. I took a humble, unoccupied seat near the end, close by the much-patronized tank of (unsterilized) drinking-water and the train-boy's basket of pop-corn balls and molasses candy, and gazed steadily at the famous man, who was chatting busily with Mr. Osgood. I remembered gratefully that my mother had taken the old ribbons off my gray velvet hat and tied me down with blue under the chin, and I thought, if Dickens should happen to rest his eye upon me, that he could hardly fail to be pleased with the effect of the blue ribbon that went under my collar and held a very small squirrel muff in place. Unfortunately, however, his eye never did meet mine; but some family friends espied me, and sent me to ask my mother to come in and sit with them. I brought her back, and fortunately there was not room enough for me with the party, so I gladly resumed my modest seat by the pop-corn boy, where I could watch Dickens quite unnoticed. Half an hour passed, perhaps, and one gentleman after another came from here or there to exchange a word of greeting with him, so that he was never for a moment alone, thereby inciting in my breast my first, and about my last, knowledge of the passion of jealousy. Suddenly, however, Mr. Osgood arose, and, with an apology, went into the smoking-car. I never knew how it happened; I had no plan, no preparation, no intention, no provocation; but invisible ropes pulled me out of my seat, and, speeding up the aisle, I planted myself squarely down, an unbidden guest in the seat of honor. I had a moment to recover my equanimity, for Dickens was looking out of the window, but turned in a moment and said, with justifiable surprize: "God bless my soul, where did you come from?"

She replied that she lived in Hollis and was going to Charlestown to visit her uncle and his family, and that she was very sorry she had to miss his lecture the night before. Incidentally she told him of some

one who had been there but, unfortunately, had not read all his stories. Here is her account of what followed:

“ Well, upon my word ! ” he said. “ You do not mean to say that *you* have read them ! ”

“ Of course I have,” I replied. “ Every one of them but the two that we are going to buy in Boston, and some of them six times.”

“ Bless my soul ! ” he ejaculated again. “ Those long, thick books, and you such a slip of a thing ! ”

“ Of course,” I explained, conscientiously, “ I do skip some of the very dull parts once in a while; not the short dull parts, but the long ones.”

He laughed heartily. “ Now, that is something that I hear very little about,” he said. “ I distinctly want to learn more about those very dull parts,” and, whether to amuse himself or to amuse me, I do not know, he took out a note-book and pencil from his pocket and proceeded to give me an exhausting and exhaustive examination on this subject—the books in which the dull parts predominated, and the characters and subjects which principally produced them. He chuckled so constantly during this operation that I could hardly

help believing myself extraordinarily agreeable; so I continued dealing these infant blows under the delusion that I was flinging him bouquets.

It was not long before one of my hands was in his and his arm around my waist, while we talked of many things. They say, I believe, that his hands were “ undistinguished ” in shape, and that he wore too many rings. Well, those criticisms must come from persons who never felt the warmth of his hand-clasp. I am glad that Pullman chair-cars had not come into fashion, else I should never have experienced the delirious joy of snuggling up to Genius, and of being distinctly encouraged in the attitude. I wish I could recall still more of his conversation, but I was too happy, too exhilarated, and too inexperienced to take conscious notes of the interview. I

remember feeling that I had never known anybody so well and so intimately, and that I talked with him as one talks under cover of darkness or before the flickering light of a fire. It seems to me as I look back now, and remember how the little soul of me came out and sat in the sunshine of his presence, that I must have had some premonition that the child who would come to be one of the least of writers was then talking with one of the greatest; talking, too, of the author's profession and high calling. All the little details of the meeting stand out as clearly as tho it had happened yesterday. I can see every article of his clothing and of my own, the other passengers in the car, the landscape through the window, and, above all, the face of Dickens, deeply lined, with sparkling eyes, and an amused, waggish smile that curled the corners of his mouth under his grizzled mustache. A part of our conversation was given to a Boston newspaper next day by the author himself, or by Mr. Osgood, and a little more was added a few years after by an old lady who sat in the next seat to us. (The pronoun "us" seems ridiculously intimate, but I have no doubt I used it quite unabashed at that date.)